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# The Mystical Ecology of Thomas Merton's Poetics

Lynn R. Szabo

Integrated into the canon of Thomas Merton's poetry, which spanned more than thirty years of his life following the liturgical patterns of medieval Cistercian monasticism, are poems incorporating his social analysis and commentary. Consistently, Merton looked to his spiritual practice to embrace and synthesize his often seemingly different interests—contemplation, nature, God, society.

Resonant with Merton's love of the predawn hours after the Night Vigils monastic office in which he found the silent darkness to be the ground of his creative energies, he found the absence of sound as the locus of an often unrequited desire for communication with God. In particular, he sought the possibility of experiencing, unhindered, the Divine in *logos/language/poiesis*, noting in a journal entry in May, 1965:

I am out of bed at two-fifteen in the morning, when the night is darkest and most silent. ... I find myself in the primordial lostness of night, solitude, forest, peace, a mind awake in the dark ... The psalms grow up silently by themselves without effort like plants ... The plants hold themselves up on stems that have a single consistency, that of mercy, or rather, great mercy. *Magna misericordia*. In the formlessness of night and silence a word then pronounces itself: Mercy.<sup>1</sup>

"Day of a Stranger," from which these lines are taken, one of Merton's quintessential essays, provides a lyric description of a typical day for Merton as a hermit monk. In a variety of tones suffused with his changing moods and insights, he transparently describes his way of life in his hermitage, St. Mary of Carmel, hidden on the property of his monastic home at Our Lady of

Gethsemani Abbey at Trappist, Kentucky. The piece represents Merton's voice as an accomplished writer and offers the reader a veritable catalogue of the mystical ecology of his poetics, hidden in some of its narrative.

Here, in some of his most evocative and poetic language, Merton offers us a microcosm of his poetic/mystical experience as a solitary stranger who lives in the woods in a world where

words cease to resound, where all meanings are absorbed in the *consonantia* of heat, fragrant pine, quiet wind, bird song, and one central tonic note that is unheard and unuttered. ... In the silence of the afternoon all is present and all is inscrutable. One central tonic note to which every other sound ascends or descends, to which every other meaning aspires, in order to find its true fulfillment.<sup>2</sup>

Merton proclaims that in this stunning moment of peace, no "writing on the solitary, meditative dimensions of life can say anything that has not already been said better by the wind in the pine trees."<sup>3</sup> Yet, he acknowledges the vulnerability of such peace to the many other sounds that threaten to interfere with and eclipse it. He hears the armed SAC plane flying low over him, taking off from nearby Fort Campbell to the war in Vietnam, with its "scientific egg in its breast"—a symbol of all that diminishes the stillness of his forest home. The plane also carries armaments that could extinguish the entire human story. In deft relief he moves his listeners back to the equilibrium of the natural world around him where "precise pairs of birds" live in his immediate surroundings: with him, they form "an ecological balance" whose "harmony gives the idea of place a new configuration."<sup>4</sup>

In this beautiful evocation of the hermit's life, the ordered privacy of his peace and solitude is set against the backdrop of the nuclear age, providing the counterpoint to a silhouette that takes its effect from the shadow which creates it. Merton, as the stranger, avoids succumbing to alienation and despair by listening to the sacred language of the universe—the silence of God spoken by the wind in the pine trees. This language of the sacred

here reflects his inclination towards the simplicity, solitude, and silence of the rural life. The settings for so much of his poetry are the Kentucky hills and their fecund life which reflects the integrity of all things: a hidden wholeness, one of whose complexities is its intimation of an "ontology of nothingness—a silence—in which there is infinite regress of the truths permanently hidden behind words."<sup>5</sup> Here all is Oneness, the ground of Merton's transforming vision of peace. His love for the forests, hills, streams, and the flora and fauna of the hills permeates his poetry. The influence of Thoreau's *Walden's Pond* and the transcendentalists is apparent in his poetry, his journals and myriad essays, particularly in his writings about the rural life around him. He wrote in a letter to Henry Miller, August 7, 1962: "Thoreau of course I admire tremendously. He is one of the only reasons why I felt justified in becoming an American citizen. ... It is to me a great thing that you say I am like the transcendentalists. I will try to be worthy of that."<sup>6</sup>

Merton's poetry reflects his study and experience of the silence and mysticism of his own Roman Catholic monastic tradition, but it also includes that of other world religions. As a Christian monk in a mystical tradition, he accepts and appropriates a belief system that presupposes a theological background (i.e. the Divine Godhead, the Bible, Roman Catholic tradition, humans as spiritual beings, etc.) even though he does not attempt the work of a systematic theologian. The foregrounding of his poetics initially and fundamentally receives its shape and is perceived through the lens of these presuppositions. However, for Merton this background was by no means static or closed (an increasingly problematic issue for his church's hierarchy). His insights about Zen, which prompted D.T. Suzuki to compliment him as one of the few Westerners who fully understood it,<sup>7</sup> deepened his recognition of transcendence and its implications for human spirituality. By means of sophisticated epistemological approaches, he also investigates and writes profoundly on the mysticism of the Islamic Sufi Masters (cf. *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story*), Tao (cf. *The Way of Chuang Tzu*), Hinduism, Buddhism (cf. *Zen and the Birds of Appetite; Mystics*

and Zen Masters) and Native American culture (cf. *Ishi Means Man*). From them, Merton synthesizes the practice of silence and contemplation as the ground for a poetics of spirituality.

Merton's poetry is marked by images that are by turns translucent, other worldly, anecdotal, and parable-like as byproducts of the unspeakable silence that the mystic acknowledges. The development of his poetics parallels his experience with mysticism and self-transcendence. In so doing, and as a contemplative, he recognizes the unspeakable value of the silence encompassing speech at the same time as he is involved in *poesis* (the making of poetry, in the Aristotelian paradigm). The poet is faced with the dilemma that the Hebrew faces when speaking about God, whose name can be expressed only in symbols. Such a complex of symbols requires that the poet speak about the unspeakable. Ultimately, the obscure, the unexpressed, the mysterious, and the undefined become the symbols of a poetics that intimates the sublime. The poem is both temporal and *a-temporal* in its inevitable deferring of meaning. The poet creates a language structure that both conceals and reveals so that the act of reading/hearing is the act of gathering both sound and silence.

"O Sweet Irrational Worship"<sup>8</sup> is an exquisite example of Merton's spiritual sensibilities brought to life in a mystical response to the natural world. In this poem Merton's "foolish worship" arises from his observations of a simple bobwhite<sup>9</sup> and the afternoon sun. The title alerts the reader to the poet's joy in a worship that skirts rationality. The poem arises in the manner of a *Zen koan*:

By ceasing to question the sun  
I have become light ...  
When I had a spirit,  
... I was on fire.

He recognizes that, like the writers of the Hebrew Psalms, he was alive as spirit even before God spoke his name" in a "naming silence." In his identification with the natural world around him, the poet is drawn into the ecstasy of his own incarnation as a being

in touch with both the human and divine:

I am earth, earth  
My heart's love  
Bursts with hay and flowers.  
I am a lake of blue air  
In which my own appointed place  
Field and valley  
Stand reflected.

He repeats the refrain, exulting in the delight of the revelation that he is in union with creation and with God, its Maker:

I am earth, earth  
Out of my grass heart  
Rises the bobwhite.  
Out of my nameless weeds  
His foolish worship.

This Zen lyric resonates with Merton's imbibing of the Psalms over the two decades of being a monk at Gethsemani. One hears the echoes of Psalm 139: "My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret ... in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them" (vv. 15-16). In the afternoon sun of his Kentucky valley, "A tall, spare pine / Stands like the initial of [his] first / Name when [he] had one." Again, one hears the music and joy of the Hebrew Psalm in the words of the poet whose identity has always existed but is now recognized in the air and light of this moment of exultation. One hears also the intense gathering of time reminiscent of Dylan Thomas's renowned lyric, "Fern Hill": "[Time] was lovely ... / it was air / And playing, lovely and watery."<sup>10</sup> The Zen qualities of the poem return the poet to the simplicity of its beginnings: wind and a bobwhite and the afternoon sun. The simple scene has elaborated itself into transcendence for the poet, who has entered its contemplative moment. The outcome is a profound experience of "sweet, irrational worship" and a recognition of his unity with all things, natural and divine.

"Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing"<sup>11</sup> is a magnificent expression of Merton's symbolizing of the silent language of God in creation. Jonathan Montaldo, in a series of essays on this poem,<sup>12</sup> elaborates this concept as central to the ecological harmony and peace of Merton's nature mysticism. The snow-covered stones are exhorted to "Hide the house of their growth!" The transparency of the Zen moment of realization is foregrounded by the secret language of the little trees:

Vegetal words,  
Unlettered water,  
Daily zero.

"Daily zero" is the interpretive code of the silent language whereby the "little forests, meekly / Touch the snow with low branches!" The curled tree is exhorted to "Pray undistracted," to turn its fire inward to its "weak fort"—a "burly infant spot, / A house of nothing." This "mad place" of silence is realized as the seed of the plants' lives where "growth" is unapparent in fiery bloom. The oxymoronic force of the poem is created by the cold and wintry "little forest" with its "low branches" transfigured by their silence in a "golden zero / Unsetting sun"—an inferno of life! Peace blesses this silent place and the lifeless scene becomes the dramatic stage where one "Loves winter when the plant says nothing." The silent language of the dormant trees is the language of the transcendent energies of the super/supra/natural in the natural world, far beyond human imaginative capacities to create in word or deed, or even love, ever conferring silence on its poets and their readers. Merton's poetics are grounded in his belief that the natural world bears the tracings of a God whose presence is Other and cannot be confined to the cosmos or categories of the human imagination. He often identified himself with the life of the Kentucky hill dwellers whose homes and farms lay in the forested knobs bordering the monastery's property. His love for the forests, hills, streams, and the flora and fauna of the hills permeates his poetry. (In 1952 he had been named the abbey's forester).

An impressive poem about the natural world, which Merton wrote before taking up his monastic vocation, resulted from a

hitchhiking trip that he took to Cleveland in 1941. "Aubade: Lake Erie"<sup>13</sup> was subsequently published in *The New Yorker* in August, 1942.<sup>16</sup> Jim Knight, his traveling companion, recounts that Merton was reminded by the vines along the lake of his childhood surroundings in St. Antonin, France and there seems also to be a somewhat sympathetic link with Rimbaud's vagabond poems.<sup>14</sup> Michael Higgins reads this *aubade* (a French song form for lovers who must part in the morning) through a Blakean lens in which children who are the embodiment of innocence have been imprisoned by capitalism and its grim Christianity.<sup>15</sup> But Ross Labrie views the children as the transcendence of innocence over their marring experiences in that their play and praise rise above the reluctance of the poem's vagabonds to point themselves to the industrial wasteland in which they find their survival.<sup>16</sup> In this contrast of innocence and experience, the children's "shining voices, clean as summer, / Play, like churchbells over the field" applauding the "bearded corn, the bleeding grape" as they chant their ode to the natural world whose sun is their "marvelous cousin." Several other of his *aubades* proclaim the natural world as the paradisaical force which has the potential to restore innocence and mitigate the trauma of experience, taking up these themes in various settings ("Aubade: Bermuda"; "Aubade: The Annunciation").<sup>17</sup>

Merton's immense love for the natural world, as he discovered it in his Kentucky surroundings, grounded his poetry in a mystical ecology. These poems, set at Merton's monastery, group themselves around the seasons. In such rural settings, the seasons and the weather were of great importance to all, no less to the monks living from their land at Gethsemani Abbey. In his early days in the monastery, Merton spent time outdoors working with the rest of the monks who made their living by farming. "On A Day in August,"<sup>18</sup> written in the late 1940s, elaborates the dependence of the farming monks on rain. In setting up the topography for the poem, Merton focuses on the hayfields "waiting to be shaved of hay:"

The deaf-and-dumb fields ...  
Suffer the hours like an unexpected sea  
While locusts fry their music in the sycamores.

Rain refuses to arrive “from the curdled places of the sky / (Where a brown wing hovers for carrion).” The heat-stricken monks “lie upon the earth / In the air of [their] dead grove / Dreaming some wind may come and kiss [their] red eyes / With a pennyworth of mercy for [their] pepper shoulders.” They have been silenced by their misery and suffer as those who are in an inferno, feeling as though they are facing approaching death: “And so we take into our hands the ruins / Of the words our minds have rent.” Here the allusion to the rending of the veil of the temple (Luke 23:45) imbues the experience with mystical power. Overcome by the heat, the poet speaks for all the laboring monks: “It is enough” (one hears echoes of Christ’s final cry, “It is finished”):

Our souls are trying to crawl out of our pores.  
Our lives are seeping through each part of us  
like vinegar.  
A sad sour death is eating the roots of our hair.

The identification with the crucifixion continues in the pleading of the monks for water and relief. The poet calls on Saint Clare, a saint who, like St. Francis, had a great love for all creatures:

We have been looking up your stairs all afternoon  
Wanting to see you walking down some nimbus with your  
gentle friends.

In a final apostrophe, the poet issues his appeal:

Very well, clouds,  
Open your purple bottles,  
Cozen us never more with blowsy cotton:  
But organize,  
Summon the punishing lightning

The complex of symbols relating to the crucifixion continues its evocation with the “Curtain of apocalypse” being hung “to earth, from heaven.” The lightning appears as “five white branches [that] scourge the land with fire.” And in the moment of Christ’s expiration, “there was a darkness over all the earth ... and the sun was darkened” (Luke 23:44-45); likewise in the simile which visits

itself on these suffering monks in Gethsemani’s fields, “when the first fat drops / Spatter upon the tin top of our church like silver dollars / ... Prayer will become our new discovery / When God and His bad earth once more make friends.”

In a similar but less liturgical vein, the eight stanzas of “Poem in the Rain and the Sun”<sup>19</sup> paint a portrait of the cycles of wind and water to which agrarian life is captive. In this poem the speaker presents a meteorological sketch of “a hermit’s weather” as he counts “the fragmentary rain / In drops as blue as coal” while standing at the door of his hermitage. (The time and place of the writing of this poem relate to Merton’s early writing shelter, the toolshed in the woods behind the monastery, which he called St. Anne’s Hermitage in honour of the mother of the Virgin Mary). The tone of the poem is one of joy and wonder. The poet interacts with rain, thunder, shadows, wind, oceans, and mountains; he personifies them as figures of wild wonder among which the poem’s speaker embraces flights of fancy:

Lands of the watermen, where poplars bend.  
Wild seas amuse the world with water: ...  
Thus in the boom of waves’ advantage  
Dogs and lions come to my tame home  
Won by the bells of my Cistercian jungle ...  
Songs of the lions and whales!  
With my pen between my fingers,  
Making the waterworld sing.

As he looks out from the “doorlight,” he sees that “out of the towering water / Four or five mountains came walking / To see the chimneys of the little graves.” In this wondrous and imaginative “waterworld,” he has

walked upon the surf  
Rinsing the bays with Thy hymns.  
[His] prayers have swept the horizons clean  
Of ships and rain.

In this rite of nature, the “waterworld” has become a code word for Paradise—into which the speaker has entered with exultant joy:

Then Adam and Eve come out and walk along the coast  
 Praising the tears of the sun:  
 While I am decorating with Thy rubies the bones of the  
 autumn trees,  
 The bones of the homecoming world.

As the poet sees himself in unity with this world of living creatures,  
 his hymn of praise becomes a prayer:

Sweet Christ, discover diamonds  
 And sapphires in my verse  
 While I burn the sap of my pine house  
 For the praise of the ocean sun!

Words become the medium by which the writer's praise moves  
 from the realm of imagination to that of mystical pleasure as they  
 "fling wide the windows of their glassy houses."

Merton took up this theme again in "Spring Storm"<sup>20</sup> in which  
 he records the power and predictability of the weather to defeat  
 the human intellect which goes "mumbling in the snow," reducing  
 him to "[his] pointless self, the hunter of [his] home" just as the  
 hundreds of sheep "run" to find shelter from the elements. In this  
 short narrative of the events, all is "unsubstantial" in the face of the  
 approaching storm:

When in their ignorance and haste the skies must fall  
 Upon our white-eyed home, and blindly turn  
 Feeling the four long limits of the wall,  
 How unsubstantial is our present state  
 In the clean blowing of those elements  
 Whose study is our problem and our fate?

The theme is repeated near the poem's end in reference to the sky  
 that has melted on the "patient animal" that his body has become,  
 while the meteorology of his surroundings remains "our quibble and  
 our doom." There is no fear associated with his being enmeshed  
 in the spring storm; rather, he is integrated into oneness with his  
 world by his humble realization.

"Evening: Zero Weather"<sup>21</sup> is one of Merton's most well-known

poems on nature and mysticism. He depicts the monastic day in  
 zero degree weather in Kentucky, ascribing to it the evocative  
 imagery of the "zero days before Lent." In a cluster of metaphors  
 and similes Merton's poem paints a scene where "all the monks  
 come in with eyes as clean as the cold sky ... paying out *Ave Marias*  
 / With rosaries between their bleeding fingers." In the approach-  
 ing winter darkness, "the brothers come, with hoods about their  
 faces, / Following their plumes of breath / Lugging the gleaming  
 buckets one by one" on a day "when shovels would have struck  
 / Full flakes of fire out of the land like rock." The line of monks  
 finding their way back to the shelter of the monastery is heightened  
 by the line rosary beads which they count out in prayer. The scene  
 is played out in Merton's early days at Gethsemani, well before any  
 modern conveniences had reached the abbey's hills. Merton finds  
 his strength in the exchange of the zero weather for the "summer of  
 our adoration." He experiences a remarkable transformation of the  
 frozen "lone world" where there is "no bird-song there, no hare's  
 track / No badger working in the russet grass" and where the "bare  
 fields are silent as eternity." As the monks "plunge, down, down  
 into the fathoms of [their] secret joy / That swims with indefinable  
 fire," they find their Christ "Here in the zero days before Lent."  
 Time is fast forwarded to August, where they are "already binding  
 up [their] sheaves of harvest / ... going up with exultation / Even  
 on the eve of [their] Ash Wednesday." This stirring poem in which  
 the wintry world is ablaze with the fire of Easter's holy mysteries  
 recalls G.M. Hopkins' "The World Is Charged with the Grandeur of  
 God" in which the natural world is infused with the purifying fire  
 of the divine presence.

Ultimately, Merton does not see poetry as simply a gesture to  
 the numinous beyond experience; rather, he appropriates poetry in  
 order to create the condition for spiritual experience. At the same  
 time he decried religious poetry that feebly attempted to enshrine  
 dogma. An example from the early collection *Thirty Poems*  
 (1944)), "Evening"<sup>22</sup> evokes Merton's sense of the presence of the  
 transcendent in the immanent:

Now, in the middle of the limpid evening,  
The moon speaks clearly to the hill.  
The wheatfields make their simple music,  
Praise the quiet sky.

In the quiet darkness of the rising moon, Merton reinvents the symbols of moon, stars, sky, fields and trees, seeing them as an Edenic paradise in which the children, "Play[ing] on the empty air" cry out their tales:

They say the sky is made of glass,  
They say the smiling moon's a bride.  
They say they love the orchards and apple trees

The musicality of the poem arises from its abundance of liquid sounds, "l", "m", "n", "r", and its highly alliterative consonance that binds its words together in a delicate fabric of sensory images:

And down the road, the way the stars come home,  
The cries of children  
Play on the empty air, a mile or more,  
And fall on our deserted hearing,  
Clear as water.

The picture of the monk high up in the cloisters looking out upon the coming night is echoed by the sounds of the children's last moments of play. In the brief meditation that ensues, the contemplative lens of the monk's sensibilities is focused on the lyric drama about to unfold in the quiet fields around the monastery's enclosure. The allusions to sacred rites of liturgy enshrine the images in hushed holiness, gesturing to the mysteries of such rites, and melding nature and the divine in moving meditations of incarnational power: "The wheatfields ... praise the sky," "the smiling moon's a bride," "the trees ... wearing ... White dresses from that morning's first communion" and words "flower."

The silent houses in which words dwell while waiting to evoke their hidden realities appear throughout Merton's poetry as archetypes for the mystic's silent language. "Grace's House,"<sup>23</sup> one of the lovely poems which belong to Merton's poetry of the child, is about a child's drawing sent to him by one his correspondents.<sup>24</sup>

In the child's drawing there is "No path drawn"; "All the curtains are arranged / Not for hiding but for seeing out." On its Mailbox, number 5, "[t]here is . . . the name of a family / Not yet ready to be written in language." Grace's house is a paradise, a world that Blake called *innocence*. Grace's crayon drawing has taken Merton into the place the mystic enters in transfiguring moments of revelation: "No blade of grass is not blessed / On this archetypal, cosmic hill, / This womb of mysteries." Between this "blessed" place and "our world"—Blake's world of *experience*, "Runs a sweet river: / (No it is not the road, / It is the uncrossed crystal / Water between our ignorance and her truth.)" When the moment of revelation has passed, the poem's speaker is drawn back into the world of the present and the lament: "Alas, there is no road to Grace's house!" As a metaphor for the mystic's journey there is, indeed, no road to map.

Monastic silence invests Merton with powers, mystical and imaginative, which allow him to articulate the unspeakable, creating a poetics of immanence and transcendence from his experience of the human and his consciousness of closeness to the divine. In such moments, the poet, as iconoclast, calls forth secrets from the unconscious and forces the soul from its anonymity into personality. Words, then, emerge from silence, and lead into the silence which is God's speech. As such, poetry borders on three other modes of statement—light, music, and silence—which George Steiner called the "proof of the transcendent presence in the fabric of the world."<sup>25</sup>

### Endnotes

1. Thomas Merton, "Day of a Stranger," in *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*, ed. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: Harper, 1999), 244-46.
2. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton Volume Five 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 242.
3. Thomas Merton, "Honourable Reader": *Reflections on My Work* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), 91.
4. Merton, "Day of a Stranger," 242..

5. Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* ((New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 280-281.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, sel. and ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), 277.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Br. Patrick Hart, OCSO and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1968, xxvii.
8. Thomas Merton, *In the Dark Before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*, ed. Lynn R. Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005), 96-97.
9. American quail.
10. Dylan Thomas, *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*, ed. Daniel Jones (New York: New Directions, 2003), 156.
11. *In the Dark Before Dawn*, 99.
12. "Seeking God' in the Journals of Thomas Merton: Loving Winter When the Plant Says Nothing." Occasional papers on the Catholic intellectual life (Atlanta, GA: Emory University, Aquinas Center of Theology, 1995).
13. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 35.
14. *Collected Poems*, 223.
15. Michael Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto, Ontario: Stoddart Publishing, 1999), 126-127.
16. Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth, TX: The Texas Christian University Press, 1979), 114.
17. *Collected Poems*, 691-692, 85.
18. *In the Dark Before Dawn*, 38-40.
19. *In the Dark Before Dawn*, 35-36.
20. *Collected Poems*, 230.
21. *In the Dark Before Dawn*, 79-81.
22. *In the Dark Before Dawn*, 77.
23. *Collected Poems*, 330.
24. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 367.
25. George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman* (Kingsport, TN: Kingsport Press, 1967), 39.