

# Old World, New Priest:

Thomas Merton's '*Senescente Mundo*'

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## Introduction

At some point between May 26, 1949, when Thomas Merton was ordained to the priesthood at the Abbey of Gethsemani,<sup>1</sup> and the end of that summer, when he sent the (almost) final version of the text of what would be his fourth book of verse, *The Tears of the Blind Lions*,<sup>2</sup> to his publisher James Laughlin,<sup>3</sup> he must have written '*Senescente Mundo*',<sup>4</sup> the concluding poem in the volume and one of the very few poems in which he draws on his experience as a priest in any extensive way.<sup>5</sup> The poem's title means 'as the world grows old',<sup>6</sup> and as a meditation on the ultimate destiny of the universe and all that belongs to it, the climactic position it occupies is particularly apropos.<sup>7</sup> But the focus of the poem is at least as much on the present as on the future: it ponders the meaning of priesthood in and for an age when meaning itself seems increasingly difficult to find. It presents the Eucharist as the convergence of past and future in the present, of soteriology and eschatology in sacrament, a participation in the paschal mystery of death and rebirth that has not only personal but cosmic significance.<sup>8</sup> The seventieth anniversary both of Merton's ordination and of the publication of the volume in which this poem first appears might be a particularly appropriate occasion to reflect on how this challenging, strikingly unconventional work provides insight into Merton's state of mind and heart at one of the key transition points of his life as a Christian and as a monk.

## A Universal Cataclysm

The poem begins with a starkly vivid depiction of the world's end,<sup>9</sup> oscillating back and forth between great and small, the general and the

particular, paradoxically pulled apart and drawn together by universal cataclysm:

*Senescente mundo*, when the hot globe  
Shrivels and cracks  
And uninhibited atoms resolve  
Earth and water, fruit and flower, body and animal soul,  
All the blue stars come tumbling down.  
Beauty and ugliness and love and hate  
Wisdom and politics are all alike undone. (ll. 1-7)

Scientific and religious traditions merge here as fire, or at least intense heat, which is described as producing the same effect on the entire globe as it would on various small, vulnerable objects, thus implicitly reducing the whole world to a comparably precarious position of impermanence and insubstantiality. The most basic elements of matter are rendered 'uninhibited' – out of control, no longer held together by molecular bonds – resulting in the disintegration of the natural order, exemplified by the three sets of complementary pairs, inanimate, vegetal and animal (note the specification of 'animal soul', the vital principle that gives sentient life to the physical body, considered as material and implicitly distinguished from the spiritual soul unique to humans). These are not only disconnected from one another but lose their own discrete identities, the verb 'resolve' here denoting not its more usual meaning of determined commitment in the face of crisis but, on the contrary, the utter breakdown of a whole into its component parts. This shift of attention from macrocosm to microcosm is then reversed to incorporate the super-terrestrial dimension, the collapse of the entire universe as epitomized by the apocalyptic scriptural image of the fall of the stars (cf. Rev. 12:4, Dn. 8:10). The second triad of pairs that follows, qualitative rather than material, consists of polar opposites — note the sly satire of the final pair, wisdom and politics, implying that these too are antithetical. The point here is somewhat different than that made by the earlier pairings: virtues and vices, the positive and the negative, are all contingent, all transient, at least in their manifestations; all will ultimately disappear.<sup>10</sup>

### The Human Dimension

So this opening panorama of final destruction is all-encompassing, but brings the focus onto the human dimension at its climax, preparing the

way for the following section, which is concerned exclusively with human behavior:

Toward that fiery day we run like crabs  
With our bad-tempered armor on.  
"With blood and carpets, oranges and ashes,  
Rubber and limes and bones,"  
(So sing the children on the Avenue)  
"With cardboard and dirty water and a few flames for  
the Peacelover's ghost,  
We know where the dead bodies are  
Studying the ceiling from the floors of their homes,  
With smoke and roses, slate and wire  
And crushed fruit and much fire." (ll. 8-17)

The poet describes himself and his audience as being drawn toward this destruction, hurrying in the direction of their fatal destiny, but doing so not directly but sidewise, 'like crabs', attempting to evade the realization of where they are heading, both temporally and morally, within a shell that they think will protect them, 'bad-tempered' in a double sense: not only vainly employing hostility, suspicion, and aggression as defensive devices, but improperly hardened, like poorly produced steel, and thus inadequate as protection. The rest of the section is taken up with the song of street children, whose innocence has been lost early by contact with the disorder and detritus of their environment. The randomness and pointlessness of this catalogue of oddly juxtaposed objects of the urban scene is evidence of the moral incoherence of contemporary society. The kind of entropy foreseen for the various pairings in the opening section seems to have already happened here in these various haphazard combinations. The only common aspect of the first group is that one element in each set represents violence or destruction. The parenthetical identification of the speakers – or singers – at this point might suggest a kind of skipping rope chant with these oddments substituting for 'salt, pepper, vinegar, mustard' etc., but in the remainder of their song the details become more circumstantial, and more disturbing. The third element of the next grouping seems to suggest paying tribute to the memory of the peace-lover, perhaps lighting vigil candles in a church or some comparable act of respect, but it is an ineffectual gesture; the peace-lover is dead and gone, present only as an insubstantial ghost; there is no

sense of anyone carrying on his legacy, continuing his commitment to peace (which in fact may not have extended beyond a predilection for peace and quiet – peace-loving does not necessarily lead to peace-making).

With the line, 'We know where the dead bodies are', the lists are revealed to be part of an actual sentence, a statement about the location of dead bodies, lying face-up on the floors of their houses. The cause of death is not known, or at least not indicated, but that is not the point. At the heart of these children's experience is an awareness of death, and an exposure not only to death but to the isolation and alienation in which death is encountered. The bodies lie, ignored by adult society, amidst the trash, one more variety of ill-assorted object, three more pairs of which are now mentioned, so that the bodies are verbally surrounded by this discarded rubbish. Ironically 'smoke' and 'roses' picks up the assonance of the final words of the previous alternate lines ('bones', 'ghost', 'homes'), the two final lines actually rhyme, and the adjectives and nouns of the final pair are linked by assonance and alliteration respectively – all of which contribute to a spurious coherence, of sound without sense. The oranges and limes mentioned earlier – now replaced by, or turned into, crushed fruit – recall the fruit of line 4, as the roses do the flower, the dirty water the water, and of course the dead bodies the body, all found in the same line; the smoke and fire that begin and end this series suggest the final conflagration itself. There is a sense here that the world, morally speaking, is already ending right now as the destructive tendencies, the accumulating degradations, of the present foreshadow final doom.

### **The Gift of the Eucharist**

Up to this point the tone has been one of pervasive, unrelenting hopelessness, but the poem's true subject is the triumph of hope in the face of despair, grounded in the gift of the Eucharist. The countermovement begins with the poet's affirmation of the redemptive power of the sacramental presence of Christ, personally experienced in a new, more intimate way through his own recent priestly ordination. Rather than considering the Eucharist in a vacuum, located in some 'sacred sphere' unrelated to secular life, the Mass is situated in the context of the disordered world just described in such harrowing detail:

Yet in the middle of this murderous season  
Great Christ, my fingers touch Thy wheat  
And hold Thee hidden in the compass of Thy paper sun.  
There is no war will not obey this cup of Blood,  
This wine in which I sink Thy words, in the anonymous  
dawn!

I hear a Sovereign talking in my arteries  
Reversing, with His Promises, all things  
That now go on with fire and thunder.  
His Truth is greater than disaster.

His Peace imposes silence on the evidence against us. (ll. 18-27)

In the prayer that constitutes the first five lines of this section, the Eucharistic elements are presented in a contrary pattern, first moving from the earthly to the divine, and then from the divine to the earthly. The two lines on the bread move from the wheat to the consecrated host, while the pair of verses on the wine begin with mention of Christ's blood, then move back to the actual moment when the words of consecration, declaring the establishment of a new covenant founded in divine forgiveness, are pronounced over the cup. The speaker's sensible, physical contact with Christ in the sacrament, his ability to 'touch' and, even more intimately, to 'hold' the bread become body, conveys the concrete experience of the Eucharist as the divine presence in the material world. The mystery of this presence, that the 'Great Christ' is somehow contained within the confines of a small, seemingly fragile object is reinforced by the paradoxical image of the host, as thin and apparently insubstantial as a disk of paper, yet as enlightening and central to life as the sun.

In the following lines the nightmarish depiction of the fallen world is directly engaged: Christ's blood is related to yet reversing the significance of the blood mentioned earlier (l.10) at the beginning of the catalogue of disorder. The poet's claim here, on the face of it, seems untrue – wars do not stop because of the Eucharist; but it is an expression of faith that Christ's death, re-presented in the Eucharist, effects the ultimate reconciliation of all things (cf. Eph. 2:14). Hidden in the 'anonymous dawn', the beginning of an ordinary, unremarkable day, the central event of all history is being celebrated. This vision of eschatological peace is a declaration that conflict and division are not the final word, that despite



concrete evidence to the contrary, the victory of Christ over sin and death is assured.

The five lines that follow turn from prayer to proclamation. The very pulse of his own life-blood coursing through his body is experienced by the poet as the divine Word received in the Eucharist. It is testimony to the salvific power of Christ the Lord of Life, who in shedding his own blood as a sacrificial offering has endured and overcome death, and thus is indeed the Sovereign, the Prince of Peace, in whose resurrected and glorified body, made available in the Eucharist, the fullness of the Reign of God is already present. The 'fire and thunder' of current turmoil are themselves transient, evanescent. The parallel statements of the two concluding lines of this section focus in turn on effect and cause – the catastrophic events that are subordinated to a deeper Truth and the human culpability for these events that is annulled, made no longer applicable, by a reconciliation that transcends the condemnation of the Law. Thus the progression of these lines moves from the Eucharistic consecration to the interiorized experience of Christ's promises, implicitly associated with the reception of communion, to a public profession of faith in these promises.

### **A Whole New Universe**

After this consideration of human regeneration, the poet then addresses the cosmic consequences of the Word become flesh, thus reversing the sequence of presentation in the first half of the poem:

And though the world, at last, has swallowed her own  
solemn laughter  
And has condemned herself to hell:  
Suppose a whole new universe, a great clean Kingdom  
Were to rise up like an Atlantis in the East,  
Surprise this earth, this cinder, with new holiness! (ll. 28-32)

There is a sense here of being at a crisis point of history, perhaps reflective specifically of the horrors of the recently ended world war and growing awareness of the threat of atomic holocaust. The world, in the negative Johannine sense of creation that has alienated itself from its Creator, has come to a realization that the time has ended for laughter, recognized not as an expression of true joy but as 'solemn', an attempt to ignore desperately serious problems, a state of illusion and denial that

can no longer be sustained. The world has come to perceive the depth of its own evil, but without any faith, and therefore without any hope, its self-condemnation an expression of despair. Thus the possibility of cosmic renewal comes as a totally gratuitous, unexpected, undeserved surprise, neither the result of natural processes nor a reward for moral improvement. There is both continuity and discontinuity in this depiction: 'a whole new universe' that is nevertheless compared to Atlantis, a hidden reality that rises up from beneath the surface – as from death or even from hell; the cinder of earth itself that is conceived to be transformed, made holy – not replacement but metamorphosis. This vision, however, is presented as simply hypothetical at this point: 'Suppose' this were to happen, this 'great clean Kingdom' were to appear. No substantial basis for such a hope has yet been provided.

### **An Embodiment of Hope**

It is only in the poem's concluding lines that the Eucharist is presented as the source of assurance confirming this promise of cosmic renewal:

Here in my hands I hold that secret Easter.  
Tomorrow, this will be my Mass's answer,  
Because of my companions whom the wilderness has eaten,  
Crying like Jonas in the belly of our whale. (ll. 33-36)

The sacramental transformation of the material elements of bread and wine into the body and blood of the risen Christ is a pledge of the eschatological transformation of all reality. Christ's resurrected, glorified body already participates in the final state of all creation, and in the Eucharist the presence of the glorified Lord becomes available within the world of space and time. This sacramental sign of final perfection is still a 'secret Easter',<sup>11</sup> perceptible only to the eyes of faith, yet paradoxically accessible to the senses as well, able, as the poet once again affirms, to be held in his hands (cf. l. 20). It is the function of the Mass and its celebrant to reveal this secret, this mystery, to those yearning for a reason to hope, particularized in the poem's final lines as fellow members of the poet's monastic community. Far from expressing a simplistic optimism or complacent triumphalism about the superiority of religious life to that in the wicked world these monks have abandoned, the poet concludes with an imaginative yet realistic depiction of their ongoing struggles to enter fully into the paschal mystery.

The monastery is imaged not as the promised land but as the trackless wilderness that consumes them, a sort of inverse communion, analogous to the whale which swallowed the prophet Jonas. Here the poet is anticipating his application of this archetypal biblical tale in the journal to be published four years later, indicated in the final line of the poem, and of the entire volume.<sup>12</sup> The monks find themselves in the desert of silence, solitude, emptiness, a void of utter destitution in which all superficial consolations are stripped away; they have died to the world and to their own worldly selves, but still await their resurrection, which they know by faith but not yet by experience. In this context, the speaker's Mass is a reassurance that the promise of new life with and in the risen Christ received in the Eucharist will be fulfilled, a response to the cry out of the depths of Jonas, still entombed in the belly of the whale but soon to emerge, prefiguring Christ's victory over sin and death – an embodiment of hope. In this scenario 'Because of' means 'for the sake of' – the answer of the Mass is given to support and strengthen the faith of the celebrant's companions. But 'Because of' can also mean 'due to' – so that the commitment and perseverance of the monks' witness serves as a kind of reciprocal assurance for the speaker of the validity of his own belief and trust in the reality of the 'secret Easter' that encompasses all that he has announced throughout the poem.

### Conclusion

Having begun with brutally frank descriptions of both future destruction and present disintegration, the poet concludes with the affirmation that, however difficult it may be to accept in the midst of the disorder and apparent meaninglessness of contemporary life, the good news hidden in the heart of the Eucharist is that the Creator's design for creation as a whole and for each creature made in the divine image, including the poet, his companions and his audience, will be fulfilled – that the world grown old is finally a prelude to a world renewed.

### Notes

1. For Merton's reflections on priesthood in the period leading up to and immediately following his ordination, see Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), pp. 314-320, 321-322; Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), pp. 190-196, 198-199. See also the Introduction to Part Four of the latter

volume, entitled 'To the Altar of God', pp. 181-83, and the concluding section of Merton's essay 'The White Pebble', written a few months after his ordination, in Thomas Merton, *Selected Essays*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), pp. 11-14. For an overview of the topic, see William H. Shannon, 'Priesthood', in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), pp. 368-370.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Tears of the Blind Lions* (New York: New Directions, 1949.)
3. See James Laughlin's 15 September 1949 letter to Merton in Thomas Merton and James Laughlin, *Selected Letters*, ed. David D. Cooper (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), pp. 59-61. Laughlin is replying to a brief undated, unpublished letter from Merton, now in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, saying that he had 'sent the Blind Lions off yesterday' and that Laughlin should receive the package soon. The copy is the almost final version because the package included Merton's poem, 'Sports without Blood – A Letter to Dylan Thomas', which had to be excluded for reasons of space, as the book had to be restricted to 32 pages because it was also being issued in a special pamphlet format for the holiday trade (see Merton's unpublished 30 September 1949 letter to Laughlin and Laughlin's unpublished 14 October 1949 reply held in the Thomas Merton Centre archives). The poem was eventually published in Thomas Merton, *The Strange Islands* (New York: New Directions, 1957), pp. 27-31.
4. *The Tears of the Blind Lions*, pp. 31-32; *Collected Poems*, pp. 221-222. The poem is also included in Thomas Merton, *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1959; enlarged ed. 1967), pp. 85-87; Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1962), p. 458; rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1974), pp. 424-425; Thomas Merton, *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems*, ed. Lynn R. Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005), pp. 62-63.
5. The other poem principally concerned with sacramental priesthood is 'Early Mass' subtitled 'St. Joseph Infirmary – Louisville', written during or shortly after a hospital stay in November 1950. It is included in *The Strange Islands*, pp. 89-90, and *Collected Poems*, pp. 281-282. For a discussion see Patrick F. O'Connell, 'Islands in the Stream: Thomas Merton's Poetry of the Early 1950s', *The Merton Annual* 22 (2009), pp. 69-74.
6. The phrase is classical in origin: see for example Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 7:17 & Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, 3.10. It also appears numerous times in patristic literature. Merton may have encountered the phrase (in reverse order as 'mundo senescente') in a well known letter of Peter the Venerable to St. Bernard on monastic customs (J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, vol. 189, col. 155B, l. 26), that he will later discuss in a conference with his novices (which does not include any

- reference to this phrase): see Thomas Merton, *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 8, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2016), pp. 134-139. For an overview of this motif, see G. J. M. Bartelink, 'La Thème du Monde Vieilli', *Orpheus* 4 (1983), pp. 342-354.
7. Laughlin mentions in his unpublished 14 October letter that Merton had specifically indicated that '*Senescente Mundo*' should be the final poem in the volume.
  8. See Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961), p. 202: 'Every sacrament . . . unites in itself the past, the present and the future. It makes "present" in some way, the whole "mystery of Christ" by virtue of its own, proper sacramental signification.' See also Patrick F. O'Connell, 'Sacrament' (*Encyclopedia*, pp. 396-397) and Patrick F. O'Connell, 'Eucharist' (*Encyclopedia* pp. 141-143).
  9. For similar descriptions of apocalyptic destruction in Merton's early poetry, see 'La Salette' in Thomas Merton, *A Man in the Divided Sea* (New York: New Directions, 1946), pp. 108-109, *Collected Poems*, pp. 130-31; the eight-part title sequence in Thomas Merton, *Figures for an Apocalypse* (New York: New Directions, 1947), pp. 13-28, *Collected Poems*, pp. 135-148); 'To the Immaculate Virgin, on a Winter Night' in *Tears of the Blind Lions*, pp. 27-28, *Collected Poems*, pp. 218-219.
  10. See the similar reflections in Merton's journal entry for 10 October 1948 in *Entering the Silence*, pp. 236-37.
  11. See Merton's reference to his ordination as 'the one great secret for which I had been born' in his Introduction to Part Four of *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 181.
  12. See in particular Merton's explanation of this image in his Prologue to *The Sign of Jonas*, pp. 10-11, as well as his use of the Jonas persona in the concluding 'Fire Watch' epilogue, *Entering the Silence*, p. 488, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 362. Merton had already been considering this figure's relevance to his own life when he entitled the new journal notebook begun on October 15, 1948 'The Whale and the Ivy', *Entering the Silence*, p. 237.

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