

In Memoriam; Thomas Merton

1. 1969 OPENED LIKE THIS

Daniel Berrigan

I wish I had some joy—
the text of eyes that pay
this year, all the last exacted; tears.
When Merton died, we met, struck dumb,
the old year's locking jaw
let blood, one last time; death, then this death.

We blow up big the photo Griffin made
Kentucky woods, hunched arms
overalls, Picasso moon face. Eyes

like a wrapt stranger among mourners
on a road, of a noon, in a landscape
stinking like graves. Hands outstretched
filled with this world's
(no other's)
flowers, wounds;
I have some joy!

The sequence of 6 poems, 'In Memoriam; Thomas Merton', by Daniel Berrigan was originally published in the Summer 1969 edition of Continuum magazine. They are reprinted here with permission of The Daniel Berrigan Literary Trust.

2. AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH,
AMERICANS HAD MASTERED THE
DYNAMICS OF A MOON FLIGHT

Daniel Berrigan

Merton's gone; that comfort ended.
The moon, bleak as an earth, blinks
bad cess back to us. That comfort
 when free as promises or willows
 or the future
 the moon hung there
 and all hands lifted
 like priests or brides
 brides or
 (minded and ringed)
 geese, straining, crying
 a northern tongue—

ended

3. EDIFYING ANECDOTES CONCERNING THE DECEASED ARE NOW IN ORDER

Daniel Berrigan

January; a sick woman
garnished with the dumb potatoes
of average do-gooders
preserved, propped there
a vinyl-sprayed op exhibit;
Soup Cans, Groceries; "IDEAL SLUM."
(Around her hideous fairy tales arise
in the eyes of the children of good parents
potato parents, canned pops and moms)

Enter Merton.
He stooped and kissed the woman
(she dying not of this ill or that
but of all all
her life and ours)
offered
six roses
A sudden weeping seized her
drained by average goodness of church and state
their boiled eyes and lives.

Touché, excelling man!
never again shall we
(canned, mashed, boiled
in the short order of creation)
cry out, exult—never again
that rite of roses
that rightness, the rose that leaps
once, and for all
dies

4. MEMORIES AFTER THE FACT: A VISIT OF ILL-FAVORED CHARACTERS TO THE MONASTERY

Daniel Berrigan

Under the stars, a last beer
cans flipped in the underbrush
good night, good night . . .

Friend, between Bangkok and this
new year zeroing in, how death
abounds, for those who try and try

the odds you took and tossed, on life!
Coffee and hamburg in a Greek hash joint
alone; a Bogie double feature. Winds stir

dead news in the street, frenzy, bombast. Meat
sticks in my throat. The gravel voice
of dead Bogart

cheats like a virtuous thief
usurious times.

Merton, of all who tremble and tear

sheets from their calendars
or shroud in nightmare
the whelmed dead to their eyes

you and I—

(The old men loom, their winter agon
nearing the newborn.

The bony fingers point, appoint

our eschaton and his; death, prison and
good night, good night.)

5. WHO S WHO AT THE OBSEQUIES

Daniel Berrigan

General Hershey did not mourn
you, nor Roy Harris nor
Cleaver's hell's angels.
The sombre Texan war lord
braved New York crazies
to shed
a vagrant tear
on a cardinal's pall—
he minded this day
his waning power and war.
Et Cetera bought farms
or oxen
or took wives
the day your death
shook the earth's round

Only the raped and rent
the shadowed, submerged
upon whom Kafka's needles
bear down, write large
the cuneiform of loss—

were there. And the four
ministering spirits of these;
earth, water, fire, air.

6. THE FUNERAL ORATION AS PRONOUNCED BY THE COMPASSIONATE BUDDHA

Daniel Berrigan

Assembled sirs. The courtesies afforded us by the Dali Lama,
the Abbot of the Trappist Fathers
and the vergers of your cathedral, are deeply felt
and enter as a sombre joy into our heart's stream.

The Christ himself (to whom all praise) were better chosen
to speak for this monk, brother and son.
Alas. The absence of your god, decreed by a thousand
malevolencies
susurrations, anger, skill in summoning his words against him—
I hear your choice, approving; *one god at a time. Better an
unknown god, even
a tedious one, than that holy son, native to our flesh.
Better a subtle millennial smile, than anger and infected wounds.
Better me than he. So be it; I shall speak.*

The assumption of this monk into ecstasy,
the opening of the crystal portals before that glancing spirit!
He was (I speak a high and rare praise)
not too strenuous after reward; so he attains eternal knowledge.
In his mortal journey, he refused direction from those pylons
impermeable, deadly smooth,
hard to the touch as the membrane of hell.
He detested their claim upon the soul, he exorcised their rumors.

(I too have been a guest in your cities. I have been conducted with
pomp
through your martian workshops, heard with a start of fear
the incantations of your genius.
Indeed the aim is clear; saints, the innocent, visionaries,
all targets of your encompassing death wish.
But the Buddha knows no disdain; he stoops low to enter your
labyrinth,
to uncoil its secret, to bare its beast.

The Buddha, a length of rope, a dog in the dust; such parables I
embrace
once more, in tribute to this monk.)

The monk has attained god;
he had first attained man. Does the nexus trouble you, issuing as it
does
from a mouth so neutral, so silent as mine? Be comforted.
Gioconda exists only to smile. She does so; her value mounts and
mounts.

But the monk Merton, in his life and going forth
requires that a blow be dealt
your confident myths. If the gods are silent
if even to this hour, Christ and Buddha stand appalled
before your idols, if we breathe the stench of your hecatombs—
still, the passage of a good man restores;
it brings the gods to earth, even to you!
For once, for a brief space, we walk among you
for a space of words,
we quicken your hearts in pursuit of the sovereign will.
O makers and unmakers! I shall shortly be borne
in a flowering cart of sandal, into high heaven; a quaint apotheosis!
The routine slaveries once more possess you.
Man and god, Buddha and Merton, those years, this hour, fold in like
a dough.
The blows of the kneading fist withdraw, the times are your own.
War readying of war;
conflicts, games of death, checks and counters—
I leave you, your undoing, promethean doers and despoilers.

Hope?
Christ and Buddha fashion a conundrum. Hear it.
The hour of your despoiling is the hour of our return.
Until then, the world is yours, and you are Moloch's, bound hand
and foot
upon a wheel of fire.

The monk Thomas I take up in lotus hands
to place in the eternal thought
a jewel upon my forehead.