

"Epiphany and Eden:" Human Love and the Love of God in Thomas Merton's *Eighteen Poems*

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Biographical Introduction

PERHAPS THE BEST KNOWN, and certainly the most 'notorious' aspect of Thomas Merton's biography is his relationship with the student nurse. Merton entered the hospital in Louisville, Kentucky on March 23, 1966 for a back operation which occurred on the 25th. During his hospital convalescence, the young woman attended Merton and, from all accounts, they fell deeply in love. From spring through the fall of 1966 Merton's relationship with 'M.,' his designation for the woman, dominates his journal and references to her continue into 1967.² The affair is treated extensively in the Michael Mott biography,³ in the quirky but interesting work by John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968*,⁴ and is mentioned in most biographical studies of Merton written after 1985.

We know more than we need to know about Merton and M. This paper does not cover that already much trampled ground. In fact, I confess that reading the journal that chronicles the relationship made me very uncomfortable. I did not like the Merton I met there. He is compulsive, selfish, and dishonest. I was shocked to read that during their affair Merton knew that M. had a fiancé in Viet Nam (LL, 89, whom he later refers to as 'the boy'! LL, 232), and I was annoyed that he consistently referred to his paramour as a 'girl,' a diminutive designation at best for a woman with whom he was in love. (See, for example, LL, 50-51, 77.) However, the importance to Merton of the relationship cannot be overestimated. As Michael Mott notes, Merton "loved greatly and was greatly loved. He was overwhelmed by the experience and it changed him forever." (SMTM, 438.) With characteristic good sense, William Shannon concludes that this was

an episode in his life that showed his vulnerability and his humanness... What the experience showed him was that he could love and be loved.⁵

Merton, himself, quickly concluded that he would not keep "the M. business entirely out of sight." He continues, "I have always wanted to be completely open, both about my mistakes and about my effort to make sense out of my life. The affair with M. is an important part of it..." (LL, 234) And so through Merton's own writing and secondary scholarly works we do know a great deal about him and M.. In reflecting on the experience after the fact Merton thought that the "true feeling is no doubt in some of the poems." (LL, 234) And it is to the poems he wrote about the relationship that we now turn.

Literary Introduction

In addition to "A Midsummer Diary for M.," published in *Learning to Love*, Merton wrote at least eighteen poems for the young woman. All were written in 1966; by means of his journal many can be specifically dated. "He entrusted them to a friend, requesting that they be published after his death."⁶ In 1985, New Directions sponsored the publication of a limited edition of 250 hand set copies, which made the poems available, but not widely accessible.⁷

Interestingly the work in the Merton poetic corpus that *Eighteen Poems* most resembles is, to my mind, 'Hagia Sophia,' which was published in the 1963 volume, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*. In 'Hagia Sophia,' wisdom is personified by the Blessed Virgin Mary and clearly is Merton's anima, the feminine principle. As the "feminine principle in the world"⁸ she is the source of creativity, associated with God in creation, and a way to God.⁹ As we shall see, the figure of the lover functions in a similar way in *Eighteen Poems*. In 'Hagia Sophia' the woman is an abstraction personified (wisdom); in *Eighteen Poems* the woman is real, fleshly, and incarnate rather than an abstract love, and yet the language and 'feel' of the two sets of poems is remarkably similar.

Although Merton himself noted on June 2, 1966 that he had "written some of my best poems about all this," (LL, 76), in my estimation, these are not Merton's best poems. They certainly convey the anguish of the writer, his yearning and frustration. In her 1954 dissertation on Merton's (then early) poetry, Susan M. Campbell

remarked "that illuminations worthy of communication follow upon struggles valiantly endured and intelligently resolved..." She continues, "if a poet wishes to communicate the understanding and value of such an experience through poetry, he must do more than transfer the emotional tenseness of the struggle and the emotional release afforded by the illumination."¹⁰ I am not certain that Merton accomplishes the 'more than.'

In *Eighteen Poems* there are many good, and a few truly arresting, lines. But the over-all technical achievement which one finds in many of the poems in *The Strange Islands* (1957), *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963), or even the experimental *Cables to the Ace* (1968), is lacking. There are notable exceptions. "Untitled Poem," "Two Songs for M." and "Six Night Letters" are very fine. As noted, most of the *Eighteen Poems* can be placed with great precision in their author's biographical context. But does this really illuminate them as poems, as 'made things,' as works of art? My suspicion is that what Robert Lowell wrote about Merton's first poetry holds for this later work: "the poet would appear to be more phenomenal than the poetry."¹¹ For some time the biographical circumstances will probably cloud our estimation of the poetry. What William Shannon said about "For M. in October" characterizes, I think, the whole volume. It "has a poignant stanza [I would say 'quality'] that embodies the helpless yearning for a love that could not be."¹²

If, then, one were to read *Eighteen Poems* as a New Critic (now an old form of criticism!), putting aside what she knows of the biographical setting of the poetry, what would be most striking about them? In terms of the poems standing alone as a volume, it is the conventionality of the set of controlling images that one finds. Love is described in terms of images of fire (see, for example, "Untitled Poem," "I Always Obey My Nurse," "The Harmonies of Excess," "Louisville Airport"), of the moon ("Evening: Long Distance Call," "Six Night Letters," "For M. in October"), in terms of waking and dreaming ("Aubade on a Cloudy Morning," "Certain Proverbs Arise Out of Dreams"), and of spring and growth ("May Song," "The Harmonies of Excess"). There are a great many expressions of the lovers' oneness and need for each other: "We are two half-people wandering/In two lost worlds" ("Evening: Long Distance Call"); "You are myself" (VI of "Six Night Letters"); "If we could come together like two parts/Of one love song/Two chords going hand in

hand" ("For M. in October"); "Our common need/Which is our common presence" ("For M. on a Cold Grey Morning"). I wouldn't go so far as to say these images are clichéd, but they are certainly 'familiar' in love poetry.

In terms of literary history, the family resemblance of these poems to the work of the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century is striking. Many scholars who have commented on Merton's poetry have drawn comparisons between Metaphysical Poetry and Merton's work.¹³ In its day, Metaphysical poetry represented a reaction against the overly formal conventions of the Petrarchan conceit. The *Eighteen Poems* are all free verse and many represent experimental forms like those Merton uses in *Cables to the Ace* and the unfinished work, *The Geography of Lograire*. Metaphysical poetry moved "toward psychological analysis of the emotions of love and religion;" it represented "a technique intended to express honestly, if unconventionally, the poet's sense of the complexities and contradictions of life. The poetry is intellectual, analytical, psychological, disillusioning, bold; absorbed in thoughts of...physical love, religious devotion."¹⁴ This description of Metaphysical poetry might also be used to characterize the *Eighteen Poems*, and it brings me, finally, to the issue I find most interesting in the volume, the relationship between human and Divine love, one of the great themes of the Metaphysicals.

Human Love and the Love of God in *Eighteen Poems*

The tradition of poets who have related human and divine love reaches back into antiquity. For example, the Biblical "Song of Songs" is a paean to sexual love which St. Bernard of Clairvaux later allegorized to express the love of humanity for God (and, of course, his own poems are frequently love lyrics to God). St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross both wrote what is essentially love poetry to God. Much Metaphysical Poetry conflates the love of the beloved with that of God. (When I taught poetry to undergraduate university students, they were often shocked to learn that John Donne did not write the "love poetry" as a young man and the "religious poetry" as an old divine!) And in the Sufi tradition with which Merton was deeply involved in the mid-1960s,¹⁵ especially in the work of Rumi and Rabia, love of God is expressed in very incarnational language, indeed.

To revert for a moment to biography, in journal entries which appear during the time the poems were being written Merton is quite explicit about the relationship between his love for God and for M.. On July 22, 1966, he writes:

...I thought of God's love for her and mine. I can see absolutely no reason why my love for her and for Christ should necessarily be separated and opposed, provided I do not go loving her in some way opposed to His will. But if I love her purely and unselfishly...then my love for her is part of my love for Him, part of my offering of myself to God. (LL, 99)

Again, on September 4, 1966 Merton muses

...I could not help questioning the idea that the love of a human being necessarily comes in conflict with the perfect love of God... the affection I have for her — with the explicit sacrifice of sex and of erotic satisfaction seems to me not to conflict with God's love, but to be in harmony with it. (LL, 122)

However imperfectly he may or may not have accomplished this 'sacrifice,' it is clear that, for Merton human and Divine love were intrinsically related in his experience of M. In "May Song," Merton associates M.'s body with God's love: "Lend me for God's love/Your lifeboat/Your saving body." In "Aubade on a Cloudy Morning" M.'s presence is love personified with a capital 'L': "And your presence/The very necessary presence/And even the person of Love/Has been thank God granted us again." There are other incidental equations of human and divine love among the poems, but in the volume as a whole that relationship appears in two primary guises: when M. appears as Merton's Beatrice, an epiphany pointing him to a deeper understanding of Love and of God, and when their relationship is compared to the recovery of Eden, the recreation of Paradise. It is, in fact, the Genesis/Eden imagery which I think unifies *Eighteen Poems*.

While Merton never explicitly calls M. "Beatrice," it is clear that she functions as such, as the wise woman who points Merton toward a more profound understanding of love and of God. (In this regard, she functions like wisdom in 'Hagia Sophia.') In "I Always Obey my Nurse" (written May 8, 1966), the whole poem turns on the "Beatrice conceit" as the nurse is the one who keeps the fire of love "Deep in her wounded breast." It is she "Who in her grey eyes and her mortal breast/Holds an immortal love." Merton is the patient who wants "to get well" and who learns from the nurse that "No one ever got

born/All by himself: It takes more than one." Similarly in the poem "Certain Proverbs Arise Out of Dreams" (written the week of May 20, 1966 and whose title is almost certainly a pun on Merton's own experience¹⁶) the speaker is a dreamer led by the vision of his beloved: "...the dreamer/knows that without his Beloved he is lost" and confesses "...In the night when nothing can be seen I turn/to my Beloved and her voice is my security." He believes that "...God created [the Beloved] to be in the center of my being?/You are utterly holy to me, you have become a/focus of inaccessible light." The dreamer awakes "with the knowledge of my whole meaning,/ which is you." Without the Beloved, light is inaccessible to the poem's speaker; she gives him knowledge of his meaning, which is found in relationship with her. In "Cancer Blues" (written July 29, 1966) she "knows how to heal" and "She grows another day more perfect and wise." This Beatrice figure is perhaps most clear in "Six Night Letters" in which she comes "Bringing the truth I need" (I). In love's "school" her "gentle love/Still follows me with patient lessons" (IV).

Merton was quite explicit about the fact that this was how M. functioned in his life. On May 9, 1966 he wrote, "...I realize that the deepest capacities for human love in me have never been tapped... Responding to her has opened up the depths of my life in ways I can't begin to understand or analyze now." (LL, 54) And again on June 22, 1966

I cannot regard this as "just an episode." It is a profound event in my life and one which will have entered deeply into my heart to alter and transform my whole climate of thought and experience: for in her I now realize I had found something, someone that I had been looking for all my life. (LL, 328)

That 'something,' I submit, was the simple, total self-giving that is rare but possible in human love, and that mirrors in the human arena God's way of loving. M. pointed the way for Merton to understand love, that defining Christian virtue, in new and deeper ways than he had before. Not surprisingly, such an experience is likened in the poems to a return to Eden.

In the journals, Merton used 'Eden language' to describe experiences with M.¹⁷ In the journal entry for September 4, 1966, Merton is reflecting on what he calls "my affair," and in recalling particular days describes them as "miracles of innocence and

spontaneity. Paradise Feasts!" (LL, 124) Two months later, on November 4, 1966, after reading Milton's "Paradise Lost" he notes, "M. and I are so much, in so many ways, Eve and Adam." (LL, 157) Although on June 1, 1967 Merton speaks disparagingly of "the most naive myths about Adam and Eve" (LL, 242), in fact, reflections of such 'myths' permeate *Eighteen Poems*. Seven of the poems use the language and imagery of Genesis/Eden/creation: "Untitled Poem," "I Always Obey my Nurse," "Louisville Airport," "May Song," "Certain Proverbs Arise Out of Dreams", "A Long Call is Made Out of Wheels," and two of the "Six Night Letters."

In some of these poems the Eden allusion is incidental. In "A Long Call is Made Out of Wheels" anywhere the lovers find themselves "Is still the edge of Eden." Similarly in "Untitled Poem" Eden is used in a geographical sense as the speaker notes that "In a stone wall Eden/An unknown flower loves me more" and because of the lovers separation from each other "Paradise weeps in us/And we wander further away." It is in "Certain Proverbs Arise Out of Dreams" (see note 16 below) that the lovers' relationship is understood as a new Genesis. Merton writes "...Together we create the light of this one day for/each other. This is love's Genesis, always beginning and/never ending. We are at all times the first day of creation." The lovers become light for each other. They are, "at all times the first day of creation," eternally innocent, eternally the day when God created light. They are the origin of love ("love's Genesis") which is, itself, eternal ("always beginning and/never ending") The lovers, in short, are associated with Biblical attributes of God: creativity, light, immortality, love. They are in the words of poem III of "Six Night Letters," "(That ancient and first love that was new/In the unheard of beginning)."

Both "Louisville Airport" and poem II of "Six Night Letters" are explicitly built around the description of their love as an image of God's original creation. In "Louisville Airport," God re-makes the original creation in the lover's relationship.

We with the gentle liturgy
Of shy children have permitted God
To make again His first world
Here on the foolish grass
After the spring rain has dried
And all the loneliness

Is for a moment lost in this simple
Liturgy of children permitting God
To make again that love
Which is His alone

...
This is God's own love He makes in us
As all the foolish rich fly down
Onto this paradise of grass
Where the world first began
Where God began
To make His love in man and woman
For the first time

The lovers are allowing God to re-make Divine love in them. But it is also clear from the lines "Where God began/To make His love in man and woman/For the first time" that Merton understood God originally to have placed divine love in the love of man and woman for each other. His particular relationship with M. is a recreation of the original love which God gave to man and woman; it recreates the relational matrix that God intended for human beings. The poem continues

We with the tender liturgy
And tears
Of the newborn
Celebrate the first creation
Of solemn love
Now for the first time forever
Made by God in these
Four wet eyes and cool lips
And worshipping hands
When one voiceless beginning
Of splendid fire
Rises out of the heart
And the evening becomes One Flame
Which all the prophets
Accurately foresaw
Would make things plain
And create the whole world
Over again

There is only this one love
Which is now our world
Our foolish grass
Celebrated by all the poets

Since the first beginning
Of any song.

It is not only their love which re-creates God's original love. All such love is, in fact, part of the "one love" "Since the first beginning." Passionate human love approximates, in the human lovers, God's original creation of love from Love.

In poem II of "Six Night Letters" the Eden imagery is most clear as Merton describes himself and his lover as Adam and Eve. The poem opens with a striking image of mutuality:

This is the morning when God
Takes you out of my side
To be my companion
Glory and worship

O my divided rib
It is good to be willing
To be taken apart
To come together

The terrible paradox here expressed is that man and woman must be separated in order to enable the two, as separate persons, to come together again and, thereby, to create new life. The poem continues

We bring glad life
To all white-waving fields
To our handsome earth
And we go worshipping together
All over the world's heaven

Their life of love is worship for, in the terms of the poem, to love is to worship God. The lovers are like the first created human beings. Their love brings life to the created world, and, in fact, makes of earth heaven. It is through this very human love, that divine love is known. The poem expresses beautifully what Merton wrote to Victor Hammer on May 14, 1959, that the "'masculine - feminine' relationship is basic in all reality — simply because all reality mirrors the reality of God."¹⁸

Reflecting on material that Merton wrote for M. between May 19 and 26, 1966, Michael Mott reports that Merton said "each of them was on the threshold of a love hidden even from them. They had the chance of creating a new paradise, one that was still only potential, but which God had reserved for them alone." (SMTM, 453) The *Eighteen Poems* suggest that, in fact, their human love did, indeed, create a "new paradise," an Eden realized not only by them alone,

but by all lovers, by all who would open the experience of human love to the presence of God whose creative essence is Love.

Conclusion

As a poet, Merton's insights about the relationship of human and divine love are hardly new or novel. Probably all lovers feel themselves and their relationship to be unique, that they are specially graced. And so they are, for the innocent wonder of human love was created by God and intended for human delight. In the *Eighteen Poems*, human love and the love of God come together in moments of Epiphany and re-creations of Eden. The human beloved becomes the incarnate epiphany, the manifestation of a heretofore unknown love rooted in God Who Is Love. The experience of human love recreates the original relationship between man and woman in Eden, a relationship that is perfect, "unfallen," open, creative, spontaneous. And in so experiencing human love, divine love is known.

In her study of his poetry, *Words and Silence*, Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr noted that Merton's central vision was "the God-awareness at the center of one's being...this was his essential theme..."¹⁹ I think Sr. Thérèse was exactly correct. Although the *Eighteen Poems* were written to celebrate human, sexual love, they are filled with "God-awareness." I may not particularly like how Merton apparently conducted his human love affair, but I very much approve of how he understood it, in all its pain and partiality, as both gift of God and path to God. That understanding as it is reflected in the *Eighteen Poems* bespeaks the truth of the writer of 1 John who said "...love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God." "...if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us." (1 John 4: 7, 12 RSV)

In an article entitled 'As Man to Man' published in 1969 in *Cistercian Studies*, Merton wrote,

...it is the love of my lover, my brother or my child that sees God in me, makes God credible to myself in me. And it is my love for my lover, my child, my brother, that enables me to show God to him or her in himself or herself. Love is the epiphany of God in our poverty.²⁰

It is my suspicion that Merton learned this, not as 'man to man,' but as 'man with woman' and, although in frustration and fragmentary fashion, he celebrated the insight in the eighteen poems

he wrote for M. I am glad he had the experience of her, and I am glad we have the experience of the poems.

Notes and References

1. I should like to offer this paper as a small gesture of gratitude to William Shannon whose great generosity as a friend is exemplified by the gift he made me of a copy of *Eighteen Poems*. Bill knew I had a special interest in Merton's poetry because I wrote my doctoral dissertation on that subject and thought I should have the "complete works."
2. Christine M. Bochen (ed.), *Learning to Love: The Journals of Thomas Merton 1966-1967* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997). Hereafter in the text as LL.
3. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1984). See especially pp. 434-468. Hereafter in the text as SMTM.
4. John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton. The Hermitage Years 1965-1968* (Published by the Estate of John Howard Griffin under the imprint JHG Editions/Latitudes Press, 1983).
5. William H. Shannon, *The Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) p. 200
6. Thomas Merton, *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985), title page. The pages of the limited edition are not numbered. I have referred to poems by title only in the text of this paper since there seemed no other way to reference the edition.
7. To my knowledge, only three of these poems appear in *The Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977): "With the World in My Blood Stream" (CP p. 615), "The Harmonies of Excess" as part of *Cables to the Ace* (CP p. 447); and "Never Call a Babysitter in a Thunderstorm" (CP p. 801).
8. Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) p. 369. (hereafter in the text as CP)
9. For my thoughts on wisdom in Merton's thought see "The Tradition of Wisdom and Spirit': Wisdom in Thomas Merton's Mature Thought," *The Merton Seasonal* 20/1 (1995) pp. 5-8
10. Susan M. Campbell, *The Poetry of Thomas Merton: A Study in Theory. Influences. and Form*. Doctoral Dissertation. Stanford University, 1954. MS pp. 190-191.
11. Robert Lowell, "The Verses of Thomas Merton," *Commonweal* (June 22, 1945) p. 240
12. Shannon, op.cit., p. 201
13. See, for example, A.M. Allchin, "The Cloud of Witnesses: A Common Theme in Henry Vaughan and Thomas Merton," *Cistercian Studies* 11/2 (1976) pp. 124-136; Sr. Bridget Marie "Merton and the Metaphysicals," *Delta Epsilon Sigma Bulletin* 16/4 (1971) pp. 128-140; Susan Campbell (see note 6); Sr. Rosemarie Julie, "Influences Shaping the Poetic Imagery of Merton," *Renascence* 9/4 (1957) pp. 188-197, 222; Bonnie Bowman [Thurston], *Flowers of Contemplation: The Later Poetry of Thomas Merton*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Virginia. 1979.
14. C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature* Third Edition (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1976) p. 316

15. References to Islam and Sufism occur in the 1966 journal, most importantly a discussion of the "momentous visit of Sidi Abdesalam, from Algeria". (LL, p. 152) For discussions of Merton's interest in Islam see Sidney Griffith. "Thomas Merton, Louis Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam," *The Merton Annual* 3 (1990) pp. 151-172; Herbert Mason, "Merton and Massignon," *Muslim World* 59 (1969) pp. 317-18; Bonnie Thurston, "Thomas Merton's Interest in Islam: The Example of Dhikr" *American Benedictine Review* 46 (1994) pp. 131-141; Burton Thurston, "Merton's Reflections on Sufism," *The Merton Seasonal* 15 (1990) pp. 4-7; and the very excellent work of Erlinda G. Paguio of the University of Louisville.
16. In a letter dated October 23, 1958, Merton wrote to Boris Pasternak of a "very young Jewish girl" of whom he dreamed. The girl's name was "Proverb," which itself suggests the Wisdom traditions of scripture. "Proverb" became an important symbol for Merton, one to which he made frequent reference. For example on November 9, 1964 he wrote, 'Last night I had a haunting dream of a Chinese princess... ("Proverb" again.) This lovely and familiar and archetypal person... She comes to me in various mysterious ways in my dreams... I felt deeply the sense of her understanding, knowing and loving me, in my depths...' (*A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965* New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988, p. 101). See SMTM pp. 361-364 for a discussion of the image. Robert Waldron in his article "Merton's Dreams: A Jungian Analysis" (*Merton Seasonal* 16/4, 1991, pp. 1-23) makes much of "Proverb."
17. For a more general discussion of Merton's use of Genesis see Brent Short, "The Hidden Paradise: Thomas Merton and the Wisdom of Genesis," *The Merton Seasonal* 20/1 (1995) pp. 10-14
18. I am quoting from the manuscript edition of the letter which I read at the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky.
19. Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1979) p. 142
20. Thomas Merton, "As Man to Man," *Cistercian Studies* 4 (1969) pp. 93-94