

Poetry, Friendship and the Communion of Saints: Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz

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I came to Thomas Merton late, as a young professor in the English department at Loyola College (now Loyola University) in Maryland. I was foraging among my bookshelves, in search of my teaching copy of the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* (class was starting in five minutes), when a single photocopied sheet fluttered off the top shelf and onto the floor. It wasn't mine – it belonged to my office mate – and as I picked it up to stash it back where it came from, I paused. Printed on the page was a poem entitled “Elegy for the Monastery Barn,”¹ and beneath the poem was the author's name, Thomas Merton. I immediately forgot about the task at hand – *and* forgot about my class – as I was pulled into the world of this poem:

As though an aged person were to wear
Too gay a dress
And walk about the neighborhood
Announcing the hour of her death,

So now, one summer day's end,
At supertime, when wheels are still,
The long barn suddenly puts on the traitor, beauty,
And hails us with a dangerous cry,
For: “Look!” she calls to the country,
“Look how fast I dress myself in fire!” (ll. 1-10)

Here was a poem about a barn catching fire – a disastrous fire, for a farm, since all the tools and harvest are stored inside – but the poet turns this disaster into a sanctified moment, one of transformative, visionary beauty as this drab, ordinary building goes up in flames:

She will not have us near her. Terribly,
Sweet Christ, how terribly her beauty burns us now! (ll. 18-19)

Those lines singed me, for I, too, felt burnt – burnt by the beauty of Merton's poem, this sudden conflagration in my drab office. The paper was nearly too hot to hold. Beauty stopped me dead in my tracks, as beauty

1. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 288.

does and beauty will. By accident, I had made a discovery that would change the course of my life as a poet, as a scholar, and as a teacher: for I had read essays by Merton, and knew his reputation as a spiritual writer and social critic, but I didn't know he was a poet – and a damn good one, at that.

So began what I can only call an obsession – that summer I made a concentrated effort to obtain and read every poem Merton ever wrote – or, at least, as many as I could find. This reading of his poems spilled over into reading his prose about poetry, his critical essays on other poets (whose work I also sought out), and, perhaps most enjoyably, the letters he exchanged with other writers. I was steeping myself in Merton, marveling at how he managed it – to be a faithful Catholic and, at the same time, a serious artist who created work that seamlessly blended his art and his faith. For I, too, was a young poet and a Catholic – and I wanted to learn how to do what he had done.

One of the many things I discovered through this immersion was that Merton's faith and his art were not only inextricably linked – they flowed from the same fountain (to mix a metaphor). In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton confesses: "I had never been able to write verse before I became a Catholic. I had tried, but I had never really succeeded."² Seen through the eyes of his new faith, Merton perceived the world in a radically different way. In his essay "Poetry and Contemplation," Merton writes: "All good Christian poets are . . . contemplatives . . . they see God everywhere in His creation and in His mysteries, and behold the created world as filled with signs and symbols of God. To the true Christian poet, the whole world and all the incidents of life tend to be sacraments – signs of God, signs of His love working in the world."³ This distinctive, sacramental vision – what theologian David Tracy refers to as "The Analogical Imagination" in his book bearing that title⁴ – was fully apparent in Merton's work. *That* was the wonder of it. To such an imagination, the common sight of a barn catching fire could easily lead to a vision of the Holy of Holies, right there amid the flaming hay and the fleeing cows.

It is noteworthy that Merton's discovery of his vocation as poet coincides with his discovery of the true vocation of every Catholic – to become a saint. We might recall the wonderful exchange in *Seven Storey*

2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 235; subsequent references will be cited as "SSM" parenthetically in the text.

3. Thomas Merton, *Selected Essays*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (New York: Orbis, 2013) 30.

4. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

Mountain between Bob Lax and Merton just after his baptism: "What do you want to be?" Lax asks. Taken off guard, Merton replies, "I don't know; I guess what I want is to be a good Catholic," whereupon Lax rebukes him: "What you should say is that you want to be a saint!" Merton is shocked by this, but later, his mentor, Mark Van Doren, confirms Lax's corrective, humbling Merton, who miserably admits: "All these people . . . understood God better than I. . . . Why was I so slow?" (*SSM* 237-38).

So the paths of the poet and the saint converge for Merton. There is a kind of sanctity in both callings. Just a few months later, after leaving Columbia and entering the monastery of Gethsemani Abbey, Merton owns the belief that poets are akin to saints, writing these words in his journal: "What is the one thing all poets need to know? They need to be reminded of their nearness to the Saints, just as everybody has to be reminded of this. To do anything any good in the world, you have to renounce the world in order to do that thing: you have to love it and give it your whole life."⁵

Merton well knew the ancient reverence for poets as those who have a high and holy calling. The Old Testament prophets – Isaiah and Ezekiel, among others – are also poets, in possession of the uncanny ability both to *see* and to *speak* the truth that ordinary human beings don't have. This combination of vision and voice is what draws Merton to holy writ as well as to poetry. His spiritual mentors are David, Moses, Jesus and Saint Paul – but they are also Shakespeare, Dante, Blake and Hopkins.

Speaking of poets and prophets, that summer I became obsessed with Merton I also became obsessed, though a similar process of accident and serendipity, with Czeslaw Milosz. In digging through Merton's published letters, I discovered the ten-year-long correspondence Merton conducted with the Nobel-prize winning Polish poet, from 1958 through 1968, ending only with Merton's death. These letters, collected in a volume entitled *Striving towards Being*,⁶ were out of print – so instead of buying the book, I was forced go to the library, Xerox it, and create my own bootleg copy. What I discovered then, and rediscover every time I reread them, is how charming these letters and these two writers are. Struck by admiration for his work, Merton seeks out Milosz, a giant of international fame, a towering intellect, and a dark unhappy Pole exiled from his homeland and forced, eventually, to live in the United States, a frivolous, shamelessly

5. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 419 [10/1/1941]; subsequent references will be cited as "RM" parenthetically in the text.

6. Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz, *Striving towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. Robert Faggen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997); subsequent references will be cited as "STB" parenthetically in the text.

consumer culture that makes both him and Merton miserable. They quickly discover they have much in common. The salutations on their letters, alone, reveals the speed with which their relationship deepened, beginning with “Dear Mr. Milosz” and “Dear Mr. Merton,” then quickly advancing to “My Dear Milosz” and “My Dear Merton,” ultimately morphing into the most intimate greeting of all, “Dear Milosz” and “Dear Merton,” a plain form of address which goes to the core of each man’s identity.

Merton had a special penchant for friendship. This was true during his Columbia days, and it continued to be true in the monastery. In fact, because of his isolation, he eventually discovered the need for friends to be greater than ever. After his intense solitude of the 1940s and early 1950s, after he first entered the monastery, he felt the need to be more involved in the world he had seemingly left outside the gates of the abbey. He sought and established an “apostolate of friendship” during the 1950s, carrying on correspondence with civil rights leaders, activists, intellectuals and artists of every stamp.⁷ This correspondence and these friendships fed Merton as a thinker and as a writer. Paradoxically, the artist needs solitude for the act of creation, but he also needs a sense of community with his readership and his fellow artists in order to flourish.

His friendship with Milosz surpassed most of his epistolary friendships in intensity and depth. Merton writes on May 6, 1960, “I enjoy writing to you and hearing from you in return . . . I value the sound of your voice and appreciate highly anything you say.” For “friendship is the first and most important thing, and is the true cement of the Church built by Christ” (*STB* 76). They corresponded about many subjects – philosophy, theology, politics – but what I find most revealing about these men as artists are their conversations about poetry.

Merton, along with his poetic master, Blake, believed that all good poetry “was ‘dictated by angels’” (*RM* 36 [10/1/1939]). It opened the door to the visionary, that liminal space in which one could see “the signs of God’s love working in the world.” For Milosz, however, poetry is a means of bearing witness to the horrors of the world, both on the micro and the macro level – of depicting a world seemingly abandoned by God, in love with violence and governed by chaos rather than some hidden order. Given his own distance from his faith for much of his life, Milosz certainly thought of poetry as a high calling, but not necessarily a holy one. He was too mired in reality for that – too aware of his own sins and excesses – and, unlike Merton, not convinced that God was the source of

7. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 482 [November 1958 letter to Pope John XXIII].

his poetic insight. The poet may well be a prophet, but he may as easily be in league with the devil as he is with the Almighty.

These great differences between the two men made for a lively, intense and sometimes fractious friendship. I think of Emerson here, who once described a friend as “a kind of beautiful enemy.”⁸ But I also think of Blake, who believed, along with Merton, “Without contraries is no progression.”⁹ Merton knew he needed the dark, doubtful vision Milosz offered him – perhaps as a counterbalance to his own hopeful, faith-filled one. Despite Milosz’s doubts, however, Merton saw him as a kind of saint-in-the-making – a dark one, perhaps – Luciferian in spirit, at times – but enormously gifted and devoted to his art. They are in fact foils, counterpoints to one another – the two halves necessary to the whole.

My summer of Milosz and Merton was rich. After reading all of Merton’s poems – and these letters – I read all of Milosz’s poems that had been translated into English. Their voices were in my head constantly, it seemed, amiably arguing with one another, endlessly quoting the chapter and verse of their own poems. It was a kind of haunting, albeit a happy one. And then, as a poet, I realized what I had to do: to perform a kind of benign exorcism, to get them out of *my* consciousness and, hopefully, into someone else’s. And so was born the poem “The Conversation.”

Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz met briefly in a restaurant in San Francisco in October of 1968, two months before Merton’s untimely death. They had met only once before, at Gethsemani Abbey in September of 1964. I wanted to know what that face-to-face encounter might have been like, after so many years of epistolary – or virtual – intimacy. How I longed to be a fly on that wall.

Of course, there is no record of their conversation – so I had to invent it. “The Conversation” tells the story of that meeting, imagining the exchange between the two men. It falls into six parts, each section devoted to the courses of the imaginary meal they share. Most importantly, the words are not mine: they are taken almost entirely from poems by Merton and Milosz – a few others come from poets Merton admired.¹⁰ It is, in some sense, a found poem – bright swatches of thought cut out and stitched together with the thread of my own few words in order to create

8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Essay VI: Friendship,” *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983) 351.

9. William Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1988) 33.

10. Brief passages are taken from William Blake, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman; the phrases “Multiplicity my delight, your despair” and “Multiplicity your delight, my despair” in section IV are adapted from Denise Levertov’s poem “On a Theme by Thomas Merton.”

out of these poetic patches a new garment – one that I hope is sturdy and will wear well.

It seems appropriate to conclude this account of my ongoing encounter with these two great poets by presenting the poem they inspired. It has been said that the best testament to an artist's excellence is that his/her art inspires the making of *new* art – art, which, in turn, breathes new life into the original work, keeping it present to our memories and our minds. Merton's and Milosz's poems continue to generate imaginative life, even decades after their deaths. Part pastiche, part paean, and part homage, "The Conversation" offers some small testimony to that miraculous fact.¹¹

The Conversation¹²

Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz met briefly in a restaurant in San Francisco in October of 1968, two months before Merton's untimely death. They met only once before, at Gethsemani Abbey in September of 1964. The many letters they exchanged during their ten years of correspondence have survived. There is no record of their last conversation.

"Friendship is the most important thing, and it is the true cement of the Church built by Christ."

Thomas Merton

"I am not my own friend.
Time cuts me in two."

Czeslaw Milosz

"Opposition is true friendship."

William Blake

I. The Saints Select a Booth by the Window Overlooking the Bay

Against the solitary gulls,
the seal lions with scepters on rocky thrones,
two enormous men in ordinary bodies
stride the hills, hungry for food that feeds
holy the imperishable heart.

11. An earlier version of this article was presented on January 31, 2015 at Corpus Christi Church in Manhattan as part of the centenary celebration of the birth of Thomas Merton, sponsored by Corpus Christi Parish and the Corpus Christi Chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society.

12. Angela Alaimo O'Donnell, "The Conversation," *Saint Sinatra & Other Poems* (Cincinnati: Word Press, 2011) 41-47.

*To see a world in a grain of sand,
where Christ plays in ten thousand places,
each sets forth a foot and hand,
finds letters from God dropt in the street.*

They stop before an open door, a sign
(*I am only a man: I need visible signs*)
and enter full of Dante's hope
despite the world's unwritten directive.

II. The Saints Order from the Menu, a la Carte

It is the Walt Whitman of menus.
Oil of olive, flesh of pig, raspberry-seeded sauce.
(*All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine.*)

The monk eyes the reluctant epicure.
I love beer and, by that very fact, the world.

He gives him that only-a-Trappist-would-say-so
look and orders vodka. Straight and cold.
*I have been devouring the world in vain
For fifty years, a thousand would not be enough.*

Breast of duck, leg of lamb, tender capon thigh.
*No one can accuse me of being without joy
Of not noticing girls who pass by.*

Radiccio, Arugula, Swiss Chard.
It's been a year since he loved the woman
As a man loves a woman.
Of this a holy poet cannot speak.

Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding.
It is man's nature to tire of his nature.
*Yes, I would like to be a poet of the five senses,
That's why I don't allow myself to become one.*

At home, the monks enter, *robes voluble as water.*
*Each one can sit at table with his own lemon,
And mind his conscience.*
Of this a holy poet may speak.

He nods his head and throws back his vodka.
Yes, thought has less weight than the word lemon.
That's why in my words I do not reach for fruit.

III. Grace

*So what kind of prophet am I?
Why should the spirit have visited
such a man as I've been made?
Why this Catholic need to confess myself
to every priest I find? Including you.*

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

My pen a knife against my heart
unrelenting against forgetting,
a hostage of my memory,
I sing myself bound and free.

*Who would dare to go nameless in the universe?
Yet, to tell truth, only the nameless are at home.
They bear with them in the center of nowhere
the unborn flower of nothing.
This is the paradise tree.*

He made me Milosz, you Merton,
and neither of us home
and sent us on a pilgrimage to find it.
*We have seen on our way and fallen in love
With the world that will pass in a twinkling.
The maker loves the maker and the made.*

IV. Meat (Cheese for the Trappist)

Multiplicity my delight, your despair.
*In the very essence of poetry there is something indecent:
a thing is brought forth which we didn't know we had in us,
so we blink our eyes, as if a tiger had sprung out
and stood in the light, lashing his tail.*

Multiplicity your delight, my despair.
*Prayer is the study of Art.
Praise is the practice of Art.
Poems the language of angels we speak.
(Sweet Christ, discover diamonds
And sapphires in my verse.*

*I hang thy rubies on these autumn trees,
On the bones of the homegoing thunder.)*

Multiplicity my delight, your despair.
*Poetry is rightly said to be dictated
By a daimonion, and the poet
A houseful of demons speaking in many tongues.
A language of angels!
Mind that you do not deceive yourself and others.
What comes from my evil—that only is true.*

Multiplicity your delight, my despair.
A poem, the intuition of perfection
resembles the soul in mystical prayer.
It is still. It is one.

Multiplicity my delight, your despair.
*The purpose of poetry is to remind us
how difficult it is to remain just one person.
Invisible guests leave and enter our house at will.
The best we can do is to hope that good spirits,
not evil ones, choose us for their instrument.*

V. Des(s)ert

*My Lord, I loved strawberry jam
And the dark sweetness of a woman's body.
And yet I cannot touch the center.
"You will never know what I feel," she said,
"Because you are filling me and are not filled."*

I am only filled when I am empty.
*I am the utter poverty of God.
I am his littleness, nothingness, lostness.
A self-emptying of God in me
forgets the pull of pleasure
receives the fullness of Grace.
Sometimes in quiet.
Once with electrifying force.*

*Sure, women have only one, Catholic, soul,
but we have two, Dionysus's and Christ's,
one forever filling, one forever full,
a poet and a man, I live between lives.*

There is no now but only always.
Time is but a stream I go a-fishing in.
Casting in the shallows and reeling in stars.
Living in the nick of eternity.

**VI. The Saints Depart through the Main Entrance,
Each in His Own Good Time**

A folded napkin, an empty glass
crumbs arranged in concentric rings,
the monk has left his mark on the silence.

In two months time (no, not so much as two)
he will have left the world as well. (*Terribly,*
Sweet Christ, how terribly his beauty burns us now!)

How slowly this bell tolls
in a monastery tower
for the death of a man
and of that brave illusion:
the adventurous self
from whom he sought escape in an abbey.

Slowly Milosz gathers up his belongings,
well-earned honors, several decades' worth of poems,
preparing to leave it all behind him.
This. Which signifies knocking against a stone wall
and knowing that the wall will not yield.

Soon he, too, will arise and go
through the entrance that leads to the sea
in the general direction of *Heaven*
where it must be there as it is here,
except that we will be rid of our dull senses
and our heavy heavy bones.
Changed into pure seeing
We will absorb as before
The proportions, the color, a Paris street,
all of it (as ever) incomprehensible,
incomprehensible
the multitude of (in)visible things!