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MERTON*

It is a privilege of a long life to be able to recall persons who for many are merely a legend. My friendship with Thomas Merton dates back to the early sixties, when I arrived at Gethsemani at his invitation. I am not being precise here, because it was Thomas Merton, who, having read my book *The Captive Mind*, began our friendship by writing a letter to me, when I was still living in France.

Our meeting in the monastery was a little surprising to me, because I had pictured Merton as an ascetic kind of person, somewhat skinny and yellowed, if not as a result of prayers, then because of poring over books. Yet he was a man with quite a broad and jovial face like a Burgundy peasant as rendered on woodcuts. Perhaps his spirituality, so strongly rooted in his body, was also showing through his words, which he put down in his books and letters. I appreciated that he was remarkable as a layman, who, prior to becoming a monk, in his youth, had lived a turbulent life in the great cities of modern civilisation. I admit I wanted to find out something about that youth and tried to do so by reading his early

* Transl. by Anna Muranty.

poems. Some of those poems, catastrophic and apocalyptic, presented New York as a Babylon of iniquity. I was astonished by the parallel catastrophic moods between New York in the thirties and my Vilnius, where, our literary group “Żagary” was known for its catastrophism. I should add that both in New York of that time and in Vilnius one could feel a Marxist influence on the way of thinking about the twentieth century. None of us chose to run away from the world, and yet Merton chose it only paradoxically, that is he tried to reconcile the contemplative life of a monk with his participation in the world. For that purpose he used a great body of correspondence, in which the line between a letter to a given person and a public address is blurred more than once. There was a contradiction in it, since on one hand being a member of a monastic community was not enough for him and he longed for the eremitic life, and on the other he was eager for any information coming from outside the abbey. And the sixties were a turbulent period in American life, with the struggle for equal black rights and simultaneously by a peace movement against the Vietnam War. I ought to mention here one more field in which Merton was active – his numerous friendships with poets. He published a poetry magazine entitled *Monk's Pond*, in which he published poems of poets less known to the general public. I had the honour to belong to those authors. Besides, Merton contributed to Polish poetry becoming familiar in the USA. It so happened, that having compiled an anthology of Polish poetry translated by me and my students – *Post-war Polish Poetry*, I mentioned it to him. He asked for a typescript and liked the book so much as to recommend it to his friends in Doubleday Publishing House, where it was published in 1965. According to a number of American poets, reading that anthology in their college years had a lasting influence on their own poetry.

My exchange of letters with Merton was first published in 1991 in Polish translation from typescripts, while the original, entitled *Striving Towards Being*, only a few years later, in 1997. It is an interesting clash of American and European minds, because Merton was nevertheless very American, and I felt European. I valued Merton's optimistic heritage highly, that is the work of Emerson and Walt Whitman, but I myself was more pessimistic, undoubtedly made so partly by our experience of history, although in my case also certain innate Manichean inclinations.

Hence my cult of such figures of French literature like Simone Weil and Albert Camus, figures, after all, of a certain affinity, since Camus valued Simone Weil highly and was a publisher of her writings. I had no difficulties in communicating with Merton, because he was bilingual, and read a lot, both in English and French.

For some Catholics Merton's name has become in a sense a symbol of an opening to the religious thought of Asia. In our age, whose mass culture has been absorbing New Age ideas, including the popularity of Zen Buddhism, to the point where one can speak of Hollywood Buddhism, someone who, thanks to his discipline of contemplative life, was well prepared for a meeting with the Far East was badly needed. Having lived in California for a long time I always remembered Carl Jung's warning that the western mind is usually deceived into thinking that it could penetrate into the essence of religions born in Asia. Here it becomes apparent how useful was an attitude like Merton's, who avoided rash judgement and approached the Tibetan monks with an effort to understand and at the same time remaining a Christian. His *Asian Journal* is for that reason particularly valuable. Whatever the moments of his inner experience on that journey might have been, of which we know little, for it all happened shortly before his death, he remains an example of ecumenical opening, and not of cheap syncretism.

The twentieth century remains for us a century of great criminals, yet also of few bright figures, whose creative thought may tip the scales of victory of good over evil. Among them I see Simone Weil and Albert Camus, and Thomas Merton as well.