

“O Sweet Escape! O Smiling Flight!”
Commentaries on a Selection of Poems
by Thomas Merton

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“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 16.24-25).

This essay includes a wonderful selection of poems by Thomas Merton that I was privileged to translate into Spanish. They represent what could be called “poetics of dissolution.” They are all glimpses which accurately convey his progressive abandonment of the “world” and of his own “self,” which were –as we will see– inseparable. Far from leading to a nihilist pessimism, Merton’s criticism of the forms of submission to reality, and his attack on individual identities throughout his work, constitute an authentic source of strength, inspiration, and joy and they lend themselves to poignant reflections, which I would like to share with the reader.

I would like to begin with an ineffable and moving poem entitled “Macarius the Younger,” included in the book *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963). In a legendary manner, this composition is inspired by the lives of the Desert Fathers, those hermits and monks from the fourth and fifth centuries who, with great religious fervour, followed the Biblical maxim: “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Matt. 19.21-22) and for whom Merton always felt great admiration. These holy men got rid of all their possessions, left behind their houses, their father and their mother, and their children, and went to live in solitude in the deserts of

Egypt, Palestine, Arabia and Persia in order to devote themselves to contemplation, prayer, (*quies* or sweet rest) and to a complete abandonment to the love of God and to the service of their brothers in charity and compassion.¹

This poem is based on Rubinus' *Historia Monachorum* and it reads as follows:

Macarius the Younger

I

The place in which he lived
Is called Scete.

In wide open desert
A day and night's journey
From the monasteries at Nitria.

No road, no path,
No land marks
Show the way there.
You must go by the stars.

Scarce is the water:
Where found at all
It smells poisonous as tar
But is safe to drink.

Few live there
Far apart
Out of one another's sight
True men of God:
Such a place
Suffers only those
Who have made up their minds.

There is great love among them
And love for any other
Who can get that far.
If any traveller
Should reach that place
He receives much care:
One who crosses such wastes
Has needs.

¹ Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 8.

II

Now one day someone brought a bunch of grapes to Macarius at Scete.

He, forgetful of his own thirst, took the grapes to another
Who was unwell.

He in turn, happy and thanking God for so much love
Took the grapes to yet another.

So the grapes went from cell to cell, all around the desert
No one knowing where they first started.

Until at length one came to Macarius, saying: "Here, Father, are good grapes,
Take them, they will refresh you."

Then Macarius was very glad to see the worth of those men
Who lived hidden in the Desert at Scete.²

It is obvious that the aforementioned lines are evoking the words pronounced by Jesus two or three times during the Last Supper: "This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15.12). The four evangelists insist on this law and St. John in his Gospel develops it in detail, a sort of invitation to community. The new commandment of love confirms this community, (*Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*) which means abandoning the particularity or personality of each of us in favour of the formula "love one another," with this impersonal "one" at which the English language points. In this regard, the symbol of the grapes might represent the death of the individual which precedes the resurrection of the community or the resurrection of *Logos*, a death which for Merton implied a fierce fight against his own biased world views, a destruction and oblivion of his self, his mask, his disguise, the worst of miseries.³ It is utterly impossible to define the nature of communal space, he will tell us. "We all add up to something far beyond ourselves. We cannot yet realize what it is.

² *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 319-20. There is a third part to this poem in *Collected Poems* that is omitted here. Used with permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

³ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 295.

But we know... that we are all members of the Mystical Christ, and that we all grow together in Him for Whom all things were created."⁴ Let us thus go to the desert among the hearts devoted to God, *beata solitudo*, not in search of a narcissist dialogue but to engage in compassionate charity, hearty friendship, and secret *philia*.⁵

The next poem is as splendid as it is audacious, and it immediately reminds us of T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* and of García Lorca in *Poet in New York*. It is included in his book *Early Poems* (1940-1942) and draws its inspiration from the time when Merton spent several years as a student of English Literature at Columbia University before becoming a monk. It is a direct affront, a genuine portrait of New York's reality at the time of the Second World War, with many European cities already destroyed and bombarded. In my opinion, the lines of the poem are very close to Christ's teaching: "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also" (Luke 6.29).

Merton does not remain silent but instead, in a kind of painful and jubilant ritual, he spells out city life and its progress, a sort of prison where alienated masses survive and are subdued to the vanity of the faith ruling the world. With an unwonted and ambiguous rhythm throughout the poem, Merton casts an unceasing rain of images shaping a grotesque scenery to denounce the monotony, weariness, luxury, squandering and superficiality of the American society: a whole collective illusion based on false ideas, fantasies and distractions which power imposes on it. We are all accomplices, he explains, perfectly adapted to a futile world

⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), 419. According to Virginia Randall, one of the major themes in Merton's poetry is precisely "the mystery of the Transcendent Self, the No-One who has gone beyond the individual self, and who is, consequently united with all." Virginia F. Randall, "The Quest for the Transcendent Self: The Buddhist-Christian Merger in Thomas Merton's Poetry," *Cithara* 17.1 (November 1977): 17-18.

⁵ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 54-55.

Will gobble aspirins,
And try to keep our cage from caving in.
All the while our minds will fill with these petitions,
Flowering quietly in between our gongs of pulse.
These will have to serve as prayers:

“ ‘O lock us in the safe jails of thy movies!
Confine us to the semiprivate wards and white asylums
Of the unbearable cocktail parties, O New York!
Sentence us for life to the penitentiaries of thy bars and nightclubs,
And leave us stupefied forever by the blue, objective lights
That fill the pale infirmaries of thy restaurants,
And the clinics of thy schools and offices,
And the operating-rooms of thy dance-halls.

“ ‘But never give us any explanations, even when we ask,
Why all our food tastes of iodoform,
And even the freshest flowers smell of funerals.
No, never let us look about us long enough to wonder
Which of the rich men, shivering in the overheated office,
And which of the poor men, sleeping face-down on the *Daily Mirror*,
Are still alive, and which are dead.’ ”⁷

Merton's contempt for metropolitan life grew bigger and bigger. Faithful to the commands of his own destiny, the monk deemed it urgent to begin a journey from the unreal city (London, New York) to the paradisiacal city (the Trappist community).⁸ Therefore, at the beginning of the forties, he entered the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani (Kentucky). On joining the monastery in 1941, he wrote a poem entitled "A Letter to My Friends." It is addressed to his university friends Robert Lax and Edward Rice, with whom he shared many good moments of study and discussion during their time as students at Columbia. They enjoyed a lasting intimate friendship and a close intellectual collaboration witnessed

⁷ Merton, *Collected Poems*, 19-21. Used with permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

⁸ See Fernando Beltrán Llavador, *La Contemplación en la Acción* (Madrid: San Pablo, 1996), 73.

to in their contributions to *The Columbia Jester* magazine. In the summer of 1939, they spent a few months together at a small cottage situated in the west side of New York State, writing novels, and reading books, amongst which was *Finnegan's Wake* by James Joyce.⁹

However, by no means was Merton's trip to the Trappist Jerusalem an evasion, but rather a way of exploring his own inner truth to find "the fullness of the Christ-life in the soul."¹⁰ Thus, he wrote in a later work, "I shall be lost in Him: that is, I shall find myself."¹¹ As we will see, in the first stanza of "A Letter to My Friends," Merton begins by establishing a comparison between the monastery, "Nazareth," Jesus's birthplace, and the "holy desert" whose inhabitants "more than we fear... love... these thorns, the phoenix's sweet and spikey tree," which might stand in the poem as a symbol of the Cross. These cenobites have gone deeper into this metaphorical wilderness in order to embrace Christ's passion but also Christ's immense love; they are described as "separate strangers," "hid in their disguises" who "have come to meet, by night, [that is to say during the divine office of "Matins"] the quiet Christ." Their dwelling is the very mystical body, an indestructible temple which, despite any demolition, can be rebuilt in three days. "All your ruins are rebuilt as fast as you destroy yourselves," stresses the poet, and he also introduces the metaphor of "our desert's wooden door," recalling the Biblical warning: "for the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matt. 7.14).

The poem reads as follows:

A Letter to My Friends

On entering the Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani, 1941

This holy House of God,
Nazareth, where Christ lived as a boy,

⁹ Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), xxii-xxiii, 127-28.

¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), 13.

¹¹ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 37.

These sheds and cloisters,
The very stones and beams are all befriended
By cleaner sun, by rarer birds, by lovelier flowers.

Lost in the tigers' and the lions' wilderness,
More than we fear, we love these holy stones,
These thorns, the phoenix's sweet and spikey tree.

More than we fear, we love the holy desert,
Where separate strangers, hid in their disguises,
Have come to meet, by night, the quiet Christ.

We who have some time wandered in those crowded ruins,
(Farewell, you woebegone, sad towns)
We who have wandered like (the ones I hear) the moaning trains,
(Begone, sad towns!)
We'll live it over for you here.

Here all your ruins are rebuilt as fast as you destroy yourselves,
In your unlucky wisdom,
Here in the House of God
And on the holy hill,
Where fields are the friends of plenteous heaven,
While starlight feeds, as bright as manna,
All our rough earth with wakeful grace.

And look, the ruins have become Jerusalems,
And the sick cities re-arise, like shining Sions!
Jerusalems, these walls and rooves,
These bowers and fragrant sheds,
Our desert's wooden door,
The arches, and the windows, and the tower!¹²

Christ became the center of Merton's life. During the first years at the abbey he devoted most of his literary inspiration to the writing of poems which express his longing for an intimate union, persevering in his spiritual path and in the hard effort to reach his

¹²Merton, *Collected Poems*, 90-92. Used with permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

own detachment. The next poem is one of the most touching examples of this.

Within a symbolic natural context of vineyards and wheat fields, which clearly allude to the bread and wine of Holy Communion, this poem celebrates a love feast, the wedding of Christ and man which takes place in the mystery (the "bright secret," says the poem) of the Eucharist or *sacramentum unitatis*,¹³ offering us the gift of love and the joy of being reborn in Christ, as He Himself announced: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (John 6.56). This ardent chant starts with an exclamation: "O sweet escape! O smiling flight!" An escape from where? we may wonder. The poet seems to clarify that it is an escape from the jails of flesh, the prison of the individual body and of the individual soul (since there is not an individual body if there is not a soul which owns it). We do not know what "body" is; we really do not know for it plunges into the deepest depths and is beyond all our superior powers: intelligence, understanding and will. In addition, terms with negative connotations such as "death," "dark," "night" are juxtaposed through these verses with other words hinting at the divine Majesty.

Paradox is, therefore, presented as an essentially intrinsic element of the spiritual journey: the lyrical voice is living in darkness – "unlock our dark," he implores– but it is a darkness which is already light, the light radiating in and from Christ. This is the darkness which precedes dawn, a darkness present in the Christian mystical tradition since Dionysius the Areopagite and so beautifully sung of by Saint John of the Cross, whom Merton read widely and to whom he owes some of his most penetrating images such as that of the "flight." This, in its turn, is the flight towards the freedom attained through the joy which pervades you when you no longer desire anything, when you no longer withhold anything, when you let go of yourself, in sum, when you cease existing, as it were. We all have some experience, or at least some hints, of how this sometimes happens. The following poem offers a foretaste of it.

¹³ Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953), 83.

The Communion

O sweet escape! O smiling flight!
O what bright secret breaks our jails of flesh?
For we are fled, among the shining vineyards,
And ride in praises in the hills of wheat,
To find our hero, in His tents of light!
O sweet escape! O smiling flight!

O sweet escape! O smiling flight!
The vineyards break our fetters with their laughter!
Our souls walk home as quiet as skies.
The snares that death, our subtle hunter, set,
Are all undone by beams of light!
O sweet escape! O smiling flight!

O sweet escape! O smiling flight!
Unlock our dark! And let us out of night!
And set us free to go to prison in this vineyard,
(Where, in the vines, the sweet and secret sun
Works our eternal rescue into wine)
O sweet escape! O smiling flight!

We'll rob Your vines, and raid Your hills of wheat,
Until you lock us, Jesus in Your jails of light!
O sweet escape! O smiling flight!¹⁴

At first, Merton thought that contemplative life at Gethsemani would help him in this way of negation. He wrote that the monastery is "a place in which I disappear from the world as an object of interest in order to be everywhere in it by hiddenness and compassion. To exist everywhere I have to be No-one."¹⁵ During the first years in the cloister, he even considered that his writing vocation could be a hindrance to contemplation. He expressed this fear both in prose and poetry. In one of his autobiographical passages we read:

¹⁴ Merton, *Collected Poems*, 40-41. Used with permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

¹⁵ Thomas Merton, "Honorable Reader": *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 65.

There was this shadow, this double, this writer who had followed me into the cloister... He is supposed to be dead. But he stands and meets me in the doorway of all my prayers, and follows me into church. He kneels with me behind the pillar, the Judas, and talks to me all the time in my ear... And the worst of it is, he has my superiors on his side. They won't kick him out. I can't get rid of him... Nobody seems to understand that one of us has got to die.¹⁶

In spite of all these vicissitudes, Merton composed several books under the obedience of his Abbot such as *Figures for an Apocalypse*, from which I have taken the next poem. The poet could never stop writing. On the contrary, his vocation as a writer accompanied him like "a Sinbad burden" all his life – let us remember that Sinbad always had a "little man" on his shoulder. Eventually Merton learned how to reconcile both vocations, as monk and poet, and ended up seeing writing as a medium of creation, contemplation and criticism.¹⁷

The Poet, to His Book

Now is the day of our farewell in fear, lean pages:
And shall I leave some blessing on the half of me you have devoured?

Were you, in clean obedience, my Cross,
Sent to exchange my life for Christ's in labor?
How shall the seeds upon those furrowed papers flower?
Or have I only bled to sow you full of stones and thorns,

Feeding my minutes to my own dead will?
Or will your little shadow fatten in my life's last hour
And darken for a space my gate to white eternity?

And will I wear you once again, in Purgatory,
Around my mad ribs like a shirt of flame?
Or bear you on my shoulders for a sorry jubilee
My Sinbad's burden?

Is that the way you'd make me both-ways' loser,
Paying the prayers and joys you stole of me,
You thirsty traitor, in my Trappist mornings!

¹⁶ Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 410.

¹⁷ Sonia Petisco, *La Poesía de Thomas Merton: Creación, Crítica y Contemplación* (Madrid: Publicaciones de la Universidad Complutense, 2005) [Digital publication].

Go, stubborn talker,
Find you a station on the loud world's corners,
And try there, (if your hands be clean) your length of patience:
Use there the rhythms that upset my silences,
And spend your pennyworth of prayer
There in the clamor of the Christless avenues:

And try to ransom some one prisoner
Out of those walls of traffic, out of the wheels of that unhappiness!¹⁸

Eventually, Merton began to realize that contemplative life within his community could degenerate into an external, ritualistic and, sometimes, superficial religiosity based on abstract ideals and an insincere self-complacency. By the end of the fifties this awareness led him to experience an intense vocational crisis, "a war in my own gut" as he himself describes it in "The Sting of Conscience." This thrilling, complex, sharp, and subtle reflection was censored because it was considered "neurotic," so in the beginning it was not published, despite being –according to Merton– one of his best creations. It was written as a response to the biting attack that the British writer Graham Greene launched in his work *The Quiet American* against non-action in the midst of a world full of injustice. A close reading of it reveals Merton's innermost wish to transcend the attitude of mere bystander and to get involved more actively in the problems of the world.¹⁹

The Sting of Conscience

You have written, Greene, in your last book
The reasons why I so hate milk.
You have diagnosed the war in my own gut
Against the innocence, yes, against the dead mother

¹⁸ Merton, *Collected Poems*, 192-93. Used with permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

¹⁹ Described by Merton as "a confrontation of twentieth-century questions" in his journal of these years. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), vi.

Who became, some twenty years ago,
My famous refuge.

This one place that claims to know peace,
This is the very den
Where most damage is planned and done.
Oh, there are quiet ones among us
And I live with the quietest of all.
Here we are, victims, making all the trouble
Loving the pity and the ignorance
With which the light stands firm
On our most righteous candlestick.

And now your book has come
To plague the hapless conscience of the just
While war boils in my own hard-praying heart.
Not out of charity,
Rather out of idleness do we refuse to hate.

O, if I were less desperately meek
And could win back some malice, once again
And tell the people what I mean
I would perhaps hate them less
For having so loved me.

I know: the decision is fatally made.
I shall never return. I cannot reach again
Those dear bad shores, to which prolific life
Is not altogether alien.
I cannot see again
The world of lively, prodigal sin!

Yet look, Greene! See Christ there,
Not in this innocent building,
But there, there, walking up and down,
Walking in the smoke and not in our fresh air,
But there, there, right in the middle
Of the God-hating sinners!

But here I stand, with my glass in my hand
And drink the pasteurized beatitudes
And fight the damned Ohio in my blood!

Tell me, at last, Greene, if you can
Tell me what can come of this?
Will I yet be redeemed, and will I
Break silence after all with such a cry
As I have always been afraid of?
Will I so scandalize these innocents
As to be thrown clean out of the wide-eyed dairies
And land in heaven with a millstone round my neck?²⁰

Throughout these lines one can understand the deep spiritual debate and the furious contest Merton held against his own image as writer of pious works. He adopts a harsh critical attitude against the general inactivity, idleness and ignorance of his own monastery, and against a Church no longer able to respond to the passage of time. There is even a moment within the composition when he seems to regret having made the decision of becoming a monk. The struggle within himself gained mounting intensity, as shown in the following poem, with lines full of melancholic touches. One can get a glimpse of his long and contradictory deliberation, bare and vivid as ever.²¹

Whether There is Enjoyment in Bitterness

This afternoon, let me
Be a sad person. Am I not
Permitted (like other men)
To be sick of myself?

Am I not allowed to be hollow,
Or fall in the hole
Or break my bones (within me)

²⁰ This poem was transcribed by Patrick F. O'Connell in his essay "Sunken Islands: Two and One-Fifth Unpublished Merton Poems," *The Merton Seasonal* 12.2 (Spring, 1987): 6-7. He discovered it in the Curtis Brown Archives of the Friedsam Memorial Library at St. Bonaventure University.

²¹ In one of his books, he had already pointed out: "To say I was born in sin is to say... I came into existence under a sign of contradiction." Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 33.

In the trap set by my own
Lie to myself? O my friend,
I too must sin and sin.

I too must hurt other people and
(Since I am no exception)
I must be hated by them.

Do not forbid me, therefore,
To taste the same bitter poison,
And drink the gall that love
(Love most of all) so easily becomes.

Do not forbid me (once again) to be
Angry, bitter, disillusioned,
Wishing I could die.

While life and death
Are killing one another in my flesh
Leave me in peace. I can enjoy,
Even as other men, this agony.

Only (whoever you may be)
Pray for my soul. Speak my name
To Him, for in my bitterness
I hardly speak to Him: and He
While He is busy killing me
Refuses to listen.²²

With the venerable depth which distinguishes him as thinker and *homo religiosus*, Merton prepares himself to fight the only battle worth fighting: the battle against the falseness of his own self and against the accumulation of the powerful and overwhelming lies of reality. This bitter struggle became a source of inspiration for most of the critical poetry he wrote in the sixties about a wide range of contemporary problems affecting a disturbed and unbalanced society. Books such as *Emblems of a Season of Fury*,

²² Merton, *Collected Poems*, 231-32. Used with permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

Cables to the Ace, or *The Geography of Lograire* appeared as an inexorable denunciation of the confusion and error which reigns in the so called Western culture and of the misunderstanding prevailing in all its political, religious, philosophical and scientific heritage. They disclose a profound yearning on the part of the poet for unlearning, for not knowing. Killing knowledge means killing death, we are told, in a somewhat axiomatic manner.

Understandably, then, the following poems by Merton are specifically rooted in the rich apophatic Christian mystical tradition as well as in Zen Buddhism.²³ In the first one we listen to him talking with great simplicity about the incompatibility and perpetual contradiction of "being," or "self" and "life." This seems a mystery which embraces and burns itself out in what is beyond consciousness, as Merton also conceived it in his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*: "Contemplation is precisely the awareness that this 'I' is really 'not I' and the awakening of the unknown 'I' that is beyond observation and reflection and is incapable of commenting upon itself."²⁴ His true nature lies in being hidden, anonymous and not being identified within society, where people talk about themselves and about one another.

The next poem is entitled "Night-Flowering Cactus," and it conveys the atmosphere of a quiet and silent night, of a rare joy afire with the plenitude of the void:

Night-Flowering Cactus

I know my time, which is obscure, silent and brief
For I am present without warning one night only.

When sun rises on the brass valleys I become serpent.

Though I show my true self only in the dark and to no man
(For I appear by day as serpent)
I belong neither to night nor day.

²³ Bonnie B. Thurston, "Zen Influence on Thomas Merton's View of the Self," *The Merton Annual* 1 (1988): 17-31.

²⁴ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 7.

Sun and city never see my deep white bell
Or know my timeless moment of void:
There is no reply to my munificence.

When I come I lift my sudden Eucharist
Out of the earth's unfathomable joy
Clean and total I obey the world's body
I am intricate and whole, not art but wrought passion
Excellent deep pleasure of essential waters
Holiness of form and mineral mirth:

I am the extreme purity of virginal thirst.

I neither show my truth nor conceal it
My innocence is descried dimly
Only by divine gift
As a white cavern without explanation.

He who sees my purity
Dares not speak of it.
When I open once for all my impeccable bell
No one questions my silence:
The all-knowing bird of night flies out of my mouth.

Have you seen it? Then though my mirth has quickly ended
You live forever in its echo:
You will never be the same again.²⁵

In a prophetic vein he wrote the lines with which I will conclude, a profound meditation which finds its correspondence in the Biblical myth of the fall of man from Eden but also in the guise of oriental "sutras" and in the Buddhist notion of *kensho*. They are the tacit expression of the unspeakable, of a wind alien to definitions, of the ineffable love which is always hovering underneath all of Merton's words. All this is quite revealing and marvellous and it confirms comments I once heard from Father Mathew Kelty at Gethsemani: "He belonged to no one. He could

²⁵ Merton, *Collected Poems*, 351-52. Used with permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

not be categorized, labelled, pigeon-holed... the fire in him burned not only himself, but many around him as well."

May the poem speak for itself:

The Fall

There is no where in you a paradise that is no place and there
You do not enter except without a story.

To enter there is to become unnameable.

Whoever is there is homeless for he has no door and no identity with which to
go out and to come in.

Whoever is nowhere is nobody, and therefore cannot exist except as unborn:
No disguise will avail him anything

Such a one is neither lost nor found.

But he who has an address is lost.

They fall, they fall into apartments and are securely established!

They find themselves in streets. They are licensed
To proceed from place to place
They now know their own names
They can name several friends and know
Their own telephones must some time ring.

If all telephones ring at once, if all names are shouted at once and all cars crash
at one crossing:

If all cities explode and fly away in dust
Yet identities refuse to be lost. There is a name and number for everyone.

There is a definite place for bodies, there are pigeon holes for ashes:
Such security can business buy!

Who would dare to go nameless in so secure a universe?
Yet, to tell the truth, only the nameless are at home in it.

They bear with them in the center of nowhere the unborn flower of nothing:
This is the paradise tree. It must remain unseen until words end and arguments
are silent.²⁶

Meaningful intuitions have appeared and disappeared with generous audacity throughout this selection, intuitions to which Merton faithfully returns a thousand and one times as part of his task of criticism and ruthless discovery. We cannot ignore these examples. As manifestations of the Living Word, they constantly exhort us not to take the appearance of reality as if it were Truth, not to be scared of ceasing to exist, not fearfully lacking a dwelling place in this world; they call us to free ourselves from the sad burden of ideas which constitute our identity, to detach from, to dispossess and get rid of that kind of "I" who is prey to the burden of time, that time which bears heavily on all of us and hinders everything: wise pieces of advice I would like to carve on this church's tympanum²⁷ with the help of all the graces from Heaven.

²⁶ Merton, *Collected Poems*, 354-55. Used with permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

²⁷ The Auditorium of San Francisco, Ávila, a beautifully rebuilt sacred building and the venue for the Conference where the author recited and commented on Merton's poems, translated by her into Spanish.