

Poetry of the Sneeze: Thomas Merton and Nicanor Parra by Paul M Pearson.

INTRODUCTION

'I have many Latin American friends because only so can one be truly "American": in other words, being only a citizen of the U.S. would be a miserable fate.'¹

Merton to Cintio Vitier - December 1962

In this paper I want to explore Merton's friendship with one of his "many Latin American friends," Nicanor Parra.

Nicanor Parra, though a contemporary of Merton's, came from a totally different background. He was born in Southern Chile in 1914. He studied mathematics and physics at the Pedagogical Institute of the University of Chile in Santiago and on graduating in 1938 taught in a secondary school until 1943 when he went to the United States to study advanced mechanics at Brown University. In 1948 he was appointed Director of the School of Engineering at the University of Chile. In 1949 he came to Oxford University to study cosmology for two years. On his return to Chile in 1952 he was appointed Professor of Theoretical Physics at the University. In 1963 he spent six months in the Soviet Union supervising the translation of some Soviet poets into Spanish. In 1966, the year he met Thomas Merton, he was Visiting Professor at Louisiana State University and in 1971 he was Visiting Professor at New York, Columbia and Yale Universities. In one of his own poems he commented on his academic career:

I certainly should have married
a widow with all her millions
an expert in darning socks!
it didn't turn out that way
and I have resigned myself
to the blackboard and the chalk
the chalk and the blackboard
until I retire or die ²

His first published collection of poems, *Untitled Songs*, appeared in 1937. *Poems and Antipoems* was published in 1954, with selections of them appearing in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Pocket Poet series in 1960. *Salon Verses* and *Speeches* appeared in 1962 and *Emergency Poems* in 1972. In 1967 New Directions published a selection of his poetry in a volume entitled *Poems and Antipoems*.

What did Parra mean by antipoetry? Parra's understanding of antipoetry developed over a number of years. In the 1930's Parra felt, especially coming from his scientific, relativist background, that "poetry wasn't really working" that there was "a distance between poetry and life." He "affirmed the need for a vernacular poetry dependent on ordinary life, expressive of common problems and accessible to the general public."³

Initially Parra's understanding of poetry was similar to Pablo Neruda's "impure poetry" - a poetry which "unites humanity with its raw language and common experience."⁴ Later he would reject Neruda's style saying "let the birds sing - man talks"⁵ on the grounds that he found even Neruda's impure poetry too flowery. Parra's idea was to strip away the superficial trimmings of poetry, its poetic language, and to present language heard in its reality. As Parra developed his concept of poetry he had three goals:

- To free poetry of metaphor in favour of direct communication with the reader.
- To depend on the commonplace so the language of the poetry reflects the life of the people.
- To localize the language of poetry so it reflects a specific social reality.⁶

Parra almost wrote poetry like he would write a mathematical theorem using an extreme "economy of language" with "no metaphors, no literary figures."⁷

Parra expressed his intention for antipoetry most clearly in his poem "Manifesto" contained in his 1972 collection *Emergency Poems*:

Ladies and gentlemen
This is our final word
- Our first and final word -
The poets have come down from Olympus

For the old folks
Poetry was a luxury item
But for us
It's an absolute necessity
We couldn't live without poetry.

Through the course of this poem he condemns a variety of styles of poetry:

We repudiate
The poetry of dark glasses
The poetry of the cape and sword
The poetry of the plumed hat
We propose instead
The poetry of the naked eye
The poetry of the hairy chest
The poetry of the bare head.

We don't believe in nymphs or tritons.
Poetry has to be this:
A girl in a wheatfield -
Or it's absolutely nothing.

And asserting very clearly a sentiment Merton would wholeheartedly agree with when he says:

The poet is there
To see to it the tree does not grow crooked.⁸

At the end of the 1930's Parra began to explore Walt Whitman's poetry, but subsequently came to reject his heroic stance, finding it too Wagnerian, turning instead to Kafka and other surrealist literature. The final influences on Parra, leading to his mature antipoetic style, came in the late 1940's during his time at Oxford. Donne, Auden, C. Day Lewis, Stephen Spender and especially T.S. Eliot were major influences on him at this time. Eliot's "radical transformation of poetic diction and his incorporation of prosaic phrases and colloquial language into his poems held a magnetic fascination for Parra," he discovered poets who "observed contemporary man and commented on his politics and manners, his religion and his society in the language of the modern city dweller."⁹ Parra had never found any similar

literary tradition in Latin America. This experience resulted in his 1954 collection *Poems and Antipoems* and *Salon Verses* in 1962.

Salon Verses was not well received by Parra's critics. One critic, Fr. Salvatierra, a Franciscan priest, said of it:

In this work there is complete contempt for women, religion, virtue and beauty. I have been asked if this book is immoral. I would say no; it is too filthy to be immoral. A can of garbage is not immoral, no matter how many times we stir up its contents.¹⁰

But this is a misunderstanding of what Parra was attempting to achieve with antipoetry. Parra was not attempting to write something immoral, but to speak to ordinary people with a voice that they could understand.

Parra's work had a profound effect on Latin American poetry, even Pablo Neruda was later to imitate him. Gradually his work became more and more political. During the time of Allende's regime he refined his antipoetic style for his collection *Artifacts*, "short epigrammatic poems that were satirical intensifications of the antipoem and were intended to have the effect of graffiti."¹¹ During the Pinochet years Parra adopted a different style using an itinerant preacher from his youth as a model for *The Sermons and Preachings of the Christ of Elqui*. He then used this figure to comment on matters of religion, finance and politics in Chile, including violations of human rights.

THOMAS MERTON AND NICANOR PARRA

In the late 1950's Thomas Merton's writings began to undergo a radical change as he moved from his initial embrace of the monastic ideal, in fleeing the world, to a new position where he was free to embrace the world. It is impossible to identify any single influence on this sea change. Merton's work with the novices at Gethsemani was certainly significant, as was his growing correspondence. It was also during the mid to late 1950's that Merton's interest in Latin America was re-awakened. He had growing contacts there relating to the translations of his books into Spanish and Portuguese; there was talk of a possible monastic foundation in Latin America by Gethsemani, with

which Merton was keen to be involved;¹² as well as a growing interest from Latin Americans in embracing the monastic life at Gethsemani. Merton's interest was stimulated further by the arrival at Gethsemani of Ernesto Cardenal to join the novitiate. Cardenal, with his own literary and political interests, was influential in introducing Merton to the writings of a wide variety of literary figures from Latin America.

Among the Latin American poets Merton discovered was Nicanor Parra. Their correspondence began in the mid sixties. Prior to Parra sending some of his books to Merton, Merton had only seen one of his poems previously. In Merton's second letter to Parra in June 1965 he says

I am happy you are thinking about maybe translating some poem of mine: you will find that before knowing your work I had written some antipoems, for example "Chants to Be Used in Processions [Around a Site with Furnaces]"¹³

This is a very important comment by Merton as it shows explicitly that his antipoetic style initially developed independently of Parra's influence.¹⁴

Before moving on to look at the development of Merton's antipoetic style it is worth looking briefly at the correspondence between Merton and Parra, along with comments Merton made about Parra elsewhere in his writings and also at their meeting in 1966.

The only surviving letters between Merton and Parra date from the years 1965 through to 1967. It is unclear from these letters who began the correspondence and when. The first surviving letter of Merton's to Parra is dated March 1965 and begins by thanking him for two books of poems he had sent "some time ago,"¹⁵ one of which was *Salon Verses*. Merton's reaction to it was rather different than that of the Franciscan, Salvatierra! Merton made some translations of some of these poems which, at the time of his letter, he had already shown to James Laughlin of New Directions, who was keen to publish some of them. It is interesting to note that Merton translated works from ten Spanish and Portuguese speaking poets, mostly Latin American, though he read more widely than this. The major collection of Parra's poems in English for many years includes a number of translations by

Merton. In total Merton translated eight poems by Parra which are all included in his *Collected Poems*.

In writing to Parra a number of themes which are prominent in Merton's later work appear. Firstly, Merton comments frequently in the sixties that it is the poets and artists who are frequently fulfilling the role of monks in the twentieth century, a theme expressed strongly in some of the talks he gave in Asia in 1968.¹⁶ In writing to Parra in 1965 Merton says: "I agree with your dissonances, and find them to be in fact very monastic" going on to add

today the poets and other artists tend to fulfill many of the functions that were once the monopoly of monks - and which of course the monks have made haste to abandon, in order to center themselves firmly in the midst of a square society.¹⁷

A second important theme is Merton's comments about language and the way he saw the society of his day expressing many of its ills through what was happening to its language. I want to return to this when I look at what Merton was attempting to achieve by his use of antipoetry but it is worth just noting his comments on this theme to Parra.

In his letter of June 1965 Merton comments on Parra's work saying

I like your irony very much and I cannot tell you how much in agreement I am with you about contemporary society. We are in a time of the worst barbarity, much worse than in the time of the fall of the Roman empire. It is sufficient to look at what is happening in Vietnam and everywhere, most of all here. Sermons are worth nothing in this situation. It is necessary to state, without judgement, the truth of things. And that apocalyptic truth cannot be expressed in apocalyptic symbols, but only in "clichés."¹⁸

He asks Parra whether he knows about the antitheater of Ionesco - a topic discussed in some detail by Merton in *Raids on the Unspeakable*. Merton then comments on his 1961 poem "Chants to Be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces" describing his method of composing the poem "almost in its entirety from the very words of

the commanders of Auschwitz" adding "it would be impossible to invent something more terrifying than the truth itself."¹⁹

Merton's final letter to Parra is written almost a year after Parra's visit to Gethsemani in 1966. Merton refers to that visit telling Parra three times in the space of a short letter to "come back."²⁰

In other parts of his writings Merton makes very favourable comments about Parra, calling him a "wonderful poet,"²¹ and comparing him to North American poets saying that Parra "seems to me to be a lot lighter on his feet than the gummy and heavy type of thing (at least so it seems to me) we are getting around here."²² Writing to his publisher James Laughlin Merton comments on some books of Parra's that have arrived saying "they are splendid. He has a good tough and sensitive delivery, straight face anti-poet style, very eloquent and impressive, and dour."²³ Finally, in his journal *Dancing in the Water of Life* Merton made the following entry on 9th March, 1965:

finished some translations of a few poems by Nicanor Parra (who is excellent, sharp, hard, solid irony) one of the best South American poets, a no nonsense anti-poet, with a deep sense of the futility and corruption of social life - a sense which has now been taken over entirely by poets and writers since the church has abandoned everything but optimism for the technological future.²⁴

Merton and Parra met only once in 1966. Their meeting is very briefly mentioned in Merton's journal *Learning to Love*. Most of the details about that visit are contained in Michael Mott's biography of Merton. Hardly any mention of it is made in Merton's journal of the period, largely because it is eclipsed by Merton's infatuation with a student nurse at that time. On 4th May he comments that James Laughlin and Nicanor Parra are "arriving here this evening." Then in a longer entry on 7th May Merton writes:

Came home dazed, long after dark (highly illegal!) and wrote a poem²⁵ before going to bed. I think Nicanor Parra was highly edified. He was saying something about how one must "follow the ecstasy" - by which he meant evidently right out of the monastery and over the hill. This of course I cannot do²⁶

In Mott's account of this meeting he describes Parra as remaining the "most aloof, yet he was clearly enchanted by [the nurse], amused by the priest and the pretty girl"²⁷ and signals to Laughlin, by kicking him under the table, that they should leave the two of them alone together and go off to discuss business elsewhere. It is a great shame that Merton did not make more of his opportunity to meet Parra and to discuss their interests.

THOMAS MERTON'S ANTI-POETRY

I want to move on now to reflect on Merton's choice of anti-poetry as his favoured means of expression for a large proportion of his late poetic writings. I say a large proportion as Merton was still writing poetry in other, more conventional styles, and the collection "Sensation Time at the Home," which Merton was preparing for publication at the time of his death, reflects this.

Over the years Merton's poetry changed considerably from the early "poetry of the choir," through his "poetry of the desert" to his later "poetry of the forest" and finally his antipoetry. The first of Merton's poetry which could be described as antipoems appeared in his 1963 volume *Emblems of a Season of Fury*. This appositely titled volume, like its journal and prose counterparts *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and *Raids on the Unspeakable*, heralded Merton's public departure from the pious monk of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Sign of Jonas*.

As Merton rediscovered the world he thought he had left behind outside the monastery gate he felt there was something fundamentally wrong with that society and culture. No longer were the pious platitudes of his early prose and poetry a sufficient response to the agonies of the time, even if it were possible to hear them over the growing technological babble, the degradation of human language and the breakdown of communication and communion between people. From his place on the margins of society Merton attempts to "make others aware of the confusions, contradictions and absurdities of contemporary language and also of other negative aspects of present-day society and culture."²⁸

As a writer Thomas Merton always had a great respect for language, whether the written or spoken word. In *Bread in the Wilderness* Merton had described words as "signs and sacraments", "partial manifestations of the Word, who is the splendour of God's Truth"²⁹ and in *The New Man* Merton had used the Greek patristic term, *parrhesia*, "free speech,"³⁰ to describe communication between God and humans. In the early sixties Merton discovered a similar respect for language in the writings of Clement of Alexandria. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* Merton quotes from the writings of Clement where he describes the importance of the word:

Reasonable speech. Logos, regenerates the soul and orients it towards the noble and beautiful act...the word prepares the way for action and disposes the hearers to the practice of virtue. There is a saving word just as there is a saving work. And justice does not take shape without logos.³¹

Over the course of the twentieth century, especially with the rise of the totalitarian state, language, Merton believed, had become debased, meaningless. Merton gives some excellent examples of this in his essay "War and the Crisis of Language." Taking examples from the second world war and from Vietnam Merton illustrates the debasement of language where it becomes necessary to "destroy [a] town in order to save it"³² and of Hitler weeping over the ruins of Warsaw after its destruction by the Luftwaffe saying "How wicked these people must have been...to make me do this to them!"³³

Merton felt that "in our mechanical age, all words have become alike, they've all been reduced to the level of the commercial. To say 'God is love' is like saying 'Eat Wheaties.'"³⁴ The use, or abuse, of language in the field of advertising is singled out by Merton for special attention. As he himself admits he very rarely saw television but

Once when I did happen to pass in front of a set I saw the commercial that was on: two little figures were dancing around worshipping a roll of toilet paper, chanting a hymn in its honor. I think this is symbolic enough, isn't it?³⁵

Merton was more in touch with printed advertisements, he sometimes comments on the magazines in doctors waiting rooms and, as he was beginning to write *Cables to the Ace* he asks his friend Ping Ferry to send him "good, gaudy, noisy ad material" and "also the most smart and subtle ads" as "I think this is even more important than reading the day's news. I mean for feeling what is in the air."³⁶ The poet, Merton believed, should not be deaf to such advertising but "apply his ear intently to their corrupt charms."³⁷

One advert which particularly caught Merton's eye and which he quoted a number of times was from *The New Yorker*:

For the love of Arpege...
There's a new hair spray!
The world's most adored fragrance
now in a hair spray. But not hair spray
as you know it.
A delicate-as-air-spray
Your hair takes on a shimmer and sheen
that's wonderfully young.
You seem to spray new life and bounce
right into it. And a coif of Arpege has
one more thing no other hair spray has.
It has Arpege.³⁸

Commenting on this advert Merton says the "antipoet recognises himself beaten hands down"

the logical *structure* of this sonata...is a foolproof tautology,
locked tight upon itself, impenetrable, unbreakable, irrefutable.
It is endowed with a finality so inviolable that it is beyond
debate and beyond reason. Faced with the declaration that
"Arpege has Arpege," reason is reduced to silence.³⁹

Such advertising Merton felt was narcissistic attempting, and usually succeeding, in giving the person the sense that if they have this item they will feel good about themselves, they will have a sense of identity and worth, they will be "eminently lovable."⁴⁰ This endows the product with "transcendental properties of being" and so it enters into the western myth-dream, a first world version of the Melanesian Cargo Cults where the most recent "cargo" is necessary for happiness.

In a similar vein Merton comments on news reporting saying that "we lose our ability to have any kind of accurate perspective on what's happening"⁴¹ and one is "left with a strange, neutral sense of dreamlike objectivity."⁴² In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* Merton illustrates this by recounting the various news reports of Pope John XXIII's death read in the monastic refectory and how they created a "bug-eyed surrealistic view of his death chamber" by the "idiot mishmash"⁴³ of their reporting.

It is language that makes it possible to communicate with one another and ultimately to form community. Under the influence of the growing abuse of language real communication and ultimately real communion was breaking down. As Merton comments in his essay "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?"

Though he now has the capacity to communicate anything, anywhere, instantly, man finds himself with *nothing to say*. Not that there are not many things he could communicate, or should attempt to communicate. He should, for instance, be able to meet with his fellow man and discuss ways of building a peaceful world. He is incapable of this kind of confrontation. Instead of this, he has intercontinental ballistic missiles which can deliver nuclear death to tens of millions of people in a few moments. This is the most sophisticated message modern man has, apparently, to convey to his fellow man. It is, of course, a message about himself, his alienation from himself, and his inability to come to terms with life.⁴⁴

This was written in the nineteen sixties before the advent of satellite television, mobile phones, e-mail, internet chat rooms, video conferencing and the world-wide web. Our communication capability has been transformed in the intervening period and yet Merton's comment here is still as true, if not, more so.

It is against this background that Merton turned to antipoetry as his attempt to speak to people in the twentieth century. His poem *Original Child Bomb* recounts the misuse of language to justify the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Similarly "Chant to be Used in Procession Around a Site with Furnaces," as already mentioned, used literal quotations from the commanders of Auschwitz to shock the reader. "A Picture of Lee Ying" uses the

newspaper accounts of her deportation after being refused asylum for a poem that paints a "heartbreaking picture of a Chinese refugee girl collapsed in sorrow at the borders of Hong Kong, where" as Merton records in his journal "hundreds of thousands are now refused and turned back into Red China by the British."⁴⁵ Merton's response to these various ways of abusing language is not to declare war on conventional language but instead "to quote - and feed back quotation into the mass consumption of pseudo culture"⁴⁶ - by repeating back the news reports, advertising blurb or similar materials in a different format, that is poetry, the reader is brought up short and is forced to stop and consider the material from a different perspective.

In Merton's two major works of anti-poetry he attempted to tackle the abuse of language as well as the breakdown of communication and community by writing protest poems which attempt to alert the reader and warn them of what Merton perceived as the things fundamentally wrong with the society and culture of his day.

In *Cables to the Ace* Merton sends out his own messages, his own cables - graffiti, garbled news broadcasts, scientific notes, business reports, quotes from the great mystics, notes from his own diaries and even more conventional lyric poems he had written for his nurse. He described *Cables* as "a series of poems, which are largely experimental and may be hard to understand, full of ironies and ambiguities appropriate to the moment when we are saturated with the wrong kind of communication."⁴⁷ *Cables* focuses on the alienation of the individual and the abuse of human language which leads to the general breakdown in communication between the individual and God and between the individual and others, leading ultimately to a breakdown in community and communion.

In *The Geography of Lograire* Merton broadens the picture as he looks at the decadence of the western myth dream in subduing the myth dreams of other cultures and thus preventing universal communion. *Lograire* points towards the underlying unity of all people which, from the very beginning of history, has failed. In his "Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants" Merton described the greatest sin of the west as "its unmitigated arrogance towards the rest of the human race."⁴⁸ In *Lograire* the voice of God is to be heard in the voice of the stranger whose wounds "turn out to be my own"⁴⁹ and

we must find that voice of God, the true Word, "in our enemy, or we may lose him even in our friend. We must find him in the pagan or we will lose him in our selves, substituting for his living presence an empty abstraction."⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

Lograire comes with a warning to the reader, written in capitalised lines. Merton says:

IF YOU HAVE HEART FAILURE WHILE READING THIS
THE POET IS NOT RESPONSIBLE⁵¹

This echoes Parra's poem "Warning to the Reader" in *Poems and Antipoems*, though Merton's warning, written almost twenty years after Parra's is much stronger. Parra warned his readers:

The author will not answer for any problems his writings
may raise:
It may be hard on the reader
But he'll have to accept this from here on in.⁵²

The close resemblance of Merton's words in *Lograire* to those used by Parra in one of his early poems which Merton had certainly read provides a glimpse of Parra's influence on Merton. Merton was developing his own antipoetic style and Parra's work encouraged him in this, inspiring him to continue experimenting, ultimately resulting in his two epic works, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*. Yet what both poets were attempting to do through antipoetry - a term they both began to use independently - is ultimately the same, though on the surface their style and techniques are vastly different. Merton and Parra were both attempting to talk to people of the twentieth century using a poetic language that was relevant to them and which they could understand. Both writers were also attempting to shock their readers into listening to them. Parra's approach came from his mathematical, relativist background, where he used the minimum language possible and avoided metaphors and literary figures so as to speak directly to his readers. Merton however goes a

step further in saying that language itself, not just poetic language, was the problem. Merton's response then is to "feedback quotations into the mass consumption of pseudoculture" - irony, parody were no longer enough. Merton's critique of language, and ultimately of society developed farther and deeper than Parra's in a much shorter period of time.

Merton and Parra both set out to shock their reader, that is what the poetry of the sneeze is about. In Merton's autobiographical essay about his life as a hermit, *Day of a Stranger*, he refers to some of his companions in the Gethsemani woods, including "the dry, disconcerting voice of Nicanor Parra, the poet of the sneeze."⁵³ In his poem "Warning to the Reader" Parra recounts some of the accusations fired at him by his detractors:

"The laughter in this book is false!" my detractors will
argue
"Its tears, artificial!"
"Instead of sighing on these pages, one yawns"
"He stamps his feet like an infant"

and lastly

"The author expresses himself by means of sneezes"⁵⁴

It is this criticism that Merton refers to in *Day of a Stranger*, changing it from a criticism to a compliment, if it is possible to have a compliment in antipoetry! Poetry of the sneeze does not "soothe the reader, or convince him or exalt him" but disturbs them. It is "harsh and as abrupt as an eruptive sneeze."⁵⁵

The anti-poetry of Thomas Merton and Nicanor Parra is very different in style, largely resulting from their different backgrounds and mentalities. Both poets though respond to the crises of their time and break through language barriers to disturb and challenge their readers, both Merton and Parra sneeze in order to make themselves heard and, hopefully, understood.

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3. *Ibid.*, 7.
4. Hemann, Barbara J. "Resolving the Paradox: Thomas Merton, Antipoetry, and the Language of Silence in *The Geography of Lograire*." master's (University of Northern Iowa, Waterloo, Iowa, 1991) 24. (Abbreviated to Hemann.)
5. Grossman, 9.
6. *Ibid.*, 8-9.
7. Parra, Nicanor. *Antipoems: New and Selected*. Edited by David Unger. (New York: New Directions, 1985) x. (Abbreviated to *Antipoems*)
8. Parra, Nicanor. *Emergency Poems*. (London: Marion Boyars, 1977) 113-119.
9. Grossman, 16-17.
10. Grossman, 24.
11. *Antipoems*, xi.
12. Merton seriously pursued the idea of moving to Latin America even requesting permission from Rome to join one of the many experimental communities that was springing up there. Merton's interest in moving to Latin America is clearly seen in the third volume of his complete journals - *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*. Edited by Lawrence S. Cunningham. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).
13. *Courage*, 213
14. Before the publication of this letter most commentators presumed Merton's antipoetry was influenced by Parra.
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18. *Ibid.*, 213.
19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 214.
21. *Ibid.*, 205. "I admire his irony and sympathize fully with the protest that it implies." 242. "I like his antipoems very much and agree with his dry and laconic comments on society." 243.
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33. *Ibid.*, 306.
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35. *Courage*, 72
36. Merton, Thomas. *The Hidden Ground of Love: the Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*. Edited by William H. Shannon. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 229. (Abbreviated to *HGL*.)
37. *Passion*, 303.

38. *Ibid.*, 303-4. *The New Yorker*. 42 (17th September 1966): 7.
39. *Ibid.*, 304.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Springs*, 152.
42. *CGB*, 277.
43. *Ibid.*
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46. *AJ*, 318.
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49. *HGL*, 155.
50. *ESF*, 82
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54. Grossman, 49-50.
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