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MEDITATIVE EXPERIENCE IN THE POETRY OF THOMAS MERTON*

Polish readers regard Thomas Merton mainly as an author of valuable reflections of a spiritual nature, collected in at least a dozen titles that function in public awareness. Less known, and for some even astonishing, is the fact of the literary, also poetic, activity of this Trappist monk of Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. Still, Merton wrote poems all his life, devoting himself to this activity also in his monastic life, although not without some remorse. I do not suppose that it could be explained in categories of uncontrollable literary ambition, although, it should be stressed that Merton as an artist was fully aware of the complexity of technique, and what he writes is a result of frequently laborious work on words. What is more, despite his monk's robe he is not a stranger to the snares of creative egotism.

Nevertheless, the subject matter of this paper will not be Merton's creative self-awareness, nor his views on the mission of literature and writers in the modern world, both worth a closer look as they might be. Although

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they are matters undoubtedly essential to the whole of Merton's profile, since they demonstrate the range of interests and extensiveness of his humanistic mind, despite the importance of these matters, I decided not to penetrate them, and instead to attempt to reach the core of the meaning and message conveyed in his poetic writings, which I thought even more essential.

Still, his is not the kind of poetry that is easily understood and surrenders to the procedures of interpretation. It seems that the key to interpreting Merton's poetic writings lies outside the sphere of literature itself. Thus familiarity with poetic convention and historic-literary contexts, even a good acquaintance with modern English and American poetry do not suffice to penetrate into the meaning that constitutes the specific world of his poetic pieces.

It also seems important to place the originality of Merton's poetry outside the sphere of influence of artistic quality, even though his work is clearly not devoid of it. The distinctiveness of Thomas Merton's poetic diction consists not so much in aesthetics, as in spirituality. Assertion of that fact seems to be of crucial importance in attempting to understand his poetry. Here lies both ultimate value of those poems and their originality against the background of poetic creativity of the time. Similarly, I think, in this specifically shaped inner experience, one ought to search for the key to open this poetry, for which it is the first and foremost catalyst. It is this experience that its subject is trying to find apt expression for.

Meditation practiced by the protagonist of Merton's poetic writings gives him certain distinctive features. Although it is not named in the poems, the whole sense of the world comprised in those pieces grows out of meditative awareness, which finds expression in them. It is impossible to understand Merton's poetic utterances without that meditative context, which appears not only in their level of meaning, but also in imagery based on categories fundamental for meditation, as well as the progression of certain poems, which are, in fact, minor introductions to meditation.

So it seems that the deepest basis for all these works is the need to verbalize this sphere of spiritual experiences, which in the most natural way eludes verbal articulation and weighs toward silence. Tension, which appears at the point of contact of this inclination for silence and simultaneous necessity to express, is perhaps one of the crucial factors, which endow Merton's poetic diction with its idiosyncratic and unique character. It follows that these works should be described and understood in spiritual

categories, from the field of prayer and meditative life, since they form a basis on which the whole construction of most important poetic meanings is built.

Therefore first of all one should inquire into the idiosyncratic features of that spiritual experience, which fell to the subject's lot, in order to take this roundabout way to try and capture, or, in point of fact, merely approach, deep meanings which organize his poetical universe from inside. Speaking in the most general terms, this experience is connected with the practice of prayer, which the subject of these poems gives most of his attention to... also, significantly, on the real existential level, as a real, not only virtual, author... The above observation seems important in that it allows one to realize the highly unusual status of this poetry, which does not cease to be one, and yet it remains – to a much greater degree – a witness to spiritual life, an attempt to record and understand own development. Thus Merton's poems, while being poetry, also constitute a personal document, something in the shape of personal spiritual diary. While keeping their autonomous status, they clearly complement essay writings of the author of *Seeds of Contemplation* and can be fully interpreted only with them and in their context.

The framework for the inner experience disclosed in the confessions of the narrator is set down by the rules of monastic life, whose minute, yet distinct reminiscences are present in a number of his writings and can be found already in titles of his numerous pieces, which point to a given town and name a given monastery – the Trappist Abbey Gethsemani in Kentucky – as a place of lyrical, or should I say, spiritual, action.

Such a precise location of the presented world does not at the same time deprive the narrator's experience of its universal nature. Although he allows the reader to be recognized as a member of a closed monastic community and custom, yet he remains above all a man, "everyone", searching for answers to questions about the meaning of life and directions. Monastic reality, references to liturgy, the monastic order of the day, or rule which appear in the texts, aren't of crucial significance to the sphere of profound meanings constituted by these poems, they serve rather as a kind of prop, useful for placing in reality that experience which goes beyond individuality. This operation serves not only the idiosyncratic, so to say, earthing of experiences described in the poem, but also introduces an element of authenticity, allows for identification of the protagonist as a man strongly set

in the existing and precisely presented, though to non-monks somewhat exotic, world. It seems especially important in the face of the nature of spiritual reality which ultimately cannot be clearly defined or captured, and which is in itself the main, and in fact, the only topic of Merton's poetic discourse. The purpose of such a method of imagery is in a way to authenticate for the reader the veracity of experience and inner way, whose outlines are designed by this poetry.

At the same time, on a purely literary level, the clash between the concrete and the universal becomes a factor creating certain artistic tension, just as it had in the case mentioned above of paradoxical oscillation between silence and voiced word. Two pairs of such tension – between word and silence and between the concrete and the general, functioning on the level of setting literary qualities, find their deeper and more complete justification in the dimension of spiritual experience. And so: a dichotomy of silence and speech at first draws a certain course of development, but also, having completed it, signifies Return, represents a kind of coda, in which opposites, although sharply stated at the beginning, are reconciled at the end. The case is similar with tension between the general and the concrete. Striving for the general can be seen as an effort to overcome “the world”, leaving behind the earthly in order to achieve supernatural goals. Hence numerous details and references to reality present in the poems appear to be an important sign that the subject has crossed over the boundary of false individualism and achieved inner union. In both cases of demonstrated dichotomies we deal with the dynamism of changing meaning, the dynamism whose rhythm is defined by the spiritual evolution of the narrator. First of all it implies that one category encompasses various, often even opposite, meanings, depending on the context. Secondly, these poems, treated as one text, divided into many pieces, bring an extremely consistent and astonishingly exact description of the spiritual path. This path and its consecutive stages has been laid by experience of meditative practice, which, in point of fact, is convergent with Merton's discursive writings, where it is properly elaborated on. Nevertheless it seems that unlike St. John of the Cross, Merton treated separately the modes of expression he practiced. They co-exist, in a way parallel to each other, yet they were not to have, in their author's intent, mutually explanatory function, which, in itself, does not stand in the way of an interpreter's illuminating them one by the other. Let us then use several texts chosen for this purpose and ordered in a specific way to follow the stages of our hero's spiritual journey.

The starting point is the call addressed to himself, to his own soul:

Sink from your shallows, soul, into eternity.¹

This encouraging call comes from the narrator's awareness that the nature of the supernatural is completely dissimilar to all the phenomena he encounters on earth; awareness perhaps not finally crystallized, yet partly aroused:

We touch the rays we cannot see,
We feel the light that seems to sing.²

The nature of this reality, so completely different from everything else, cannot be presented by anything but operating with the contradictive and “diagonally” intersected paradoxes of synesthetic nature. Here “touching the rays”, which is impossible in reality, and remains in discrepancy with the laws of physics, is set against the sense of sight by means of the merging of sensations. However, seeing also seems impossible to the narrator. Thus a double, two-level paradox is created, additionally strengthened by the repetition of the same catch in the next line. The phrase “we feel the light” instead of the expected “we see the light” gains the virtue of unimaginability, or even absurdity – if we are to apply earthly categories – by adding that the singing of the light is also possible. In effect the description of eternity, although encompassing the three most important senses – touch, sight and hearing – is more than ever placed beyond the possibility of articulation, which makes it even more mysterious and desired. This kind of imagery, although extremely visual at first sight, in fact builds a metaphor that cannot be translated into any images, which puts Merton among the avant-garde 20th century experimenters. In this case as before, poetic artistry finds theological justification. First of all, the paradoxical use of the senses, which turns out to be completely useless in recognizing extra-physical reality, underlines the extra-conceptual and unimaginable nature of eternity. Secondly, the synesthetic combinations of individual receptors and objects which do not confirm to, let us say, competences of those sensory organs, suggest the so-called inner senses – the term often used by mystical authors to describe the ways of cognition characteristic of the perception of invis-

¹ After the Night Office – Gethsemani Abbey, in: *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York: New Directions, 1980, p. 108.

² Ibidem.

ble realities. One could construe that the paradoxical phrases in the poem suggest precisely this mystical understanding of the senses.

Therefore the narrator is lost in his attempts to present the goal of his longing in words. Nevertheless, this does not change his determination and conviction that it is necessary to abandon his everyday superficial self, and transcend the person as an initial, necessary and fundamental condition of setting out on an inner journey. At the same time a vague intuition begins to tell him that only in that incomprehensible and unnamed, eternity beyond him, there is a true meaning and fulfilment, which makes all surrounding things look pale and brings out their illusory appeal:

[...] drink these deeps of invisible light.³

This perspective on eternity is to be the cure for the false guidance of a soul engrossed in attractive yet false appearances, which are taken for the fundamental nature, a soul immobilized in the mask that would not let it leave the shallow waters. The latter ought to be probably understood not only in terms of inner shallowness and superficiality, but also as a feeling of being at home with what is familiar, and therefore – safe, the feeling threatening any kind of development. A specific lack of courage resulting in limiting oneself to moving only on familiar ground may result in a self-satisfied torpor and lead to barrenness. It is not surprising that an ardent call to come out of the safe limits of this light, conditioned on habits “self” constitutes the most fundamental directive in the spiritual way.

The next poem – *The Trappist Abbey: Matins* discloses the next condition, or rather, two conditions, set before the soul searching for the light of God:

Now kindle in the windows of this ladyhouse, my soul,
Your childish, clear awakeness:
Burn in the country night
Your wise and sleepless lamp.⁴

Inner vigilance as a necessary ingredient of the way to salvation, understood in any manner, depending on religion, appears in all spiritual traditions of human kind. But why in Merton’s poem is there mention of “childish awakeness”?

³ Ibidem

⁴ *The Trappist Abbey: Matins*, in: *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 46.

There can be three explanations, and none of them is in collision with the others. Firstly, it brings to mind the evangelical warnings of Jesus who tells us it is necessary to become like children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Hence, if one assumes that eternity so enigmatically presented in the previous poem as a goal of the earthly pilgrimage, denotes entering the kingdom of heaven, then the condition of regaining (or keeping) spiritual childlessness is additionally strengthened. A child is perceived here as a symbol of innocence and simplicity, qualities without which all perception is contaminated, and the sense of vigilance distorted. Secondly, viewed from psychological aspect, a child – being curious of surrounding reality – is capable of true vigilance. No new element can elude a child’s attention. A child intrigued with the world gives it its full attention. And thirdly, the phrase “childish awakeness” may also be an intentional reference to Buddhist writings, which compare an awoken mind to child’s one – fresh, open, receptive, simple, and free of prejudice. Without such a mind cognition is impossible.

The last of the traits listed here seems to be of particular importance, because of Merton’s confirmed interest in the spiritual traditions of the East and his attempts to use the wisdom of Zen in his own prayer⁵. Signals derived from remote fields of the spiritual tradition and put together in one poem express the Mertonian narrator’s search for deeper unity, gradually being disclosed in the way of his meditative practices. In this way vigilance and attentiveness are both a preliminary requirement and a fruit of meditation itself, which is maturing in time, leading him through novel experiences to enlightenment.

Vigilance as a stance, being a form of attentiveness, would be convergent with the latter. Both vigilance and attentiveness take their origins from eastern spiritual traditions as well as sayings of Christ. The poem brings to mind the latter in a more conspicuous manner, both by introducing the unambiguously Christian theme of God’s blood, apostles and betrayal, which are all easily identifiable evangelical events, and by subtle reference to Christ’s parable of the foolish and wise virgins. The burning of the sleepless lamp in combination with the call to stay awake introduce evangelical themes taken from the above-mentioned parallel.⁶

⁵ Here one cannot rule out the influence of Eastern Christianity from beyond the sphere of hesychasm, which uses similar categories of vigilance and attentiveness, and considers them important for spiritual growth. I would like to express my thanks to prof. Waclaw Hryniwicz who pointed it out to me.

⁶ Cf. Mt 25, 1-13.

While open to the inspiration flowing from spiritual richness of zen Buddhism, Merton's narrator remains within the realm of Christianity. In this case it would be a misunderstanding to speak of contamination of beliefs. Interest in other spiritual traditions is not here to construct a transpersonal, amorphous, eclectic, and syncretic religiousness. First of all it is here to assist in finding a common element in the human experience of God, independently of the content of creed articulated by every religion, and secondly, but more importantly, in fulfilling the need to improve the means used for establishing a connection with God. In this respect the ways developed in the circle of eastern religions could not have escaped his notice.

In further stages of his inner journey the narrator, having been summoned to stay vigilant, meets on his way silence and loneliness. These terms function as representations of two different realities, depending on the context and stage of development in which they appear.

If you seek a heavenly light
I, Solitude, am your professor!⁷

In effect, at the beginning of the meditative journey, vigilance, wakefulness and attentiveness are conditioned by silence and solitude, and understood first as external circumstances conducive to concentration and entering oneself:

I go before you into emptiness,
[...] Opening the windows
Of your innermost apartment.⁸

At the beginning silence and loneliness are of a more external nature and play a functional role in the narrator's journey towards himself, and, finally toward God; they lead him through an increasingly deserted ground:

When I, loneliness, give my special signal
Follow my silence, follow where I beckon!⁹

External silence and inner loneliness, indicated by monastic scenery, where poetic action takes place, are gradually changing their status, beco-

⁷ Song: If you seek, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 340.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ibidem.

ming more and more innermost realities and significant spiritual experiences. Yet before Silence will manifest itself as impossible to comprehend and express in words intuition of All:

For I, Solitude, am thine own self:
I, Nothingness, am thy All.
I, Silence, am thy Amen!¹⁰

So before his silence becomes the only answer adequate to enfolding the Silence of the Pre-eternal, which manifests itself as the name of the Unspeakable, he has to meet demons that hide inside him and overcome the budding temptation of despair. This spiritual struggle, comparable to agony:

[...] a match, in which you overcome [...] after a long agony.¹¹

leads to meeting the shadow:

I went down
Into the cavern
All the way down
To the bottom of the sea.
[...]
I went down lower
Than any diamond mine
Deeper than the lowest hole
In Kimberly
All the way down
I thought I was the devil
He was no deeper down
Than me.¹²

in order to, after showing him his cracked nature:

Fear not, little beast, little spirit
(Though word and animal)¹³

lead him in the end to transcend his "self" and be reborn within himself on a new level:

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ To a Severe Nun, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 287.

¹² All the Way Down, in: *The Collected Poem*, p. 669.

¹³ Song: If you seek, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 340.

And when they thought
That I was gone forever
That I was all the way
In hell
I got right back into my body
And came back out
And rang my bell.¹⁴

Inner suffering is an inseparable element of the process of spiritual growth depicted by the above quoted sequence. The way of meditation presented in this poem leads through the inner death. In this crucial stage loneliness and silence appear to the narrator not so much as the prospect of fulfilment, but as a despair generating factor. The meeting with the self in "the cavern" "all the way down", as it is described by the narrator, is in fact a descent into the bottom of his ego, into the spiritual loins of his self. This descent, necessary to the awakening on the new level of awareness, is connected with shock and numerous dangers, and, first of all, with the temptation of despair. Therefore the narrator's voice, well aware of the threatening despair and the accompanying it ruminations on hopelessness of his own position, gives a warning:

Drive on: do not consider your despair!¹⁵

knowing full well that such reflections serve only to weaken the spirit.

Yet another kind of trap awaiting the one who keeps silent is concentration on himself and various projections concerning the shape of his own person. In this case, as before, he gives himself a sound piece of advice:

[...] Do not
Think of what you are
Still less of
What you may one day be.
Rather
Be what you are [...].¹⁶

This piece of advice discloses a double status of poetic self, who has two kinds of awareness at his disposal at the same time. On one level he

participates in the process, which takes place in him through and thanks to meditation, and on the other, higher, one, he is in a way ahead of this maturing process, and by reaching to the areas of super-consciousness surveys the course and effects of changes that take place in him.

In his poem "In Silence" there appears one more hint, this time quite an intriguing one, or so it seems:

O be still, while
You are still alive.¹⁷

The phrase used here is based on a paradox in which someone who still remains in the dimension of earthly time – "while you are still alive" – is ordered to keep silent, which in itself is a fundamental reversion of accepted rules which function in the "normal" life. Silence and stillness are recognized as signs of death. Here they appear in combination with the level of mortal existence. If one simplifies and brings out the whole paradoxical sharpness of this recommendation, it can be rendered as: now, as long as you are here, refrain from words. In consequence, there is a hidden suggestion: you will speak afterwards. This depiction introduces two kinds of conviction – first of all it transforms the system of emotional values, according to which death is endowed with a negative, and life with a positive meaning, by giving the "post mortal" sphere significantly more significance. This death does not have to, or even should not, be understood literally. It represents the state before and after touching the "bottom". Secondly, this paradoxical piece of advice may contain an intuition that before experiencing the descent to the most profound depths of the self, there is *de facto* nothing to talk about as yet, since there has been no cognition, and the self remains in the darkness. In this understanding silence, which is created as a result of ascetic silence, would appear as a transitory state, closely connected with ... waiting:

How long we wait, with minds as quiet as time,
Like sentries on a tower.

[...]
How long we wait with minds as dim as ponds
While stars swim slowly homeward in the water of our west!
Heaven, when will we hear you sing?¹⁸

¹⁴ All the Way Down, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 669.

¹⁵ To a Severe Nun, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 287.

¹⁶ In Silence, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 280.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ How Long We Wait, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 90.

This experience, burdensome and prolonged at times filled with longing, wait (metaphor of the sentries and question “Heaven, when will we hear you sing?” appear on purpose and are extremely meaningful!) requires enormous patience and vigilance. It also seems to be one of the basic experiences of a human being in the meditative wanderings. One might say that it is quotidian practice of mediation. Moments of flashing light in the darkness that precede actual enlightenment:

I am the unexpected flash
Beyond “yes”, beyond “no”¹⁹

are rare, the most frequently experienced feeling is monotonous and tiring waiting:

Our minds are grey as rivers.²⁰

One gets closer to the destination of this spiritual journey only by abandoning expectations to achieve any spectacular effects of one’s efforts, while at the same time being persistent in undertaking them, that is by means of the combination of unselfishness with patience:

How long we have listened to the silence of our vineyards
And heard no bird stir in the rising barley.
The stars go home behind the shaggy trees.²¹

The two last lines quoted above associate fulfilment with... returning from self to the world, or even more, from the state of separation to union and from complication to simplicity present in the Beginning. In this way the meditative path turns out to be the path of return... which seems to be for Merton its primary goal. At the beginning of the spiritual journey this separation from the world and listening to silence the self devotes itself to solitude, in order to discover the roots of own spiritual identity by means of painful and long-lasting deprivation:

I’ve seen the root
Of all that believe.²²

¹⁹ Song: If you seek, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 340.

²⁰ How Long We Wait, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 90.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² All the Way Down, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 669.

which brings him a revelation of himself in God:

Stand in the unspoken.²³

The spiritual passage, marked with crises (“All the way down I thought I was the devil”, “they thought that I was gone forever that I was all the way in hell”) and gradual evolution in understanding silence as it is, in the end leads to personal reintegration:

I am all (here)
There!²⁴

which enables him to understand the generous song of creation where:

A yellow flower
(Light and spirit)
Sings without a word
By itself.²⁵

to join it:

By ceasing to question the sun
I have become light,
Bird and wind.
My leaves sing.
I am earth, earth²⁶

and to endure wordlessly in unity with Life, seen as the universal rule of Wholeness, to which he himself belongs with all his being:

²³ “Prologue,” 498.

²⁴ In reference to the poem a sense of time is an important element of this experience, a sense in which presence Now is the only thing of import. The title of this poem seems to refer to the Zen exercise practised to this end, namely one of careful, meditative walking that frees the awareness of focused at a given moment contact with own body and surface on which one is walking. The question ‘Why I have a Wet Footprint on top of My Mind’ is of koan-like nature – that of a phrase based on paradox, whose studying is to open to truth.

²⁵ Song for Nobody, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 337.

²⁶ O Sweet Irrational Worship, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 344.

I am earth, earth

All these lighted things
Grow from my heart.

[...]

My heart's love
Bursts with hay and flowers.²⁷

Need one say anything else? Is it proper to violate his silence with an untimely analysis, when Silence manifests itself to him as Word:

Let no one touch this gentle sun
In whose dark eye
Someone is awake.²⁸

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ *Song for Nobody*, in: *The Collected Poems*, p. 337.