

# The Poet as Stranger

*David Scott*

Whenever I have a bit of spare time and decide to perform the act of 'Merton browsing', I start with one idea, and slowly in the course of a morning the study is littered with material, madly cross-referencing journal with commentary, poem with biography, letter with journal, commentary with non-Merton material, all completely fascinating, but with lunch only a frenzied call from my wife away, I have a moment to say, 'What on earth was the original seed for this search? What touched my interest in the first place? What generated the search engine?' I have got into the labyrinth and need to roll in the cord to find my way back. Not to mention the labyrinth that you discover within the labyrinth. The first spark of interest in Merton is a fixed point.

Alright let's come clean, that Merton on a day in heaven when there was not much else to do, decided to pick on one innocent bystander in a public library in the West Midlands and guide him by 'satnav' to the shelf on which happened to be *Thoughts in Solitude*, cover outwards, with the picture of a monk wearing a white robe, and white gaiter things round his legs, and a tonsured head. I recognised such things from long hours dealing with the 'Dissolution of the Monasteries' in history lessons. That book was for me.

1964, 44 years ago, summer, the shady churchyard of the local parish church, next to the library, leafing through *Thoughts in Solitude* –

'The more we are content with our own poverty the closer we are to God', and phrases like 'the spiritual life' and words like 'asceticism' and 'self-denial': a book from the library with God inside it and Merton on the cover. I had the statutory hour away from my boarding school to go into the village, and the time went very quickly, so it was soon back to an environment very similar to Oakham School, back to the rush, tumble, door-slamming, gentle, residual-bullying, comic-culture of a 'dimwash' English public school, and hiding *Thoughts in Solitude* deep in the desk, which was the only private space we owned. Come to think of it, school was probably more monastic than Gethsemani in some ways. When I read *Elected Silence* subsequently, those Oakham chapters had already been written in my soul, and the two wonderful enigmatic words of my title 'stranger' and 'poet' carved into my desk.

Stranger and poet are words thick with resonance, and I must confess I've had trouble with them; thus the rather elongated prologue. There are lots of different sorts of strangers, and lots of different sorts of poets, and certainly lots of different ways of being a strange poet. The conference title suggests that Merton at this point did not necessarily feel himself to be the stranger, but he understood the way the stranger could be the friend of God. Yet there are many ways in which Merton through his life seemed to me to be a stranger, by which he understood what it felt like to be a stranger, and so could empathise with the situation of the stranger. As a poet he would be sensitive to the many ways the words strange, stranger, estranged, in English; *étrange, étranger*, originally in the French; and their close cousins in meaning, the alien, the outsider, come to work their way into the language of feeling. So we get that enigmatic run of words from Hopkins in his poem *Pied Beauty*: 'all things counter, original, spare, strange': a list of things for which we can give glory to God. It is a surprising list, but not so surprising from the God of surprises. God loves the strange, the stranger, as in 1 Corinthians 1:26–31: God has chosen things that are foolish, weak, base, contemptible, 'so that no one might boast in the presence of God'. The poet needs to see things strangely for them to impinge, or for strange things to challenge our presuppositions, and so excite and stimulate the process of a poem. But I rush on.

To focus on some helpful areas of poetry and 'poetry and the stranger', sometimes of both but not always, let me give you a bit of a

route map. I'd like to recap a bit on the upbringing of Merton in the context of 'the stranger', and the healing place poetry took in that for him, particularly through his relationship with Mark van Doren. Then I want to spend some time with a pivotal, midway poem for Merton, 'Elias – variations on a theme'; then finally, I want to look at Merton's poetic 'determination to listen to the voice of the stranger, so that the stranger would no longer be an another'.

First how was the poet formed? There was a strong artistic side both to his father with his painting, and his mother with her creative eye on design, and her desire to make books, 'Tom's Book' and that numinous entry in the book for the tenth month: 'out of the chaos of many sounds, all or most all beginning with d, comes the first word 'Deh!' meaning 'There!' – a triumphant 'There!' It's a bit of a jump from 'Deh!' to the poetry of William Blake at Oakham, but there doesn't seem to have been much in between except Conan Doyle and *Pilgrim's Progress*, but it was with Blake that Merton's poetry memory engages.

Meanwhile there was one discovery of mine, one poet who was a poet indeed, and a Romantic poet, but vastly different from those contemporaries, with whom he had so little to do. I think my love for William Blake had something in it of God's grace. It is a love that has never died, and which has entered very deeply into the development of my life.<sup>1</sup>

For my own part I could never really understand how it was possible to stretch one's mind into two such variant themes as the world of innocence and the world of experience, which Blake managed to do so brilliantly and with such empathy. And it was that stretch of empathy, which Merton managed to cover with his love of innocent beauty in nature, and the concerns he took on with regard to justice and peace, and the bifocal openness to both world and monastery.

Yet what struck Merton about Blake despite the 'strange' heterodoxies, was Blake's rebelliousness, which was fundamentally the rebellion of the saints. Merton acknowledged Blake was truly strange, and yet within the strangeness, Merton experienced the presence of a good and holy man. Blake's faith was so real and his love for God so mighty and sincere.<sup>2</sup>

Out of the stranger, Merton realised that through Blake he could come in a roundabout way to the one living God, through his son Jesus

Christ. The strange one came to him at the right time. Later on, Merton realised that he no longer needed Blake in the same way: 'Blake has done his work for me: and he did it very thoroughly. I hope I will see him in heaven'.<sup>3</sup> Merton was influenced by Blake's poetic genius, by the seer in him. It was at twelve Blake had already seen Elias, under a tree in the fields south of London. And so like Blake, Merton too, was given the gift, and with it the sheer energy of writing, and the energy to remain constant to a vision within a society that understood neither him nor his kind of faith and love.

It is easy to collate Blake and Merton here. The poet is a stranger to the prevailing culture. Blake was a stranger to 18th-century salon culture incarnate in Joshua Reynolds: Merton a stranger to 20th-century materialism and rationalism, and quite a few other 'isms' too. So Merton found Blake in the blue Nonesuch edition, or was found by him, and like many prophets before him inherited a strangeness, a set apartness from conventional life. The death of Merton's parents, his sense of aloneness in the world certainly provided him with an inner capacity to compensate for aloneness, and turn it into its fairy godmother, solitude, or into its opposite, belonging to God, and through God to everyone and everything. The huge range of Merton's interests, the capacity to touch so many lives, must I think come out of a deep belonging to God and through God, and so to share that paradox 'of having nothing, and yet possessing everything' (2 Corinthians: 6.10). It is at the point of seeing Merton's connection with God that we may cease to worry about inappropriate adulation, and accept that Merton models for us a way of being which is open to all through the Holy Spirit, and is Christ's way, and therefore kosher, OK, alright, a helpful role model.

The purgatorial way of loneliness at school, and all sorts of chicanery at Cambridge glimpsed in the poems though metaphors of blood, dark rivers and stairs, and the resulting desolation and exile, brought him paradoxically to faith. The story of the journey of that faith and doubt we all know so well. It becomes constructive for us if we let it feed our deeper faith in God, placing Merton with the reluctant saints, and working with his memory as paradigm, not icon, not saviour, but friend. Yet there is one more thing to do with Blake that would come suitably here, and that is the creative friendship and mentoring of Mark Van Doren. I hope it may be instructive to follow Merton and Van Doren into the seminar room at Columbia, which

James Harton has helped us do in his recent book, *Merton and Friends*, and even more intimately through Van Doren's own writing on Blake in his book *Enjoying Poetry*.

In that book he takes the poem by Blake titled 'The Little Black Boy'. Now I know I'm on thin ice here as regards political correctness, but with Van Doren's help I hope to show how, far from being an embarrassing blot on history of ethnicity, in the words of Van Doren it is the most wonderful hymn to love. The black boy reflects on his colour.

My mother bore me in the southern wild,  
And I am black, but O! my soul is white;  
White as an angel is the English child,  
But I am black, as if bereaved of light.

The black boy's mother wisely says that at the end both black and white will be absorbed in the act of leaning with joy upon the Father's knee. Meanwhile the blackness will shade the white from the heat and thus show his love of the other:

Thus did my mother say, and kissed me  
And thus I say to little English boy.  
When I from black and he from white cloud free,  
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy,

I'll shade him from the heat, till he can bear  
To lean in joy upon our Father's knee;  
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair  
And be like him, and he will then love me.

It sounds at first as if the white boy is getting all the service and the black boy all the work, but hear Van Doren as Merton must have heard him:

The poem itself is always simple, like the voice of the child who speaks it; and like his soul that speaks through it. For he has a conviction with which we cannot argue, since it is born of the very love that is his subject. His love of the English boy is more important than any proof he is advancing of their equality. Equality cannot be defended; it can only be felt, and the little black boy knows everything about how it feels. It is what reduces his sentences to the utmost simplicity – as when in the penultimate verse Blake leaves out 'the' before 'little', 'And thus I say to little English boy', and as when in the next line he omits

any form of the verb to be after the pronouns: 'When I from black and he from white cloud free'.

Above all it is what makes the last two lines so inexplicably moving. The stroke of a hand smooths every syllable and leaves it pure of everything except its own innocent intention; and the monosyllables in the closing line ... are invincible to any unbeliever.

And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,  
And be like him, and he will then love me.

To anyone, that is, who before he read the poem had not known how equality feels. He still might have arguments against it, but he could not use them here. They would have no more effect on the little black boy's faith than the little black boy's argument, in so far as he has one, needs to have on anybody. The real poem, the poem we hear as we read, has left the body of argument as far behind it as the souls of the twin boys will leave their flesh when they become twin lambs that rejoice. It is all, of course, for the benefit of little English boy, who had not known till now how much love was waiting for him in the southern wild.

I understand from that, that there is a reality of love between people that can conquer racial differences. The love of the black boy for the white creates the capacity for love in the other, and it is a very simple human love that does it. Times change, and however true it may be that the black boy loved the white boy with a Christ-like love, in 1963 Carole Denise McNair (black) was killed in Birmingham, and Merton wrote a scorching poem about it titled 'Picture of Black Child with A White Doll'. Merton was incensed by the killing and by the sickening irony of this young black girl clutching a Barbie doll. When it was the Barbie doll culture that in some senses fuelled the racial divide. It is a strange comment on the Blake poem, even down to the image of the golden hair:

Your dark eyes will never need to understand  
Our sadness who see you  
Hold that plastic glass-eyed  
Merchandise as if our empty headed race  
Worthless full of fury  
Twanging and drooling in the southern night  
With guns and phantoms  
Needed to know love

That senseless platinum head  
Of a hot city cupid  
Not yet grown to whore's estate  
It glories and is dull  
Next to your live and lovely shade  
Your smile and your person  
Yet that silly manufactured head  
Would soon kill you if it could think  
Others as empty do and will  
Except for that need  
Which you know without malice  
And by a better instinct  
The need for love...<sup>4</sup>

Two views of beauty here, the ersatz non-beauty of the Barbie doll, 'the senseless platinum head', 'that silly manufactured head' set against the dead child's once 'live and lovely shade ... her smile and her person'.

Merton in his 1953 Master's essay *Nature and Art in William Blake*, glosses this idea of beauty, flowing from the divine, where, quoting Plotinus, 'The material thing becomes beautiful by communicating in the thought that flows from the Divine'. And again from the essay:

Since claritas implies essential beauty it also implies intelligibility, and this is what Blake always insists on when he defends imagination against scientific reason ... for Blake the nature that we see merely with our eyes is nothing, it is dross, nothing but 'the hem of the garment' of the sons of the imagination.

And how much he enjoyed quoting a section of the poem *Milton*:

These are the sons of Los, and these the labourers in the vintage.  
Thou sees't the gorgeous clothed flies that dance and sport in summer  
Upon the sunny brooks and meadows, each one the dance  
Knows in its intricate mazes of delightful art to weave:  
Each one to the sound of the instrument of music in the dance  
To touch each other and recede, to cross and change and return  
These are the children of Los. Thou sees't the trees on mountains  
The wind blows heavy, loud they thunder through the darksome sky  
Uttering prophecies and speaking instructive words to the sons  
Of men: these are the sons of Los: these the visions of eternity  
But we see only as it were the hem of their garments  
When with vegetable eyes we view these wondrous visions.

We have vegetable eyes, I suppose, until we see things with the eye of faith, or look with the eyes of love and compassion. How we see, is a theological matter, before it is a visual one. I want to conclude this first section, which has perhaps been happily dominated by the memory of Mark Van Doren, by reading his poem for Merton.<sup>5</sup>

*Death of a Monk*

The best bottle of the best wine  
Tipped over all at once and spilled –  
Catch it, save it, but nobody  
Could. Nothing left but the fragrance.

Which remains. Miraculous,  
It fills all the air, and is sweeter daily;  
And sharper, for this merry mind  
Had knives in it, had indignation.

Which could not kill the kindness, did not  
Dim the holy brightness – or  
We thought it holy; otherwise  
How came his wit was never weary?

\*\*\*\*\*

We have looked at some of the early influences on Merton and the way in which the strangeness of his life helped to make him the person that he was, and how strangeness is not necessarily harmful, on the contrary it gives an edge to thought, a drive to passions. I can't resist looking next at a poem from the collection *The Strange Islands*, published in 1957, dedicated for Mark and Dorothy Van Doren. Our resident expert on the poems of Merton writes that this collection 'initiates the poet's departure from the dominant neo-metaphysical mode championed by the academic poem and a drift towards greater freedom, uncertainty and humanity in rendering judgements'.<sup>6</sup> In her biography Monica Furlong too comments that: 'To those interested in Merton's life ... the poems often reveal emotions that might be difficult for him to explain elsewhere; compared to his prose work, they were obscure to his superiors, almost as if written in incomprehensible code.'

I think I responded to the poem 'Elias – Variations on a Theme'<sup>7</sup> because although cryptic, in section II of the four sections, I sensed something that had attracted me to Merton in the first place. It was, I think the Walden factor. The getting out from school, in Merton's case onto the ridge of hills that looked over The Vale of Catmos. After a fairly neutral account of the geography:

the town of Oakham gathered round the grey, sharp church spire. I sat on a stile at the hill top, and contemplated the wide vale, from the north where the kennels of the Cottlesmore hounds were, to Lax Hill and Monton in the south ... . And all the time I reflected upon Blake. I remember how I concentrated and applied myself to it. It was rare that I ever really thought about such a thing of my own accord. But I was trying to establish what manner of man he was. Where did he stand? What did he believe? What did he preach?<sup>8</sup>

The geography and the poetry, the solitude and the place, interacted with Merton throughout his life. At Gethsemani it was a case of getting out of the monastery building itself, and into the woods, and later still into the hermitage. It was something to do with needing space to reflect, to be intimate with God, and to receive the energy that comes from creation, and the surprising and beautiful things that are on offer free from what is simply around. Merton's journals have a similar routine to the medieval capacity to catch the beauty of the small thing, and to put it in the margin of a treatise on St Augustine, or in this case Ecclesiasticus. The flower, or the herb, or the cart, or the sun or moon, or a yokel's nose rub shoulders with the dense patristic commentary. Merton came out into the woods and found in the margins of creation, ordinary things that made his soul smile: things counter, original, spare, strange:

I

Listen Elias,  
To the southern wind  
Where the grass is brown,  
Live beneath this pine  
In wind and rain  
Listen to the woods  
Listen to the ground.

O, listen Elias  
(Where the bird abides  
and sings alone),  
The sun grows pale  
Where passes One  
Who bends no blade, no fern.  
Listen to his word.

Then it gets a bit more mantic and troubled, as you might expect from a poem about Elijah passed through the sieve of Jewish mysticism, and spread on the wind of Graeco-Oriental syncretism:

How the pine burns  
In the furious sun  
When the prophets  
Come to Jerusalem.  
(Listen, Elias,  
to the covering wing?)  
To Jerusalem  
Where the knife is drawn.

Section II of Elias is a wonderful combination of the mysticism of Elijah ascending in his chariot, and Merton's devotion to hidden places and spaces, in particular here to an old wagon. I always lose track of how many experimental hermitages Merton had before he got the proper job, so to speak. But my memory of the journals is that he was always on the hunt for somewhere to sit and just be. So I think in section II of Elias we have a jumble of references to all sorts of things to do with Elias' ascension, Blake's Last night of the Proms 'Bring me my chariot of fire', and the relationship Merton struck up with various lost causes of derelict train carriages. All gathered in the spirit of the Jewish 'Merkabah', the 'kabod', the glory of God, as the chariot, the wagon becomes the entry to what John Donne called the 'house and gate of heaven'.

## II

There were supposed to be  
Not birds but spirits of flame  
Around the old wagon.  
( 'Bring me my chariot' )  
There were supposed  
To be fiery devices,

Grand machines, all flame,  
With supernatural wings  
Beyond the full creek.  
( 'Bring me my chariot of fire' )  
All flame beyond the rotten tree!  
Flame? This old wagon  
With the wet smashed wheels  
Is better. ( 'My chariot' ).  
This derelict is better.  
( 'Of fire' . ) It abides.  
( Swifter ) in the brown ferns  
and burns nothing. Bring me ( 'Of fire' )  
Better still the old trailer ( 'My chariot' )  
With the dead stove in it, and the rain  
Comes down the pipe and covers the floor.  
Bring me my chariot of rain. Bring me  
My old chariot of broken down rain.  
Bring, bring my old fire, my old storm,  
My old trailer; faster and faster it stands still,  
Faster and faster it stays where it has always been,  
Behind the felled oaks, faster, burning nothing.  
Broken and perfect, facing south,  
Facing the sound of distant guns,  
Facing the wall of distance where blue hills  
Hide in the fading rain.  
Where the woods are cut down the punished  
Trailer stands alone and becomes  
( Against all the better intentions of the owners )  
The House of God  
The Gate of Heaven  
( 'My chariot of fire' )

At which point I wanted very much to spend the day on a spiritual binge indulging in Merton's secret hiding places where he could be a stranger to the world but intimate with God and with silence, 'and with no message.'

Under the blunt pine  
I who am not sent  
Remain. The pathway dies  
The journey has begun.  
Here the bird abides  
And sings on top of the forgotten  
storm.<sup>9</sup>

It is the secret places of stillness, prayer, and contemplation that fascinate me about Merton. His need to find private spaces, where it was possible to hear the birds and the wind and the trees, sometimes as a backdrop to whatever poem he was reciting to himself, or book he was reading. 6 December 1949,

I am going through the Spiritual Canticle again in Spanish out behind the horsebarn in a little corner behind the cedars where I can sit among the blackberry bushes out of the wind ... Phrases cling to you without your making half an effort to grasp them ... Vacio, hambriento, solo, llagado y doliente de amor, suspenso en el aire (Empty, famished, alone, wounded and suffering with love, suspended in the air). ... I remember taking books out to the woods behind Nally's (late October) walking uphill in the bare washed-out place where the oak trees were cut down and the stumps and roots are black in the wreckage of shale. I read St John's poem over and over again and tried to get it right into the memory of my bones'.<sup>10</sup>

However, the poetry of the later periods of his life came not so much out of the derelict places, but out of a mental engagement with issues and ideas, possibilities and cultural raw material, responding to what was out there in the cultural world, and the place of events and contemporary ideas. I'm thinking of the poetry of 'The Geography of Lograire' and 'Cables to the Ace' (English translation 'Telephone calls to the Boss'). These works seem to me to be at the opposite extreme of the Waldenesque search for meditative quiet, and the suffusing power of nature. They are writings in the thick of the now, research projects, strangely different from the 40s and 50s, claustrophobic, cryptic, troubled, strange, in a stranger way than *The Strange Islands*. Which is why some people dedicated to the early and mid-way Merton opt out of the enigmas of the later poetry. It's as if Merton was consciously abandoning the sentimentality of the early period, putting it behind him, and entering a more cerebral, ironic coded period; interrupted with a seismic force by the Margie poems. But even that doesn't work entirely, because in 'Elias', the apparently complex later stanzas invite a cracking of the code and the effort to do that can be rewarding. O fickle reader! But we are only human, and there is time: perhaps the answer will come in time for us. For Merton there seemed to be an eschatological urgency to it all, drawn to do what he had to do urgently, say what he had to say before the endtime, driven by this

huge energy, or was it love, to say what he had to say. Where was I? Oh yes. I was with Elias – Variating on a Theme.

Briefly, the last section IV of this poem, does seem to be looking forward to the new feel of Merton's poetry:

Here the bird abides  
And sings on top of the forgotten storm.

Merton is reflecting on a bird who sings but with no particular message. What the bird does is not planned as we might plan and then practice to sing a song. Nor is it arbitrary. The bird shares a pattern of being with the seed, the salt, the cell, the drop of rain. The nature of the bird gives Merton another idea. This time it's about freedom. Nature calls the tune to what it is to be free. The truly free person 'sings/ alone as universes do'. We wonder at the universe. The birds way of behaving and being comes as naturally as the universe. And here a gloss by George Kilcourse would be helpful: 'each poem is a venture back to ultimate questions'. Merton begins with a bird song as an image of freedom. So the one who is free is like the bird, and like the universe itself – the product of God's activity, of God's self:

... The free man sings  
Alone as universes do. Built  
Upon his inscrutable pattern  
Clear, unmistakable, not invented by himself alone  
Or for himself, but for the universe also.

In some ways this is familiar gospel territory as Merton knew it, really very simple on one level:

But like the birds or lilies  
He seeks first the Kingdom, without care.

(Without care, is careful for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication.. .)

Nor need the free man remember  
Any street or city, or keep campaigns  
In his head, or countries for that matter  
Or any other economy.

Elias, the poem's archetypal free man:

... becomes his own geography  
... his own wild bird, with God in the center,

His own wide field which nobody owns,  
His own pattern, surrounding the spirit  
By which he himself is surrounded:

For the free man's road has neither beginning nor end.<sup>11</sup>

The freedom that lies in Christ takes us into eternity, a timeless realm heralded by the bird (the Holy Spirit).

Some people find the poems of Merton difficult. I am one of them. They don't have an undergirding sense of rhythm to 'dumdedum' us along. They can seem too clever or obscure, or both, whereas his journals have juice, and allow us instantaneous recognition of states of mind, feelings and place, and the words usually follow a familiar order. But poetry works more by stealth, like the parables of the Kingdom in the gospels. You get them partly because you want to get them, and partly with my Augustinian hat on, you are meant to get them. And the 'meant to' bit of life comes from a secret providence of God knowing what we want before we know it ourselves, and giving us clues to what he wants us to know. So it is not us who does the right thing (there is no good in us) other than us responding to the right thing that God offers to us to respond to. Understanding poetry is rather similar. We have to want to want to understand it. We have to move into the arena of love, I think: no hand-holds, no absolute security, but a trust. At least that's the way to start.

The division that poetry causes always surprises me. Why should I love it and another not. It's what turns us on, or off, I suppose, to put it crudely, and more simply than my diversion into Augustinian theology. 1966, English lesson in the school library – teacher reading with huge feeling Edward Thomas' poem about a train making an unexpected halt at Adlestrop, an Oxfordshire railway station: a classic anthology piece. The train stops. The steam finishes steaming. All goes quiet. No one gets out, no one gets on. Then birdsong is heard, at first close, then further and further away, right out to the neighbouring county of Gloucestershire. I was in that silence as deep as I was into anything. This poem was written for me. I admired it, loved it. If poetry can work such miracles then poetry was for me. After a long pause my neighbour round the library table, not known for his literary enthusiasms, more on the sporting side of things, raised his hand. The teacher thrills to get such an early response, from one so notoriously unconverted. 'I hope you don't mind me saying so, sir (we were very

polite then) I think the heel on your shoe is coming apart'. Ballistic was not the word. 'One was taken, the other left'. How is this so with poetry?

The strangeness necessary to compel our interest in things has its limits. I'm not sure if I would have persisted with Merton's poems if I didn't feel that the strangeness would lead me to something that would in the end be true. Listening to poems over the years that is the question that most frequently comes to mind. Is it true what the poem is saying, or am I being 'had'. Has the reality of the situation been truthfully revealed, not ultimate truth, but true to the vision of the poet. Have the poets got it right for themselves? Is that what they really heard, saw, thought, or are the words trying to say more than was or is the case? Yet there is a further difficulty for me, and that is that Merton always seems to be about five steps ahead of the game. Just as soon as I have got used to his middle period, which still has one foot in the traditional, western, monastic tradition, there appears the prophetic new world poems, which have a pioneering quality far beyond the cosy area that we are used to. So far I have felt myself to be on safe territory. Elias contains both the old sheds and something new, which I could just about square with my familiar culture, but there were hints of the strange which felt beyond the comfort zone:

### III

So now, if I were to return  
To my own city (yes my own city), I would be  
Neither accepted nor rejected.  
For I have no message  
I would be lost together with the others.<sup>12</sup>

No one likes to be lost, to be a stranger in another's city. But if we are to follow Merton into the 60s then we have to move on to more unfamiliar territory, and try and understand his deep interest and concern with cultures very different from his own. The arrival at the monastery of Ernesto Cardenal brought with him his Nicaraguan roots and culture. This was fascinating and unsettling for Merton. It made him want to leave Gethsemani and continue his monastic life in the culture of Latin America. His reading, always unbelievably wide and deep, moves into overdrive. It extends now to the Spanish literature of Latin America. He translates the poems of Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Nicanor Parra, Cesar Vallejo. He reassesses the geography of America.

'This then is what seems to me so important about America – and the great function of my vocation in it: to know America in its totality, to be a complete American, a man of the whole hemisphere, of the whole New World'.<sup>13</sup>

I suspect we could divide ourselves into those who have embraced this later Merton – the Merton of 'The Geography of Lograire' – and those who haven't. I would say that I have tried my hand with both, and have annotated both, but find it difficult to be assured with them. So Merton can come to be a stranger to us, as he may well have done to his fellow monks, and to avid readers of the early work. Yet Merton embraces the stranger, and if we have gone so far with him then we would probably want to trust him that bit further. Many others may well have come in at the 60s period, just because the work is so widespread and interesting culturally. Merton's own words may be helpful: 'I have not yet even begun to write, to think, to pray and to live ... and only now I'm getting down to waking up'. *Emblems of a Season of Fury* charts this sea change and 'evidences the poet's determination to listen to the voice of the stranger, so that the stranger would no longer be another.'<sup>14</sup> I am quoting from Malgorzata Poks here from her book *Thomas Merton and Latin America: a consonance of voices*, published 2007, which is proving a huge help in getting this time-warped oldie into new and exciting territory. Merton is forever for challenging and expanding our range, and this new book is a very good guide indeed to the poetry aspect of this culture shift, and to Merton's later poetry in general, and writing about poets.

It is interesting that Merton uses poetry to draw out his message. 'A Letter to Pablo Cuadra Concerning Giants' is largely about seeing through and standing up to the bullies in the playground, and remembering the Christ who died for the small people, the vulnerable people, the weak and the oppressed. And when we are quick to imagine we are on the side of the angels Merton writes: 'it is my belief that we should not be too sure of having found Christ in ourselves until we have found him also in the part of humanity that is most remote from our own.'<sup>15</sup> In this context let me briefly contextualise the 'strap line' of our conference:

Whatever India may have had to say to the west she was forced to remain silent. Whatever China had to say, though some of the first missionaries heard it and understood it, the message was generally

ignored as irrelevant. Did anyone pay attention to the voices of the Maya and the Inca, who had deep things to say? By and large their witness was merely suppressed. No one considered that the children of the Sun might after all, hold in their hearts a spiritual secret. On the contrary, abstract discussions were engaged in to determine whether, in terms of an academic philosophy, the Indian was to be considered a rational animal. One shudders at the voice of cerebral western arrogance ... judging the living spiritual mystery of primitive man and condemning it to exclusion from the category on which love, friendship, respect, and communion were made to depend.

In the poems Merton gathers from the ancient cultures, the stranger laments:

with brimming tears  
We mourn our lost writings  
The burned books  
The buried men  
The flaming harvests  
Holy Maize destroyed  
Teachings of heaven and earth  
Destroyed

Do humming birds cheat one another?  
Do they kill one another?<sup>16</sup>

Merton turns anthropology into poetry, but also uses poetry and the poets to remain outside the categories that lead to Auschwitz. When Merton was writing in the early 50s, the years of 'Elias', when he was still 'a man with too many questions': he kept asking Garcia Lorca, one of the victims of the Franco regime in Spain, 'Under what crossless Calvary lie your lost bones?'<sup>17</sup> In the 1960s Merton could already drop the rhetorical question, but the conclusion he had once drawn remained all the more valid: even if the earthly remains are not found, the poet who dies a martyr's death leaves his poetry behind. This often proves the most effective weapon in human assaults on the Unspeakable. Poetry becomes the best means of piercing 'the minds of those who remain', to alert them to danger and spur them to action.

I don't know about you but I spend quite a bit of time rerunning the internal film of how things first began. It probably should be called Eliot's syndrome: to return to the past and know it again for the first time. But shortly after having discovered the book *Thoughts in Solitude*

in the local library with the picture of Merton in the woods in short habit and white gaiters, my school chaplain, who had only minor similarities to Merton's school chaplain at Oakham, took a small group of us to a Franciscan monastery in the depths of the countryside around Worcester. That in itself was a revelation, and shortly after that in the middle 60s, perhaps '65, I took myself off to the monastery, at least my dear mother drove me, and I took with me a book my parents had brought back from their visit to America earlier in the year. I had asked them to bring any book by Thomas Merton and they brought me *Selected Poems*. So with my toothbrush and my copy of *Selected Poems* I arrived at the monastery aged about 16, late for lunch but was ushered into the refectory clutching the poems to read in silence over lunch. Friar monks and guests eat together. There would only have been about ten of us altogether. A monastery founded by Fr. William Sirr, and I think, a holy place, and have found huge inspiration from its Franciscan peace and welcome.

At least two things remain etched in my memory from that visit. One is the *Selected Poems*, which still has the pages of 'Elias - variations on a theme' spattered with gravy from trying to eat and read the book at the same time; and the other is that on the opposite side of this small refectory was a clergyman. Later in the day when I was out in the garden, which looked over a beautiful stretch of countryside to the Abberley Hills beyond, the clergyman came out for a chat, and it was Fr. Donald. There I met Donald 45 years ago, I forget the maths exactly but I give thanks for the providence of God, for getting to know Donald and Thomas Merton at about the same time.

#### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948: 107. Subsequently referenced as SSM.
- <sup>2</sup> c.f. SSM: 109.
- <sup>3</sup> SSM: 229.
- <sup>4</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions, 1977: 626. Subsequently referred to as CP.
- <sup>5</sup> D. Patnaik, ed. *A Merton Concelebration*, 1981:21.
- <sup>6</sup> Malgorzata Poks, *Thomas Merton and Latin America, a Consonance of Voices*, 2007: 264.
- <sup>7</sup> CP: 239.
- <sup>8</sup> SSM: 108.

- <sup>9</sup> CP: 240–2.
- <sup>10</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, London: Hollis and Carter, 1953:239.
- <sup>11</sup> CP: 244–5.
- <sup>12</sup> CP: 244.
- <sup>13</sup> Robert Daggy, ed. *Introduction East and West: the foreign prefaces of Thomas Merton*, 1981.
- <sup>14</sup> Poks, op cit.
- <sup>15</sup> CP: 382.
- <sup>16</sup> CP: 492.
- <sup>17</sup> CP: 45.