

A Door Opening onto Theology: Thomas Merton's Crafting of 'Still-points'

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*Facilitate the leap towards the transcendent*¹
Pope Francis

Introduction

As a teacher in the Modern Languages Department of a French University I belong to a system of higher education where only two public universities have a Theology Department, due to the early 20th century French law on secularism in the public domain.² Designing a module on the climate crisis as projected through literary texts, I wished to focus on the neglect of the spiritual dimension within ecological reflection. A common undertaking in literary study for French students is an *explication de texte*, through which they seek to identify issues of language, style, and content, as channels of meaning. Among the texts to be explored, I chose a selection of what I named 'still-points' from Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. 'Still-points' are watersheds in the flow of the text, where the attention to Merton's meandering observations is interrupted, and forced to linger in an alternative space. We explored one striking example which is physically set apart from the flow of prose by being framed by two rows of three asterisks. It is 4am, the time of Prime. Merton stands out of doors and describes what he sees:

* * *

Cold stars. Steam coming up out of the kitchens into the freezing night (4:00A.M.) Frost on the side of the coal pile outside the furnace room. Dirty bread lying in the gravel, frozen, for birds. Creak of the frosty wooden steps down to the infirmary. Flamingos on the Standard Oil calendar in the kitchen. Hot tea.³

* * *

The sharing of this prose extract with the students generated a range of energetic responses. It was interpreted as a liturgy in which everyone can participate; a sharing of bread against the odds; a triumph of dialogue between the human and the natural world; an alternative to the non-dialogue exemplified in the climate crisis, where the natural world is refused a voice. They identified the power of a play of words to signal encounters between the known and the unknown, and to give universal access to something pointing to the sacramental.

Such verbal craftsmanship creates an accessible embodied theology and resonates with Merton's definition of liturgy as 'theology lived'.⁴ It also provides a model for his thoughts on liturgical renewal. For Merton, the essential characteristic of liturgy was contemplative seeing through its invitation to attentiveness, beyond the surface contours of the world, the very process the students identified in the text.⁵ In this article, I aim to analyse Merton's literary form as a new locus for theological enquiry.

The Play of Liturgy and The Play of Text

Conjectures figures among those works of Merton which have attracted considerable attention in academic interest as well as having wide popular appeal. It is rare, however, that attention is given to the form of Merton's writing. Studies which focus on Merton's textual art, including for example, seminal works by Ross Labrie and Victor Kramer, tend to include his whole oeuvre and hence, allow limited scope for close analysis of individual texts.⁶ In a 2015 thesis on Merton's theological poetics, Philip Seal, identifying this neglect, offers a masterly exploration of the form of Merton's prose, though *Conjectures* does not feature in his exploration.⁷ Seal pinpoints formal characteristics of Merton's prose to demonstrate his premise that 'the literary forms of Thomas Merton's prose writings embody theological claims he makes elsewhere at the level of content'.⁸ His ensuing analysis is highly original and, in my view, deserves further development. It poses the question of whether the form of Merton's prose can of itself give access to theological concepts, understood beyond the limits of confessional engagement.

Conjectures sets out to explore the 'confrontation of twentieth-century questions in the light of monastic commitment', a dialogue between the world of action and the contemplative life in the light of the pronouncements of Vatican II.⁹ In the text, two types of prose are identifiable, representing these two vantage points. On the one hand, Merton comments on what he stumbles upon in a seeming random flow of content, thus demonstrating his presence 'in the world' and his

eagerness to participate in it. On the other, he crafts descriptive vignettes, which invite one out of the world into the contemplative realm.

Romano Guardini, a key player in the Liturgical Movement which shaped the reforms of Vatican II, recognised this invitation in Merton's writing, noting that 'Merton can bring it about that things receive a singular immediacy: they become simple and fresh.'¹⁰ Guardini's work, *The Spirit of Liturgy*, highlights the biblical image from the book of Proverbs, which provides a source of reflection for Merton, that of the innocent child playing in the garden.¹¹ The absorbed composure and stillness of the child at play signals the qualities conducive to contemplative seeing. Guardini identifies two different kinds of play. He offsets the character of space within a gymnasium with that provided by a woodland. In the first, 'every detail of the apparatus and every exercise aims at a calculated effect' and is 'consciously directed towards discipline and development'. This for Guardini is the theology of canon law. Conversely, the play of liturgy is located in 'the open woods and fields, life is lived with Nature', and 'internal growth takes place in her', which results in a 'universe brimming with fruitful spiritual life', allowing 'the soul to wander about in it at will, and to develop itself there.'¹² In the manner Guardini describes, reflecting the play of liturgy, Merton verbally plays with his material surroundings, trawling there for intimations of the sacred. Through the crafting of textual 'still-points', he arrests the reader's attention and invites participation in a fresh way of seeing.

By exploring Merton's 'still-points', it is possible to identify the textual elements which invite this second kind of play. There is a delicate craftsmanship of language, the more powerful for being as if chiselled out from the drift of reflections, serving as an arresting counterpoint to Merton's meandering commentary. Key themes are liminality or in-betweenness, and the Eucharist, which together capture the negotiation between material fixity and a more capacious, unbounded space. Each text nudges the reader towards an understanding of quietude, of silence, which attends to the material reality of a given place, understood as intrinsically graced.

The Place of the In-between

Merton recounts an experience of being the night watchman in the monastery during heavy rain. Rather than describing the nature of the task, he captures how he experiences the process, as a time in which he drifts on the cusp of awareness between the conscious and the semi-conscious. This focus on the element of water in all its forms is common

in Merton's prose and poetry.¹³ It is a frequent symbol of the power of contemplative vision to reconfigure a habitual way of seeing, by eroding the limitations of surface reality:

Last night I was on the night watch. It rained heavily. Between rounds I went into the little shelter in the middle of the cloister court, which is traditionally called by the French name of *préau* here. Rain poured down on the walls of the building, on the four big maples, on the roof of the shelter. I was sleepy, and sat in the chair, nodding in the dark. Hanging on the edge of sleep I could hear the rain around me like a huge aviary full of parrots: but just as the aviary became 'real' I would wake up, rescue myself from this strange world of sound, until gradually I would fall into it again.¹⁴

Characteristic of many of these textual 'still-points' is the use of multiple prepositions: into; in the middle; down; on; in; on the edge; around; from. This tactic demonstrates Merton's grounding of his observations in material reality. Phrasal verbs involving prepositions and verbs of movement similarly create a spotlight on the action of passing over thresholds: nodding; hanging on the edge; waking up; rescuing from; falling into; pouring down. Merton thus captures an awareness of being on the cusp of change.

The French term *préau*, an enclosed yard, echoes both the French origin of Cistercian monasticism and the French school playgrounds of Merton's childhood. It implies in both cases unprescribed time away from the chapel and the classroom. The yard shelter is inadequate to protect from the rain. Creating the sense of an invasion, Merton uses a strategy common to mystical texts, in which the writer seeks to find ways of going beyond the limitations of language to capture an experience of plenitude.¹⁵ This sense of amplification is reflected in the 'huge aviary', 'the four big maples'. The magnitude is equally evident in the relentless pounding, recreated in the sibilant and plosive consonants of 's', 'sh', 'st', and 't', with the further alliteration of letter 't' hinting at liquification and an utter drenching. The hyperbolic strangeness of such sound invading the silence of the monastery is evident in the equation with exotic chattering of parrots, birds rarely to be met in the Kentucky countryside. The *préau*, this in-between space becomes a place which speaks and demands a listening, through the quasi-baptismal drenching by language-filled rain.

Over the Threshold

In the next extract Merton does not stay on the threshold but is tipped across into the awakening to new consciousness. This passage is among Merton's most well-known. It led to the creation of a cast iron street plaque to mark the spot in Louisville, and of blog pages and articles taking the name 'Fourth and Walnut'. Emerging once again from meandering observations, the sudden pinpointing of location carves out a new space in the flow of narrative:

In Louisville at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.¹⁶

The narrative mode and the neat shaping of sentences and layering of clauses create an ease of engagement, as does the careful mapping of spatial detail. The delineation of space is assisted by a sequence of prepositions: *In Louisville, at the corner of two streets, in the centre*. The verbs, 'waking from' and 'overwhelmed by' underline the need to relocate. The acknowledgement of displacement is given multiple names: alien, stranger, spurious self-isolation, separateness, a special world. In sharp contrast, over the threshold is a startling admission of love and of mutual belonging: 'I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs.' The possessive pronouns underline a deep sense of connection. The phonetic echoes in holiness, whole and holy dissolve the fragmentation of separateness, to unearth a unity which is experienced as holy.

The sense of being 'suddenly overwhelmed' echoes earlier experiences within church interiors in Rome and in Cuba, recorded in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and in his journal, where his descriptions imply a forceful relocating of vision. Merton, on finding the mosaic of Christ coming in judgement in the church of Saints Cosmas and Damian by the Roman Forum, writes that: 'The effect of this discovery was tremendous. ... an art that was tremendously serious and alive and eloquent and urgent in all that it had to say.'¹⁷ And in Cuba, attending Mass at the Church of St Francis in Havana, as the children cried out 'Creo en Dios!',

Merton records that:

There formed in my mind an awareness, an understanding, a realization of what had just taken place on the altar, at the Consecration: a realization of God made present by the words of the Consecration in a way that made Him belong to me.

But what a thing it was, this awareness: it was so intangible, and yet it struck me like a thunderclap. It was a light so bright that it had no relation to any visible light and so profound and so intimate that it seemed like a neutralization of every lesser experience.¹⁸

Each instance provides Merton's unique vantage point which William Harmless describes as a 'profound and fundamental religious insight' and in which 'people and things are seen in their God-given dignity'.¹⁹ In Louisville, a city hitherto described by Merton as 'dull as usual' with its 'miles and miles of one storey homes', becomes the locus of a transfiguring compassion.²⁰

Once again Merton cannot refrain from hyperbolic terms to describe his experience at the same time recognizing that it is beyond explanation: 'I have the immense joy of being man', and 'it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.' Bringing the account of his realisation to an end he claims: 'I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.'²¹ Holiness is hence experienced *pro-fane*, outside the temple, on a high street, allowing all places to become the locus of a God-given revelation of human dignity and solidarity.

In a few engaging sentences, Merton has illustrated his perspective on sacramental understanding, on the gratuity of grace, on the experience of integration. He embodies biblical teaching on the incarnation and on the invocation for humanity's oneness with God, as voiced in John 17:21: 'that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.' He begins in a specific place and then moves from the material world to the metaphysical, in abandonment of his own preconceptions concerning the monastic life. He thus releases theology from structured reasoning and linear analysis, creating a more dynamic textual construct, in which the sense of new-found joy dismantles the need to analyse or to prove, and renders the theology self-evident.

The Play of Nature and Liturgy

Merton's 'still-points' highlight the play of different elements in liminal or transitional space. The following extract emerges from the meandering delivery of *Conjectures*.²² It projects itself, however, in bold. Vivid description unfolds in a long comma-free sentence, concluded by a sentence fragment. The text then proceeds into a sentence beginning 'And' with a reference to the Gospel of the day, as if it were necessary to move on. This picking up the thread of journalistic commentary underlines that these 'still-points' have to be dug out of the ongoing movement:

Sun poured in the novitiate chapel onto the altar and a glory of reflected lights from the hammered silver chalice splashed all over the corporal and all around the Host. Deep and total silence.²³

Merton signals how liturgy and nature are mutually shaped into splendour. The unstoppable crescendo of words in the first sentence generates a sense of abundant layering. It captures a rich enmeshment of all the elements. In contrast, the sentence fragment of the final four words, in its simple isolation, is freed from all evaluative comment. For Seal, such sentence fragments are characteristic of Merton's 'poetics of thereness' which involve 'an act of reading that apprehends literary objects that exist by being themselves by becoming alone amongst textual relationships that surround them and by occupying a space.'²⁴ The combination of the long sentence with the closing fragment tips the narrative from dynamic outpouring into silent wonder.

Merton creates textually an energetic fusion of the two entities: nature and the human-made paraphernalia of the liturgy of the Eucharist. He pitches together sun and altar, light and chalice, the metal and its shaping into a vessel, light on the white corporal and on the consecrated bread. Within this pairing there is a third element reflective of the hand of the creator behind the sun, the light and the altar. The divine presence of the Eucharist emerges in the echoes of the passion evident in 'hammered', in 'splashing' suggestive of an outpouring of blood, and the symbolism of the shroud behind the corporal. An understanding of transubstantiation is hence recreated as the bread and wine evoke body and blood. The reciprocity of impact between the different elements is represented by the verbs: poured; reflected; hammered; splashed. This is also evident in the sequence of prepositions: in, onto, from, all over, all

around, which indicate invasive movement. Merton creates a sense of dynamic vitality in the interplay between objects and the forces of nature. It is reflective of grace as encountered through the sacraments. The acknowledgement of abundance is evident as the multiple sides of the chalice reflect iridescently, 'all over' and 'all around', suggesting a complete drenching in light and grace. This picture captures Merton's understanding of the Eucharist in words he shared with Jacques Maritain: 'To me the Eucharist has always been light, illumination.'²⁵ Merton thus transforms the familiar items present in every liturgy of the Eucharist into a symphony of movement and colour. A still life becomes a vivid splash of vitality. In this melding of words, matter and divine presence, Merton grasps the richness of liturgical pronouncement.

Liturgy in the Open Air

We now return to the opening extract, where Merton's contemplative attending on the detail of his physical surroundings reveals a liturgy enacted beyond any specific sacred space. As mentioned previously, the importance Merton grants to this passage is evident in its being one of the few passages set apart between two sets of asterisks.²⁶

The passage is framed and balanced by two sentence fragments: 'Cold stars' and 'Hot tea' which capture the character of polarity represented by cold and hot. Merton then offers a striking landscape of pictorial and sensory contrasts of temperature and colour, in which divine creativity meets human creativity. 'Cold stars', 'freezing', and 'frost' confront 'steam', 'coal', 'furnace', 'hot tea', whilst the monochromes of black, white, and grey blend with a splash of flamingo pink.²⁷ The intimacy of the divine with the human is manifest as the expanse of the cosmos stands alongside the earthly familiarity of hot tea. Through the use of sentence fragments, Merton creates a sparseness and terseness which gives immediacy to the description, granting the reader the opportunity to step into the spotlight of Merton's vision. Emphasis is laid on the simple quality of being there, of the stars, steam, frost, bread, creak, and the tea. As in the previous extract the sentence fragments are cut away from normative textual structures and stand alone. Seal appropriately describes this way of crafting isolated units of meaning as a 'poetics of thereness'.²⁸ Such pairing down to essentials is reflected in the signalling of the elements of creation. Earth, air, fire and water are variously captured alongside other categorisations of animal, vegetable and mineral. The wider cosmic landscape is captured in stars, night, and cold. This turn to simple, universal elements identifies thereness as both a

material and spiritual reality.

The focus on the Eucharist is evident in the bread, the unnamed cup, and in the sense of immense gratitude, reflective of the word's derivation from eucharistia, the Greek word for thanksgiving. An accompanying sorrow is evident in the underlay of ecological concern in the reference to Standard Oil. On the one hand, Merton highlights the ambivalence of an oil company, giving away calendars depicting the beauty of nature, which its own industry violates. On the other, as the background of coal-stained snow meets the transforming deep pink of the flamingos, there is a recollection of the Eucharistic wine and the blood of the passion.

Flamingos feature several times in Merton's life and work. They occur in his poem, written whilst in Cuba, 'Song of Our Lady of Cobre' which he described in *The Seven Storey Mountain* as 'the first real poem I had ever written, or anyway the one I liked best':

The white girls lift their heads like trees,
The black girls go
Reflected like flamingoes in the street.²⁹

Later as master of scholastics, he was teaching 'in a room which was painted (through my own misjudgment) in a wild flamingo pink, and I think that is the only reason why they are almost always awake.'³⁰ Subsequently it came to be known as 'The Flamingo Room'.

Giving shape to the picture is the shadowy presence of the human beholding the stars, tending to the birds, enjoying hot tea, attendant upon the cosmos, upon nature and his own simple pleasure. The *haiku* type lines serve up in their concentrated brevity a distillation of a wealth of theological tropes from the biblical garden of Eden and the incarnation, through the ecclesial construct of the Eucharist and the associated themes of transfiguring space, the paradox of the sacraments, contemplative stillness, eco-spirituality, and the thereness of things in their God-given dignity.

The Value of the *Explication de Texte*

Merton's own early high school education would pivot between the *préau* and the frequent task of providing an *explication de texte*. The response of the students to the formal qualities of Merton's text demonstrates the value of the task. In 'Laudato Si', when Pope Francis asks that 'environmental education should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning', Merton's

crafting of prose emerges as a possible tool.³¹ The students recognised how Merton pinpoints a root cause of the climate crisis in the refusal to acknowledge the inherent dignity of the created world. They saw how his willingness to yield to the sacred dimension of his surroundings resulted in a dynamic dialogue between the visible and invisible, enabling the possibility of attaining the cusp of awareness between attending to material reality and the gradual unfolding of a more capacious and more mysterious understanding. Finally, they registered a way of being before the created world, wherein the primordial role is to hearken to the earth's materiality, to recognise its inherent dignity and its power to provide an unexpected path towards the revelation of the sacred.

Notes

1. Pope Francis, 'Laudato Si', 2015 <http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html> par.210. 'Environmental education should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning'.
2. Law of 09/12/1905 of separation of Church and State. The concept of *laïcité* can be defined as the neutrality of the state towards religious beliefs, and the complete separation of the religious and public sphere. Vie Publique, 'Le Régime de Séparation Principe Des Relations État et Les Cultes', 2020 <<https://www.vie-publique.fr/eclairage/20205-le-regime-de-separation-principe-des-relations-etat-et-les-cultes>>.
3. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), p. 338. The text is developed from his journal entry for 17 December, 1963, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 5 – *Dancing in the Water of Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 42.
4. In his recorded talk about Vatican II to the novices on 16 December, 1963, Merton said: 'We should see our theology and so forth as part of our liturgical life because liturgy is theology lived.' Copies of the recording can be obtained from <https://www.learn25.com> in their collection 'Thomas Merton – Vatican II: The Sacred Liturgy and the Religious Life'.
5. Patrick W Collins expands on this idea in his article 'Thomas Merton and the Future of Liturgical Renewal', *The Way*, 53.2 (2014), pp. 99–113.
6. Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1979); Victor Kramer, *Thomas Merton – Monk & Artist* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988).
7. Philip Seal, 'Towards a Formalist Theological Poetics: Practising What You Preach in the Prose Writings of Thomas Merton' (University of Oxford, 2015), <<https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:be5480fc-2edf-464a-b37c-a28d2c25fd1f>>.
8. Seal, p. 2.

9. *Conjectures*, p.6.
10. Robert Anthony Krieg, *Romano Guardini: A Precursor of Vatican II* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), p. 52.
11. 'Proverbs', Chapter 8. 'Proverb' is the name of a young Jewish girl who appears to Merton in a dream, as recounted in his journal entry for 28 February, 1958, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 3 – *A Search for Solitude* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. 175–6. To explore this theme in Merton's writings, see the article on 'Proverb' in *The Merton Encyclopedia*, pp. 374–375.
12. Romano Guardini, *The Church and the Catholic* and *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1935), p. 27.
13. Thomas Merton, *When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature* (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2003), pp. 182–85. Kathleen Deignan lists Merton's references to snow under 'Winter' p. 182, clouds, p. 183, rain, p. 184–185 and the elements including water, p. 183.
14. *Conjectures*, p. 152. The text is developed from Merton's journal entry for 10 September, 1957, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 3, p. 115.
15. Alois M Haas, 'Reading Mystical Texts', *The Way* (2001), p. 144: 'Thus the language of the mystics is marked not just by apophatic idioms, but also by discourses of going beyond or going out (*excessus*), especially by paradox.' <https://www.theway.org.uk/back/s102Haas.pdf>.
16. *Conjectures*, p. 153. The text is developed from Merton's journal entry for 19 March, 1958, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 3, p. 181–2.
17. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975), p. 104.
18. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 284.
19. William Harmless, *Mystics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 32.
20. Journal entries for Jan 8, 1949 and Nov 12, 1950, *The Journal of Thomas Merton*, vol. 2 – *Entering the Silence* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. 263, 439.
21. *Conjectures*, p. 154, 155. The text is developed from his journal entry for 19 March, 1958.
22. Examples of Merton's casual expressions: 'an odd-ball'; 'bothered me a bit'; several adverbial phrases of certainty: 'of course', 'obviously', 'in any event', 'certainly', exemplifying a laid-back quality.
23. *Conjectures*, p. 148. The text is developed from his journal entry for 14 February, 1961.
24. Seal, p. 155.
25. Letter to Jacques Maritain, 30 June, 1960 in Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth - Letters to Writers* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1993), p. 32.
26. *Conjectures*, p. 346. See note 3.
27. At the start of the century Standard Oil, controlled 90% of the refining of oil in the USA. Their economic power was so excessive that the US Government ordered the company to divest itself of its major holdings. Their company

calendars tended to depict rural scenes to imply a close concern for the natural environment by a hugely polluting industry. Jared Cummins, 'The History of the Standard Oil Company', *Dividend.Com*, 2015 <Dividend.com>.

28. Seal, pp. 150, 155 and 161.

29. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p.283.

30. Letter to Dom Hubert Van Zeller, January 30, 1954, in *The School for Charity*, p.72

31. See note 1.

Elizabeth Rainsford-McMahon completed a PhD on theological genre with a focus on Thomas Merton at the University of Bristol. She has taught Modern Languages throughout the UK, in Nepal, in Corsica and mainland France, and is currently based in the Faculty of Modern Languages at the University of Lorraine, France. For nine years she also worked as regional representative of A.C.N UK in the Plymouth Diocese. She is interested in the interplay between place and language where language itself becomes a dwelling place and place becomes a text to read. With theology as companion, the exchange sharpens to become one between the building of a sanctuary and the crafting of a text, something which she finds vividly present in the work of Merton.

The TMS-GBI is very grateful to artist **Mike Quirke**, whose drawing of Bl. Franz Jägerstätter is on the front cover for our Advent Merton Journal. He is a London-based British artist, working from St Patrick's Studios in Wapping. He has worked in art and design all his life. On completion of studies at Chelsea School of Art and later Goldsmith College, London University, he worked for many years in art-related fields and in art education.

More recently, he was invited to join the team of artists working on Westminster Cathedral's "Way of Mercy" Stations, contributing two paintings. Both paintings (the Merciful Father and the Conversion of St Paul) are now on permanent loan to parishes in the Archdiocese of Westminster, England. He has also done mixed media prints and drawings of figures closely related to the life and interests of Thomas Merton, including a monoprint of Merton himself.

Some of his recent exhibitions have included the Royal Academy 250th Summer Exhibition, Wapping Open Studios, and St Michael's Arts Festival with solo exhibitions at Husk Creative Space and the Catholic Truth Society. He was awarded a Pubeo painting prize for his contribution to Camaradas: British/Mexican art collaboration at Menier Gallery in 2019. He is currently working on panels for a reredos screen for Guardian Angels Church, Mile End.