

Mending Walls: The Changing Forms of Thomas Merton's Poetic Imagination

Patrick F. O'Connell

Thomas Merton first appeared on the literary scene as a poet. Between 1944 and 1949, he published four volumes of verse (1), containing a total of 130 poems, written over the course of a decade that included his last two years of secular life before entering the monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky in December 1941, and his first eight years as a monk. His productivity had already begun to wane toward the end of this period, with his fourth book, *The Tears of the Blind Lions*, consisting of only seventeen poems, and he wrote almost no verse through the first half of the 1950s. There are a number of reasons that contributed to this poetic eclipse, among them no doubt his increasing responsibilities in the monastery, where he began teaching young monks in 1949 and was named master of students, in overall charge of their formation, in 1951; his own uncertainty that poetry and contemplation were compatible (2); adverse criticism, including that of T. S. Eliot, who told Merton's publisher his work was hit or miss, and that he wrote too much and revised too little (3); and certainly his unexpected success as a prose writer, beginning with his best-selling autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* in 1948. But there is a sense also that by the late 1940s Merton had written himself out in the characteristic

vein of his early verse, and needed to allow his poetic imagination to lie fallow for a while. When he resumed writing verse in the mid-1950s much of it was in a strikingly different style that reflected his own spiritual and intellectual development during the intervening years, and the last dozen years of his life proved to be as prolific of poetry as his early years as a writer had been.

To take soundings of the change in style (4) between Merton's first and second periods, I would like to examine two poems published a decade apart, 'Natural History' (5) from 1947, nearing the end of his initial period, and 'In Silence' (6) from 1957, when Merton once again, in George Herbert's words, began to "relish versing" (7). What makes the two poems particularly worth comparing is that both focus on what might be called, to borrow a phrase from Robert Frost, "mending walls," (8) not in his sense of walls needing to be repaired but walls that are themselves somehow restorative, calling to transformation and wholeness. While one must not over-generalize from such a small sampling, considering these two poems in tandem can at least provide one avenue of entry into discovering both the changes and continuities in Merton's religious and poetic imagination.

'Natural History' (9) begins very straightforwardly, even prosaically:

There is a grey wall, in places overhung
With the abundant surf of honeysuckle:
It is a place of shelter, full of sun.
(ll. 1-3)

Attention is initially directed at the plainness of the "grey wall," but it is not uniformly plain: the juxtaposition of the honeysuckle suggests vitality, color, sensuousness, and above all dynamism in the image of its "abundant surf," implicitly likening the way the vegetation flows over the wall to waves inundating the shore. The scene initially appears to be complete in itself, an impression reinforced by the assonance and interior rhyme of "overhung," "abundant," "honeysuckle" and "sun"; but this sense of wholeness is subtly modified in a couple of ways. The wall is immediately characterized as hospitable to life and growth, yet the slight but significant distinction between "in places" and "a place" suggests that the presence of the honeysuckle doesn't fully exhaust the wall's function as a "place of shelter": there is room for something more, for further use. Moreover, the metaphor of the surf is also an implicit reminder of the cyclic aspects of the natural world: as tides recede so the now abundant vegetation is destined to die later on. Both a sense of richness and a sense of transience are thus introduced in these opening lines.

In the second section of the poem attention shifts from place to time:

There, in the middle of September,
in the vintner's workdays
When the skies begin to change,
Putting away the steams of August
'til the air is loud with blue,
The creeping things, in the wise
diligence of an ascetic season,
Have worked their small momentous
wonder,
Prepared their winter's sleep. (ll. 4-9)

The opening "There" echoes the beginning of the first verse paragraph, but the syntactic switch from expletive to adverb makes it more emphatic, summing up all that has been said already and providing a transition to consideration of the time of year. Richness and transience are again evident: it is the time of harvest, of abundance, but also of change, as the haze of "the steams of August" has given way to the crisp clarity of mid-September skies, in which the blue is so vivid it can be described synaesthetically as "loud" – the brightness of the sky thus contrasting with the greyness of the wall described in the previous section. Yet in the very next line it is paradoxically characterized as "an ascetic season" for the "creeping things" that are to be the main focus of the poem. The use of this scriptural term, familiar from the creation story (cf. Gen. 1:24, 25), already suggests a religious dimension to the events being observed, as does the term "ascetic" itself, with its implications of detachment and rigorous self-denial. The "creeping things" (not yet identified further) are linked by their own labor and "diligence" to "the vintner's workdays," but they have come to the wall not, like bees, to gather sweetness from the honeysuckle, but to prepare for "their winter's sleep". Their wisdom is

an intuitive recognition of approaching diminishment, but it is an active wisdom, a "wise diligence," that "work [s]" a "wonder" – an echo of the biblical "signs and wonders" that suggests it may be of "momentous" significance not only for the creeping things themselves but for the observer as well. The final line, with its masculine ending (after the feminine endings of "season" and "wonder" in the two previous lines), the metrical regularity of its iambic trimeter, and the completion of patterns of alliteration ("wise," "wonder," "winter") and assonance ("steams," "creeping," "season") by "winter's sleep," is both more concrete and succinct and more far-reaching in its implications than its syntactical parallel in the preceding line. Foreseeing the coming winter in mid-September, the creeping things have readied themselves for "sleep," which already suggests awakening after the winter is past, an awakening that will be a rebirth into a new and elevated level of existence when the "creeping things" will take wing and fly. This is a dimension that is left implicit throughout the poem, which focuses largely on the present process of dying to the old life, but nevertheless its subtle and graceful introduction here will underlie the entire subsequent discussion.

The spiritual import of the scene begins to be made explicit in the following section, which is addressed to Christ:

O Savior! How we learn Your mercy
and Your Providence,
Seeing these creatures in their tiny and
tremendous labor:
Each one diligent and alone

Furling and arming himself in a grey
case, the color of the wall.
(ll. 10-13)

While these lines introduce both divine and human participation, the focus remains as yet on the creatures themselves, though now the presence of an observer is signaled by the reworking of line 8 in line 11: subject ("creeping things") becomes object ("these creatures"); verb ("Have worked") becomes prepositional phrase ("in their . . . labor"); and adjectives modifying the direct object ("small momentous") become modifiers of the object of the preposition ("tiny and tremendous"). The shared "diligence" of the preceding section is now rephrased as singular: "Each one diligent and alone" – each undertakes individually the same double action, which suggests both an ending and a beginning: "furling" compares the cocoon in which the creature wraps itself to a flag covering a corpse, as though at the end of a battle, but "arming" makes the same cocoon into a shield, a source of protection against dangers still to come. Likewise the "grey case" of the cocoon is suggestive of armor, but linked to the stone wall it is also suggestive of the tomb (10). The paradox of the creature's condition is highlighted by each detail of the description.

The pair of questions that follow both recapitulate the opening setting and point toward the divine presence in the scene:

Who told these six or seven creepers
how to hasten to this place,
this safety,

This warm home-haven,
better than a Riviera,
And to these stones that will, all winter,
never know the wind?
Or who has brought them here together,
With no time-table and no calendar,
On this particular day?

(ll. 14-19)

The answer to these questions has already been given, in line 10: it is Christ the Savior whose mercy has led the creatures "to this place, this safety," and whose providence has "brought them here together". The focus on place in the first question recalls line 3 with its emphasis on security and shelter: the wall is "better than a Riviera" (echoing the sea imagery of line 2) because it is not a temporary resort but a "home-haven" (a combination that recalls Hopkins' "heaven-haven" (11)). The weaving together of sounds is particularly detailed here: "haven" echoes "hasten" as well as "place" and "safety" in the previous line, and relates to "seven," "Riviera" and "never," while "home" prepares for "stones" and "know" in the following line, and "warm" alliterates with "will," "winter" and "wind". The second question, focused on time, is more restrained in line length as well as in sound links; the shift in verb form from the simple past of "told" (l. 14) to the present perfect of "has brought" (l. 17) signals continuous divine involvement in the process, a providential confluence bringing the creatures "together" (even as they act "alone") without any coordination on their part, a reflection of an internal "leading" not dependent on an external temporal frame. The repeated use of the demonstratives "this" and "these" – six times in these six lines, culminating

with "this particular day" in line 19 – suggests a kind of Scotist "*haecceitas*" operating here – an emphasis on the way in which these specific creatures are realizing their own identity and fulfilling their calling.

This attention to the creatures' own response is central to the next section of the poem, again (or still) addressed to the Savior:

Measure the quality of the obedience
With which their natures hear Your
thought and come,
Each worm hastening as best he can
To die here in this patch of sun.

(ll. 20-23)

They are recognized as examples of obedience, but an obedience "of their natures": the speaker doesn't attribute their response to free will, to individual choice. Rather they are faithful to their own inner nature and so live out their God-given identity (the same basic point that is made in the second chapter of the prose work from the same period, *Seeds of Contemplation*, entitled "Things in Their Identity" (12)). Here the speaker asks the Lord to "Measure," that is, to evaluate, "the quality" of the creatures' obedience – there is a progression from the context of space and time, from dimensions that can be mathematically or scientifically calibrated – the distance traveled and the length of time taken to do so – to the meaning of this movement, as a response to a summons, to "Your thought". Time and space remain a framework – "hastening" (echoing "hasten" in line 14) suggests the temporal element and "this patch of sun" once again describes the particular

location where the creatures converge – but the meaning of the events is not contained by this framework as the paradox of the final line here makes clear: even as it recalls “a place of shelter, full of sun” (l. 3) and “this place, this safety, / This warm home-haven” (ll. 14-15), the wall is now being perceived as a place “To die”! The safety, shelter, security of the wall seems subverted – the creatures are hurrying to their own doom. The question is raised whether the appearance of the wall as shelter is deceptive, ironic, evidence not of mercy or providence but of destruction and dissolution. The answer is of course “no,” but the phrasing points to the counter-intuitive dynamism of the creatures’ journey. Safety is not what it initially seems to be; the “patch of sun” does not stave off death, but does change its significance.

The reflection on the creatures is completed in the following verse paragraph:

Leaving all leaves and grasses and the
smaller flowers
And all their haunts unseen and
summer pastures
They do not stay to study Your
command, Your mystery,
That this, the only thing they know,
must cease
And they must seal themselves in
silences and sleep.
See with what zeal they wrestle off
their ancient, tawny life
And fight with all their might to end
their private histories
And lock their days in the cocoon.
(ll. 24-31).

Whereas the previous section, and the poem in general up to this point, has focused on what the creatures have come *to*, these lines look back on what they have come *from*, what they leave behind – the leaves, grasses and flowers which seem more vital and attractive than the bare wall they have sought out. But the final seasonal reference to “summer pastures” is a reminder that this organic vitality is transitory and will soon disappear. Its preferability is deceptive, illusory. Their journey, in its immediate, unhesitating response, reflects the paradigmatic apostolic pattern to follow Christ into the unknown that culminates in a death to the familiar self. The double “must” clauses echo one another, but are not quite equivalent constructions: “this . . . must cease” is not dependent on the creatures’ actions – the world they know is coming to an end whatever their response may be; the old life is doomed; mortality is inevitable; the familiar setting cannot be retained in any case. The second clause, “they must seal . . .” is less a parallel than a consequence of the first: because the previously known way of life must end, they in turn “must” – i.e. need to – withdraw, turn within, undergo this “death” which is the only way to transcend death. The necessity to “seal themselves in silences and sleep” recalls the description of “furling . . . himself in a grey case” from line 13, while the three lines that follow develop the implications of “arming” in the same line, emphasizing the effort, the struggle of the (spiritual) combat, an agon in which the creatures must “wrestle off” their old life, seen as something constricting to be removed and cast away: it is “ancient” as

belonging to the old, unredeemed world, and “tawny” as implicitly bound up with their appearance as “creeping things,” and not their future winged forms. They must fight to “end their private histories,” the “old self” that separates them from the rest of reality. Note that the imagery in these lines is all temporal: “ancient . . . life,” “private histories,” “their days”: as they had to move away from familiar places in lines 24-28, so here they move away from familiar times. The final image of “lock[ing] their days in the cocoon” may seem to conflict with this sense of dispossession, suggesting that they are taking their past with them, but in doing so they are removing them from the ongoing temporal process and making possible a new beginning.

The next verse paragraph turns from reflection to application, a consideration of what is to be learned (cf. l. 10) from this event:

Walk we and ponder on this miracle
And on the way Your creatures love
Your will,
While we, with all our minds and light,
how slow
Hard-hearted in our faithlessness, and
stubborn as the coldest stone!
It was your St. Theresa struck the deeps
Of this astounding parable –
For all creation teaches us some way of
prayer.
(ll. 32-38)

A double focus is proposed for this “walking meditation”: first, “this miracle,” the providential work of Christ (first mentioned in lines 10 ff.); second, “the way Your creatures love Your will,” the response of the

creatures (as described in lines 20 ff.). The two following lines (34-35) then introduce the third dimension, the human response, which is initially one of contrast. Despite “minds and light,” humans’ superiority to irrational creatures, “we” are put to shame in contrast to the worms: our slowness is inferior to the worms’ haste. The “coldest stone” of stubborn, faithless hardheartedness starkly contrasts with the warmth of the stones of the wall: now the stone represents not shelter but resistance to transformation, not dying as a prelude to rebirth but the clinging to a separate self and so resistance to necessary self-surrender. St. Teresa of Avila, in her allegory of the silkworm and the butterfly from *Mansion 5 of The Interior Castle* (especially chapters 2 and 3 (13)), has recognized the spiritual implications of this “natural history” lesson; the juxtaposition of these last three lines with the previous two suggests not simply that humans fall short in comparison with the worms, but fail to learn the lessons taught by nature. It takes a St. Teresa to properly interpret the parable. (While the speaker has in fact made sense of it himself in previous sections, its relevance to ourselves is still undeveloped – so far, the only application has been the negative contrast of lines 34-35).

In the lines which follow, the “deeps” struck by Teresa are revealed:

Here on the Trappist wall, beside the
cemetery,
Two figures, death and contemplation,
Write themselves out before us in the
easy sun
Where everything that moves is full of

mystical theology.

(ll. 39-42)

For the first time the location of the wall is specified – its position “beside the cemetery” suggests the similarities between the dormant worms and the dead monks, but the succeeding lines point out that not only death but contemplation is figured here. The congruency between the two is one that Teresa emphasizes in her Fifth Mansion, which is a preliminary stage of divine union: the total self-surrender of contemplation is itself a kind of death, so that one “figure” images the other. This double lesson reflects the recognition drawn from St. Teresa that “all creation teaches us some way of prayer”: both meditation on the “book of nature,” by looking at and reflecting on what is happening with the worms, and contemplation of divine reality, by identifying with the worms and participating in their act of self-surrender (as in Teresa, who moves from talking about actual silkworms to talking about people as silkworms in Mansion 5.2.6 (14)). This second, deeper level is reflected in the concluding line here, which has brought speaker and reader from “some way of prayer” to an awareness “full of mystical theology.” The creatures are no longer seen in contrast to human behavior but as a gift, a revelation, a sign of contradiction but also a sign and image of authentic spiritual development, recognized in the “easy sun” whose clarity of light makes it simple to perceive the meaning of what is seen.

The imagery that opens the following section of the poem recapitulates that of

lines 29-30:

Shall we still fear the fight that wrests
our way

Free from the vesture of our ancient
days,

Killing the prisoner, Adam, in us,
And laying us away to sleep a space, in
the transforming Christ?

(ll. 43-46)

As the worms struggle to “wrestle off their ancient, tawny life,” so the same effort is suggested here in the “fight” that “wrests” one free from the “vesture of our ancient days,” the stripping away of the “old man” (cf. Col. 3:8-10), the death of Adam, the false self. Here the reference seems to be to actual physical death, being laid “away to sleep a space” in the grave in preparation for emerging from the tomb into resurrected life through the power of the “transforming Christ.” The speaker’s words are posed as a question, but with the expectation of a negative response. We will no longer fear death or the struggle to divest ourselves of the old, sinful self that leads up to death, a reversal of the slowness of the previous section.

But the relevance of the worms is not exclusively connected to physical death. It has a present significance as well:

Oh, we, who know from faith and
Scripture

All the scope and end of
metamorphosis,

Run we like these creatures in their
glad alacrity

To our far sweeter figurative death, . . .
(ll. 47-50)

Unlike the worms, whose knowledge is just instinctual, humans learn both the “scope and end of metamorphosis” through belief in revelation. The pairing of “scope” and “end” suggests particularly the teaching of John Cassian in his first *Conference*, where Abba Moses identifies the “*telos*” or “end” of human life with the Kingdom of God and the “*scopos*” or immediate goal with purity of heart (15). The *telos* comes at the end of life, but the *scopos* can be found here and now, a present transformation through contemplative commitment. This is the “far sweeter figurative death,” the contemplative death to self that can take place now by participating in the paschal passage of the cross to become a new self, the self-in-Christ that Paul describes when he says, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is now no longer I who live but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:19-20). This spiritual reality has been suggested by natural process of the worms’ metamorphosis, but far surpasses it in meaning.

Yet the possibility of learning such lessons becomes the incentive for being attentive to the lessons of “natural history”:

When we can learn such ways to God
from creeping things
And sanctity from a black and russet
worm!

(ll. 51-52)

The poem ends with wonder and awe at the linking of high and low – “such ways to God” with “creeping things” and “sanctity” with “a black and russet worm”. It is precisely the lowly status of the source of insight that makes the

lesson that much more impressive: the distance between the message and the messenger paradoxically heightens the impact. Even at the end, the focus always remains on the worms: we never see the end result – butterflies are never even mentioned. The attention is very much on this side of the transformational divide, on the worms’ activities, not on their results. Likewise the focus remains on the decisions and commitments of “us” in this life, with the result only implied and alluded to. It is the “agon,” not the outcome, that is at issue, the act of faith and hope, not its fulfillment. Yet the process, the journey to the wall, “such ways to God,” is a revelation and realization of “sanctity,” of conformity to the divine will here and now that is perfected in union with divine love now and forever.

The form this poem takes is in many ways a very traditional one, with its roots in the methods of meditation taught by Ignatius of Loyola and his successors and found in many of the seventeenth-century religious poets Merton admired. The poem begins with a vivid “composition of place” (and time), then moves on to a systematic and logically developed series of what might be considered “points for meditation,” a progression from a focus on the role of Christ to a focus on the response of the creature to the divine initiative, to a focus on the human application (16). There is a clear structure and a definite progression from God, to non-human creation, to ourselves. There is even a suggestion of the application of the traditional three powers of the soul, the memory of the scene at the cemetery wall, a growing understanding of its spiritual

significance, and a bringing of the will into conformity with the will of God. It is in its own way a strikingly effective example of Merton's appropriation of a tradition of religious poetry dating back to the era of the Metaphysicals.

* * * * *

When he returns some ten years later to reflect once again on a wall, his approach will be strikingly different. Though just as deeply religious in its theme, 'In Silence' (17) is less overtly so, and its stripped down, spare diction emphasizes the mystery of the spiritual life in a way that suggests his initial engagement with the paradoxes of Zen: it is suggestive that on the very same day that Merton transcribes a draft of this poem in his journal (18) he also mentions his readings of D. T. Suzuki, who will be his principal guide for the study of Zen in the decade to come.

The quiet tone of the opening lines are appropriate to the instructions they present:

Be still
Listen to the stones of the wall.
Be silent, they try
To speak your

Name.
Listen
To the living walls.
Who are you?
Who
Are you? Whose
Silence are you?
(ll. 1-11).

The speaker here is unidentified, but the echo in the opening line of the voice

of the Lord in Psalm 46:11 ("Be still and know that I am God") suggests that if the speaker is not actually God it is one who speaks with authority, who communicates divine directives. But here the command to "be still" and to "be silent" is focused not immediately on knowing God but on knowing oneself, though an awareness of the original use of the words in the psalm suggests an intimate, even intrinsic connection between the two. Stillness is the condition for receptivity, for becoming aware of the revelatory power of the created world, which mysteriously speaks not only of itself but of ourselves, or at least tries to. The "stones of the wall" are at once natural objects and parts of a human construction, so that they imply the potential of both nature and culture to serve as channels of revelation.

The most noticeable aspect of the opening section, the first four lines, is its incompleteness, the separation of the last word of the sentence from what preceded it. The effect of suspending the thought here, at least momentarily, is both to focus particular attention on the word "Name," and to make the reader more aware of the implications of the word "try," raising the possibility of not succeeding. And what is in fact heard is not an identification but a repeated question, apparently asked first, in line 8, as though acknowledging failure and asking the listener to supply the missing identification himself. But when the question is repeated, with "Who" given an entire line by itself, it is evident that the question is no simple request for information but a probing of the listener's sense of his own identity, and

when it is rephrased as "Whose / Silence are you?" it is clear that no "name" can serve as an adequate answer to this question, which suggests that the deepest mystery of one's own selfhood is to be discovered not in words but in silence, and in the silence of Another – the truest name is one that cannot be named, that does not serve as a label providing a facile classification, that reflects not a static, autonomous self-possession but a dynamic relationship, a call to belong to what is Other and greater than the self. The implication is that the name is not spoken by the stones because the listener is not ready to hear it.

The question is repeated one more time as the following section opens, in a sort of antiphonal juxtaposition with a variant of the speaker's command:

Who (be quiet)
Are you (as these stones
Are quiet). Do not
Think of what you are
Still less of
What you may one day be.
Rather
Be what you are (but who?) be
The unthinkable one
You do not know.

(ll. 12-21)

The implication is that the answer to the question of true identity depends on participating in the "quiet" of the stones, a quiet that is evidently not incompatible with repeatedly posing the question of this identity. Perhaps it is simply by realizing their own identity, by quietly being what they are, that they invite and challenge the listener to self-discovery. But the verses that

immediately follow are a warning not to attempt to respond to this invitation and challenge in a reductive way, by objectifying oneself and so turning oneself into a "thing" that can be grasped and understood and clearly defined – that is, limited, enclosed within boundaries of thought, or even worse, within the projections of some fantasized identity to be achieved in a vague future period. Authentic selfhood is a mystery beyond definition, but not beyond experience; it is not an achievement but a gift already given, that simply needs to be lived out: "Be what you are" already, let go of the desire to "know" oneself as a fact and accept the pre-verbal, pre-rational, pre-conceptual subject that is "unthinkable" because it is the being that is deeper than all doing, all acts, even the act of thought. Yet the interjection of the listener here suggests he is still trying to come up with an "acceptable" answer to the question he has heard from the wall, not realizing that the only satisfactory response comes from living rather than from talking.

The speaker tries to make this clear by returning to his initial directive, now set in a wider context than just the stones of the wall, which are recognized here as representing all creatures:

O be still, while
You are still alive,
And all things live around you
Speaking (I do not hear)
To your own being,
Speaking by the Unknown
That is in you and in themselves.
(ll. 22-28)

Here is a vision of life shared by all

creation, a profoundly sacramental vision of created reality as an epiphany of the Creator, but an epiphany of mystery, of what cannot be comprehended by finite beings but can nevertheless be imaged by them. The stones, and the rest of reality, do not speak in and of themselves, but are themselves words spoken by the Unknown and Unknowable Source of all reality, and are thereby a revelation of that same Source in oneself. That is why they paradoxically speak through silence: their stillness allows the voice of the Unknown to be heard, provided that the listener has entered the same stillness, as the poem's speaker once again commands the listener, who nevertheless insists, "I do not hear," because he remains alienated from his "own being" and its divine ground.

In the final ten lines of the poem, the voice of the listener takes over and reveals both his dilemma and the possibility of resolving it:

"I will try, like them
To be my own silence:
And this is difficult. The whole
World is secretly on fire. The stones
Burn, even the stones
They burn me. How can a man be still
or
Listen to all things burning? How can
he dare
To sit with them when
All their silence
Is on fire?"
(ll. 29-38)

Echoing the word "try" from line 3, and responding to the question "Whose / Silence are you?" in lines 10-11, he pledges to try to be his own silence, a

rather ambiguous formulation: if he means to fully embrace and identify with his silence, to be truly still, this would be a step in the right direction, but if he is going to be only his own silence, not the deeper silence of "The Unknown," then it will be only a barren silence, a dead silence, not an emptiness that is receptive and attentive. That his silence is not deep enough is indicated by the fact that in it he experiences the profoundly disorienting awareness that "the whole / World is secretly on fire," that is, that all things – even the most apparently stable, the stones – are perishing, being consumed. His silence has brought the discovery of universal contingency, transience, mortality. And there is a more personal dimension: the stones not only burn, "They burn me". Recognition of their instability brings an awareness of his own: silence and stillness are terrifying because they threaten his own fragile sense of self. He is burned – he is burning – he is being consumed. His final questions appear to be a sort of self-justification for failing to obey the opening commands to "be still" and "listen," as though the only response to the questions, "How can a man be still . . . ? How can he dare to sit with them?" is: "He cannot." But this is not the inevitable answer, or rather not the full answer: if he cannot by his own power, he must rely on the power of Another. The final questions must be reinterpreted, by speaker and reader alike, as requests for instruction, for direction, in order to discover how indeed to "be still" and "listen / To all things burning," and "To sit with them / When all their silence / Is on fire." By going deeper into the silence he will

find what is not being consumed, what is not passing away. To learn to listen to a world on fire is to discover that the meaning of that fire is far more profound, though no less threatening to the superficial self, than he has realized. If their silence is on fire, then the fire cannot be merely destructive, for silence cannot be consumed: in the depths of silence this fire can be recognized as the same fire that Moses encountered in the burning bush, the same fire that descended on the disciples at Pentecost, the refiner's fire that purifies and strengthens, the fire of the Spirit, the fire of divine love that is at the heart of all reality and transforms what is loved into itself. In this fire he has perceived the necessary death to self, but not the fullness of life that is symbolized by that same element. Whether he will do so or not is left unresolved, but the answer to his questions has already been given, and if he returns to the beginning of the poem and does as he has been directed there, he will have fully heard what the stones reveal, will discover who he really is, and will learn the true name that will be his forever.

Bodhidharma, the first Chinese Zen, or Ch'an, Patriarch, is best known for his "wall-gazing" meditation, in which he spent years at a time facing a blank wall and deepening his awareness of the emptiness of all forms (19). These two poems, written a decade apart, suggest that Thomas Merton was faithful to his own practice of "wall-gazing meditation," even if it was not so constant and so radical as Bodhidharma's. Though the two poems

are strikingly different in style, structure and diction, and even though the precise analogies of 'Natural History' have given way to the profound ambiguities of 'In Silence,' I would conclude by suggesting that the differences finally do not overwhelm or cancel out the continuities, and that for a discerning reader the wall that is "full of sun" in the first poem is recognizably the same wall, or at least a similar wall, to that whose "silence is on fire" in the second; by gazing at each wall poet and reader alike are led to recognize the necessity for that self-surrender and self-transcendence that is at the heart of authentic contemplative experience. Mending walls indeed!

Patrick F. O'Connell is associate professor at Gannon University, Erie, Pennsylvania. He is the co-author of *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* and has also edited *The Vision of Thomas Merton*.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Thirty Poems* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1944); Thomas Merton, *A Man in the Divided Sea* (New York: New Directions, 1946); Thomas Merton, *Figures for an Apocalypse* (New York: New Directions, 1947); Thomas Merton, *The Tears of the Blind Lions* (New York: New Directions, 1949).
2. See "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," *Figures for an Apocalypse* 95-111, especially 109: "poetry can, indeed, help to bring us rapidly through that part of the journey to contemplation that is called active: but when we are entering the realm of true contemplation, where eternal happiness begins, it may turn around and bar the

way." For an analysis of this text and its revised version, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," see Patrick F. O'Connell, "Poetry and Contemplation: The Evolution of Thomas Merton's Aesthetic." *The Merton Journal* 8:1 (Easter 2001) 2-11.

3. See Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 242.

4. See George Woodcock's distinction between "the spare poetry of the eremitic life which I shall call 'the poetry of the desert' as distinct from the much more ornate work which I shall call 'the poetry of the choir'" in *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978) 51.

5. *Figures for an Apocalypse* 76-78; Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 182-84.

6. Thomas Merton, *The Strange Islands* (New York: New Directions, 1957) 87-88; *Collected Poems* 280-81.

7. George Herbert, "The Flower" (l. 39), *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941) 166.

8. Robert Frost, "Mending Wall," *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969) 33-34.

9. Woodcock calls this poem an "impressive example" of "the English tradition [that] brought nature poetry and religious poetry so close together," and describes it as "a poem that hovers on the verge between the poetry of the desert and the poetry of the choir (but by its fullness of tone must be regarded as belonging to the latter category)" (*Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet* 60).

10. The process here may seem to resemble the construction of a chrysalis from a leaf, rather than the spinning of a cocoon, but both the explicit use of the word "cocoon" in line 31 and the reference to the caterpillar in the poem's final line as "a black and russet worm," which seems to describe the so-called "wooly bear" (or, in the South, "wooly worm") caterpillar, the larva of the tiger moth (*Pyrrharctia Isabella*), with its alternating bands of black and reddish brown, indicate that a cocoon rather than a chrysalis is being described. If so, Merton may be telescoping the process here, as the wooly bear generally conceals itself in crevices of walls and similar places during the winter and spins its cocoon after the coldest weather has passed.

11. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Heaven-Haven," *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953) 5.

12. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Direction, 1949) 24-30.

13. St. Teresa of Avila, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, trans. Otilio Rodriguez, OCD and Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1980) 341-53.

14. St. Teresa of Avila, *Collected Works* 2:343: "'Let's be quick to do this work and weave this little cocoon by getting rid of our self-love and self-will, our attachment to any earthly thing . . . Let it die; let this silkworm die, as it does in completing what it was created to do!'"

15. John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, Ancient Christian Writers vol. 57 (New York: Paulist, 1997) 41-44; see also Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers*:

Initiation into the Monastic Tradition, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005) 204-206.

16. See Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962) 25-39 and *passim*.

17. This poem is discussed by David D. Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989) 153; Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1979) 125-26; Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001) 66-67; Scott Nelson, "Three Decades of Poetry: Merton's Spiritual Maturation," in M. Basil Pennington, ed., *Toward an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton's Journey* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988) 244-46; Bonnie

Thurston, "Wrestling with Angels: Some Mature Poems of Thomas Merton," in Patrick F. O'Connell, ed., *The Vision of Thomas Merton* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2003) 191-92; Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet* 85-86.

18. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 56-57 [July 27, 1956] (the lines of the transcription are misarranged). The poem is actually written not at Gethsemani but at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, where Merton had gone to attend a conference, one of his rare trips away from his own monastery.

19. For Bodhidharma see John C. H. Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen* (1967; New York: Doubleday Image, 1996) 34-40.

Congreso Internacional Semillas de Esperanza: El Mensaje Contemplativo de Thomas Merton

International Conference
Seeds of Hope: Thomas Merton's Contemplative Message

Ávila, Spain

28, 28 y 29 Octubre / October 2006

James Conner

Jim Forest

Cristóbal Serran-Pagan y Fuentes

Fernando Beltrán Llavador

Erlinda Paguio

Paul M. Pearson

Sonia Petisco

Bonnie Thurston

www.merton.org/spain www.ciem.es ciem@ayuntavila.com