

## THOMAS MERTON'S Antipoetry: A Revolution in Language and Thought

**M**an is an odd creature who needs to be re-born in order to exist. Renewal and rebirth are intrinsic qualities of his nature and of his art. The work of Thomas Merton is an answer to this need for transformation or resurrection, which is becoming specially acute in our postmodern times, when it seems that we are agonising under imposed and calculated forms of knowledge and freezing rationalism. In this dark night, the darkest in human history as Ernest Bloch has described it, Merton's poetic thought represents a new *Fiat Lux* in the very deep heart of our cavernous shadows.

**One** may think that, because Merton chose to be a monk, he retired from the world. On the contrary, he proved to be a writer engaged with the problems of his own time. The longer he lived in the cloister, the louder his critical voice on social affairs became. His poetry implies a strong criticism of prevailing trends toward global war, totalitarianism, imperialism, racism, spiritual inertia, and crass materialism. According to him, the task of the poet is to denounce those structures which apparently seem immovable. In an ardent message to poets read at a meeting of young Latin-American poets in Mexico City, in February 1964, Merton addresses them with the following words:

There are now in our world new people, new poets who are not in tutelage to established

political systems or cultural structures – whether communist or capitalist – but who dare to hope in their own vision of reality and of the future.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, the poet is one who dares to hope, who has the courage to react against the tiring verbal routine, against the inherited and already dead forms of language and experience, against the standardization of feelings. He should be concerned not with established thought but with discovery, with the revitalization of language, and he should also open his mind to unprecedented possibilities of interpreting and understanding. “for the poet there is only life in all its unpredictability and freedom. Poetry is the flowering of ordinary possibilities.”<sup>2</sup>

**Freedom** is an essential characteristic of the poetic spirit. Consequently, good poetry should always be a source of social protest against any kind of imprisonment. Merton himself became an antipoet and always remained outside categories. His criticism is directed against the “common illusion” in which we are living and specially against the basis on which this illusion is founded: language. His two antipoems, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire* are reflections on the crisis of human language and the failure of humans to communicate. In the very beginning of *Cables* we read:

“Since language has become a medium in which we are totally immersed, there is no longer any need to say anything. The saying says itself all around us. No one need at-

tend. Listening is obsolete. So is silence. Each one travels alone in a small capsule of indignation. (Some of the better informed have declared war on language).”<sup>3</sup>

**Merton** seems to be one of them. He has declared war on language, this language which has been deprived of meaning, of presence, of Spirit. He has become a sort of Caliban, the Shakespearean character, antipoet and slave, someone who believes that it is necessary to rethink our world, “to reshape an accurate and honest language that will permit communication between men.”<sup>4</sup>

**Against** already defined forms of expression, Merton's antipoems represent an attempt to recover through the Word the true reality lost or hidden in a manipulated use of words. In fact, they are examples of experimental poetry which aims towards transparency and purity.

**However**, the poet knows that to achieve this transparency, he must carry out a demythologising task. In *Cables to the Ace*, a corrosive, revolutionary, and disturbing work, he starts by speaking gracefully but realistically for his age. He parodies our culture by quoting almost literally large sections from books and newspapers, as we can read in the following extract entitled ‘Newscast’: Children of large nervous furs will grow more pale this morning in king populations where today drug leaders will promote an ever increasing traffic of irritant colors...

In New Delhi a fatal sport parade involving long mauves and delicate slanders was apprehended and constrained at three p.m....

Today's top announcement is a frozen society Publicizing a new sherbet of matrimonial midways

and free family lore all over the front pages...<sup>5</sup> **Merton** is ashamed of a culture which has abandoned its fundamental human worth for the follies and non-sense represented by mass-culture, mass-media information and advertisements. The target of his attack is our society full of alienations and his essential humour and irony reaches all the vices of this society, with special emphasis on the corruption, the intransigence and falsehood of our world, the omnipotence of economic capitalistic power and the tyranny of money: “for money is blood.”<sup>6</sup>

**The** scope of his criticism is so vast that it seems as if he wants to deconstruct any previous system of knowledge: “ideas, productions, answers: sand in the eye... Science, Politics, Theology: sandstorms.”<sup>7</sup> Any of these forms of scientific, mythical or religious thought become obstacles to true *sapientia*. Merton seems to be talking of a new consciousness or wisdom beyond opposites, of a unifying and unitary vision of reality. This is shown in the beginning of the poem, where we encounter a Blakean sentence: “We assist once again to the marriage of Heaven and Hell”<sup>8</sup> Later on in the poem, we read the following aphorism: “Love the inevitable! Hate alone is perfectly secure in its reasons. Over the door of Hell is written: “Therefore “!”<sup>9</sup> This is a clear ironic reaction against Cartesianism,<sup>10</sup> which has resulted in a society where men are divided and set up against one another:

I am doubted, therefore I am. Does this mean that if I insist on making everybody doubt me more, I will become more real? It is enough to doubt them back. By this mutual service we make one another complete. A metaphysic of universal suspicion!<sup>11</sup>

**Merton** continues his condemnation

of rationalism and the enmity among human beings in another part of the poem. He ironically compares the pre-meditated actions of human beings with the organized life of ants:

Each ant has his appointed task

One to study strategy

And one to teach it

One to cool the frigidaire

And one to heat it.

Each ant has his appointed round

In the technical circuit

All the way to high

One to make it and the other to break it ...

Each ant has his appointed strategy to heat  
To fuse and to fire at the enemy.<sup>12</sup>

**Instead** of this logicism of Western thought, these dead forms of knowledge and life, Thomas Merton suggests an openness and spontaneity of thought and action, and he gives the following advice in the form of another aphorism: "*Follow the ways of no man, not even your own. The way that is most yours is no way. For where are you? Unborn! Your way therefore is unborn. Yet you travel. You do not become unborn by stopping a journey you have begun.*"<sup>13</sup>

**In** this last fragment, one can observe the influence of Zen Buddhism in the antipoetry of Thomas Merton. He had read and conversed with the great Zen Master, [Daisetz Suzuki] during the 60's, and in this long poem he shows a complete acceptance of non-dualism. The prologue of *Cables* becomes a declaration of independence from the Western method, and, possibly, the endorsement of an Eastern one.

**However**, to achieve a non-dualistic consciousness that transcends all division requires a negative and painful process of emptying oneself (*kenosis*), of deep metamorphosis (*metanoia*) and a radical unlearning (*conversatio*): "*Abandon your body and soul into the abun-*

*dance of light sent from above and give no thought to enlightenment or illusion. Only sit like a great void of fire...*"<sup>14</sup> There is the need of forgetting oneself in order to be able to receive everything. Merton tries to make us aware of nothingness, not for nothingness's sake, but because out of this poverty Life emerges in all its plenitude and unity. He chooses to wear "*the most naked mask*", although "*it is not without risk in a Season of frost.*"<sup>15</sup>

**It** is in his final poem, *The Geography of Lograire*, that Merton's unitary vision of reality reaches its maturity. This poem is a mosaic, a mixture of fragments without many logical connections, a "*surrealistic meditation*"<sup>16</sup> in which Merton draws a cosmic map, a mixture of inner and outer geography.<sup>17</sup> From the silence and solitude of his hermitage, he remembers all the past spaces and landscapes he has dwelt in. He restarts the pilgrimage of his life, but now recreated from a different place, from "nowhere":

To begin a walk

To make an air

Of knowing where to go

To print

Speechless pavements

With secrets in my

Forgotten feet

Or go as I feel

Understand some air

Alone

Around the formerly known

Places

Like going

When going is knowing

(Forgetting)

To have passed there

To have felt

All my old grounds

Forgotten world

All along

Dream places

Words in my feet

Explain the air of all

Feel it under (me)

Stand

Stand in the unspoken

A cool street

An air of leg

An air of visions

Geography

I am all (here)

There!<sup>18</sup>

**The** new geography of Thomas Merton is the geography of the air, symbol of the highest freedom and happiness. It embraces "here" and "there" at the same time: "*Here*": the inner geography, full of Merton's memories, imagination, passion and regrets. "*There*": the outer geography, which he has internalised: England and Blake, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Joyce, France, Carlyle, Scotland, Italy, Switzerland, Bermudas, Camaguey, Cuba, New York, California, Cincinnati, the Catholic Church, history, mysticism, art, Picasso, literature, Homer, etc.<sup>19</sup>

**And** both geographies are transcended and recreated by words, in such a way that a new geography is born: an ever-present-time-and-place geography. The name "Lograire" comes from "logos". *The Geography of Lograire* is the geography of language, of the creative word, that which does not belong to anybody, that which allows man to partake in the divine task of creation.

**This** word emerges from the silent waters of Life and points towards the Unspoken. It is the word of poets, whose language does not try to convince anyone, to sell or to buy, but "*to point beyond all objects into the silence where nothing can be said*". As Father Louis has pointed out:

We (poets) are the children of the Unknown.

We are the ministers of silence... Let us then recognize ourselves for who we are: dervishes mad with secret therapeutic love which cannot be bought or sold, and which the politician fears more than violent revolution. For violence changes nothing. But love changes everything.<sup>20</sup>

**Merton's** antipoetry brings us a new love, a new vision, a new fire that purifies our language of lies and hatred.<sup>21</sup> In a world which lacks poetry, where the poets are exiled, he still keeps Holderlin's hope that men can live poetically on earth:

I think poetry must

I think it must

Stay open all night

In beautiful cellars.<sup>22</sup>

May the endless path of poetry be always open in our hearts.

## Notes and References

1. Thomas Merton: *Raids on the Unspeakable*, New York, New Directions, 1964, p. 155.

2. Ibid. P.159.

3. Thomas Merton: *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York, New Directions, 1977, p. 397.

4. Thomas Merton: *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, New York, New Directions, 1985, p.272.

5. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (op.cit.), pp.427-428.

6. Ibid., p.401. Merton expresses his conviction that money is the main cause of war, fighting and enmity among human beings, and that it is the worst religion of all.

7. Ibid., p.397.

8. Ibid., p.396.

9. Ibid., p.411

10. Already in his years as student at Columbia University, Merton recognizes this need for transcending "*the unreality and unsubstantiality of the dead, selfish rationalism which had been freezing my mind and will for the last seven years*" (Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Orlando, Harcourt Brace,

1976, p. 190).

11. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (op.cit.), p.411.

12. Ibid., pp.430-431.

13. Ibid., p.421.

14. Here Merton is quoting the words of the Buddhist master Dogen (v. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, [op.cit.] p.434).

15. Ibid., p.448.

16. Author's Note in *The Geography of Lograire*, New York, New Directions, 1969, p.2.

17. As Merton explains in a note to his publisher, James Laughlin "I have without scruple mixed what is my own experience with what is almost everybody else's ( ...) Its content is derived from many times and many cultures, and particularly those so-called primitive cultures that we in the West have destroyed or corrupted." (See *The Geography of Lograire*, ([op.cit.] p. 1).

18. Ibid., p.41-42.

19. There are also many references to the American South of Mexico, the South of Africa, Cargo Cults and Ghost Dances. Merton criticizes with irony the imperialism of Western people and the tyranny of Western thought which led to the destruction of pristine cultures and religions. People from Yucatan (Mexico) are given voice in the poem, and these are their lamenting words: "with brimming tears/we mourn our lost writings/the burned books/the burned men/the flaming harvests/holy maize destroyed/teachings of heaven and earth/destroyed" (ibid., p.36).

20. "Message to Poets" in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, (op.cit.) p.160.

21. cfr. "Camus and the Church" in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, (op.cit.) p.273.

22. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, (op.cit.) p.431.

## *The Wisdom of the Desert*

“A certain brother went to Abbot Moses in Scete, and asked him for a good word. And the elder said to him, Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.”