PETISCO, Sonia, *Thomas Merton's Poetics of Self-Dissolution*, Foreword by Peter Ellis (Valencia, Spain: Publicacions de la Universitat de Valencia, 2016), pp. 178. ISBN: 978-84-370-9924-8 (paper) $15.00.

Sonia Petisco Martínez wrote her doctoral dissertation on Thomas Merton's poetry[1] and is an accomplished translator of Merton's poetry into her native Spanish.[2] Her recent book *Thomas Merton's Poetics of Self-Dissolution* is a collection of eight previously published essays (all but two originating as conference presentations either in Spain or in the United Kingdom) on various aspects of Merton's poetic corpus, along with an Introduction (17-22), a chronology of Merton's works (23-26), an appendix transcribing her interviews with Merton scholar George Kilcourse of Bellarmine University and with monk-poet and former Merton novice Paul Quenon, OCSO (165-72) and a reference bibliography (173-78), as well as an appreciative Foreword by British Merton scholar Peter Ellis (13-15). Issued in conjunction with the centenary of Merton's birth by the University of Valencia's "Biblioteca Javier Coy d'Estudis Nord-Americans" (available in America through Amazon), this collection makes her insightful and at times provocative discussions of various aspects of Merton's poetic corpus more readily available to a wider audience.

In her Introduction, the author explains that her title refers to the common focus throughout her essays that considers the ways in which his poetry "clearly shows how the quest for self-detachment and mystical communion with the divine is indeed at the center of Merton's spirituality and political concerns" (18). Her principal thesis is that the "entire body of Thomas Merton's poetry can be thought of as a poetics of dissolution: the dissolution of the old corrupt world full of pointless slaughters in favour of an apocalyptic vision of a new world; abstract categorizations of the supernatural giving way to a more direct, humanized and intimate experience of the sacred at home in the world; and above all, a fading away of the false self in the light of the true self in Christ" (18) – though the essays, like her title, perhaps place more emphasis on the dissolution of the false self than on the discovery and recovery of the underlying true self in Christ (better expressed as "God is in me" and "I am in God" than as the misleading – perhaps inadvertently misprinted – statement that "Merton claimed that God is me and that I am God" [19]).

---

1. Sonia Petisco, *La Poesia de Thomas Merton: Creación, Critica y Contemplación* (Madrid: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2004).

2. Thomas Merton, *Oh Corazón Ardiente: Poemas de Amor y de Disidencia*, trans. Sonia Petisco (Madrid: Trotta, 2015).

The first three chapters reprint pieces originally composed for Spanish audiences and are clearly intended for those with at best a limited previous acquaintance with Merton's poetry. The first of these, "Thomas Merton's Poetic Evolution from World's Denial to an Experience of Universal Love" (27-37), surveying the entire corpus of Merton's verse in eleven pages, is necessarily a quite compressed overview of his poetic career. It includes certain imprecisions,[3] particularly the assumption (27-28) that Merton's first volume of poetry is *Early Poems (1940-1942)*, when in fact, though printed first in the *Collected Poems*,[4] this collection actually appeared posthumously in 1971,[5] and is a further selection of mainly pre-monastic poems contemporaneous with those found in *Thirty Poems*[6] and the first half of *A Man in the Divided Sea*,[7] Merton's first two published volumes of verse. This article is particularly helpful in showing how *The Strange Islands*[8] from 1957 was a key volume in making the transition from a more judgmental attitude toward the secular world to the compassionate identification with struggles for justice, peace and human dignity that marked Merton's writing both in prose and in verse during the final decade of his life (though not all would agree with the author's statement that "the book cannot boast of a deep lyricism or a formal complexity" [33], particularly with reference to "Elias – Variations on a Theme," certainly one of Merton's greatest poems and one that articulates most powerfully the change in attitude toward the world).

Chapter 2, "'O Sweet Escape! O Smiling Flight!': Commentaries on a Selection of Poems by Thomas Merton" (39-56), was originally presented in Spanish at the October 2006 Merton conference held in Avila. The commentaries, of varying length (ranging from almost an entire page for the early poem "Hymn of Not much Praise for New York City" [42-43] to a

---

3. There are a number of relatively minor chronological inaccuracies: "Lent in a Year of War," written in 1941, refers to World War II, not to the American Civil War (29); there is no reference in "Aubade: Lake Erie" (1940) to inviting "soldiers who take part in the war to be aware of the sun . . . identified with Christ" (30); "An Argument: Of the Passion of Christ" and "The Flight [in]to Egypt" were pre-monastic poems, and even "The Trappist Abbey: Matins" was written at the time of Merton's Holy Week 1941 retreat at Gethsemani rather than after his return in December to join the order (30).

4. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 1-24; subsequent references will be cited as "*CP*" parenthetically in the text.

5. Thomas Merton, *Early Poems: 1940-1942* (Lexington, KY: Anvil Press, 1971).

6. Thomas Merton, *Thirty Poems* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1944); *CP* 25-57.

7. Thomas Merton, *A Man in the Divided Sea* (New York: New Directions, 1946); *CP* 59-131.

8. Thomas Merton, *The Strange Islands* (New York: New Directions, 1957); *CP* 223-90.

single sentence on "Night-Flowering Cactus" [54]) originally served to introduce the author's translations of nine of Merton's poems and are more effective in that context than simply accompanying the original English texts that constitute about half the article as found here.[9]

The third chapter, "Thomas Merton's Antipoetry: A Revolution in Language and Thought" (57-64), provides a brief overview of Merton's two final published volumes of verse, the book-length sequences *Cables to the Ace*[10] and *The Geography of Lograire*.[11] It was originally presented at a conference on American Poetry at the University of Salamanca in 2000, and its length was presumably determined by the limitations of the usual "concurrent session" timeframe. It focuses particularly on the issue of language, its manipulation and its distortions, illustrated by apposite passages from *Cables*; the two brief pages on *Lograire*, largely given over to quotation of "Why I Have a Wet Footprint on the Top of My Mind," the lyrical prologue introducing the second, "North" canto of the poem, provide a helpful summary of the meaning of the title, particularly the connection of "Lograire" with "Logos" – word (and Word) – but do not go on to consider how, or whether, this quite different encounter with language is also to be considered as antipoetry.

The next three chapters all consist of presentations made at the biennial meetings of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, thus for audiences more conversant with Merton and his work. "Silence as the Path to Joy in the Poetry of Thomas Merton and T. S. Eliot" (65-89), from the 2014 conference, is the longest and most thoroughly developed essay in the volume. While referencing Merton's appreciation for Eliot's work, it does not explore the influence of the older poet on the younger or investigate larger formal and structural patterns, but considers common themes and images and a shared spiritual sensibility as evidenced in illustrative passages from the mature works of each author. The apparent deadness of winter as symbol of a period of unrecognized spiritual growth is found both in Eliot's "Little Gidding" (last of the *Four Quartets*) and in Merton's "Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing" (69-71); a passage from "The Dry Salvages" shares with "O Sweet Irrational Worship" a

9. Both the original Spanish text and this English version are found in the bilingual conference proceedings volume: Fernando Beltrán Llavador and Paul M. Pearson, eds., *Seeds of Hope: Thomas Merton's Contemplative Message / Semillas de Esperanza: El Mensaje Contemplativo de Thomas Merton* (Cobreces: Cistercium-Ciem, 2008) 61-79; 65-84.

10. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968); *CP* 393-454.

11. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969); *CP* 455-609.

vision of the salutary loss of self through appreciation of and communion with the natural world (71-72); the apophatic embrace of darkness and emptiness is found in "East Coker," with its paraphrase of St. John of the Cross, and in the citation of Meister Eckhart in *Cables to the Ace* (75-79); the intrinsic connection between silence and innocence, above all the innocence of the child, is traced in passages from three of the *Four Quartets* and in Merton's "Grace's House" (79-83); the limitations of language are repeatedly confronted by Eliot in the *Quartets* and "Ash Wednesday" and by Merton in *The Tower of Babel*, *Cables* and "Elias" (83-88). "After having approached Eliot's and Merton's poetry with their significant recurrence of superb imagery and themes," Petisco writes,

> we can conclude by saying that they both regarded silence as the place of self abandonment and true communion with the divine beyond the imprisonment of their own egos. . . . It is in . . . the freedom of human knowledge and the freedom of one's own self conformed by that knowledge – that both poets found a true source of joy and action: the joy of unknowing, the radical openness of wonder and exploration of the endless possibilities of life and art. (89)

What is particularly remarkable in this perceptive discussion is that the author presents Merton as quite capable of "holding his own" artistically in this series of juxtaposed passages, and her selection and comments on the two poets' work make a plausible case that, at least in this context, Merton's poetry does not suffer unduly by comparison.

This article is followed by a much shorter and considerably earlier comparative study, "Recovering Our Innocence: The Influence of William Blake on the Poetry of Thomas Merton" (91-101) from the 1998 conference. Along with a brief summary of Merton's early contact with Blake's work, including his 1938 Columbia master's thesis, the essay considers ways in which Merton appropriates such well-selected Blakean themes as the "Religious Transfiguration of Reality," "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: Going Beyond the Opposites," "Finding the Extraordinary in the Ordinary: A Sapiential Vision," "A Search for the Original Unity: Love" and "Freedom and Love: Recovering Our Innocence." These subsections are all suggestive, but vary in the amount of detailed discussion provided: on the first of these topics (91-94), for example, an extensive passage from Merton's poem "Stranger" is juxtaposed with two brief quotations from Blake, while in the following section (94-95) two stanzas from Blake's "Night" are followed only by a brief excerpt from one of Merton's adaptations from Chuang Tzu. More evenly matched are the parallel passages in the two final segments from "The Little Black Boy" and

"Freedom and Experience" (97-98) and from "Infant Joy" and "Grace's House" (99-100). Though "Elias" is briefly quoted (99), no mention is made of the fact that Merton makes prominent use of lines from Blake's "Jerusalem" in the second section of that poem, nor that the first section of *Cables to the Ace* concludes with the words: "We assist once again at the marriage of heaven and hell" – borrowed from Blake's volume that provides the title of the article's second subsection. Although presented at a Merton Society conference, this essay resembles the first three chapters more than the immediately preceding one in that it provides a rather basic introductory overview more attuned to the needs of an audience at least somewhat unfamiliar with the topic under discussion.

Chapter 6, entitled "Thomas Merton's World Discourse: Economic Globalization vs Religious Universality" (103-28), is a joint presentation from 2002 by Fernando Beltrán Llavador (a distinguished Spanish Merton scholar who had been Petisco's thesis supervisor [21]) and Petisco herself. Though both parts are very fine, the first section (103-17), largely taken up with Merton's contemplative critique of technology and what has come to be called globalization, seems somewhat out of place here, and while its discussion of Merton's analysis of the misuse of language is certainly relevant to poetry, the connection remains implicit. It might have been preferable simply to provide a fairly brief synopsis of this material and move on more quickly to what is evidently Petisco's contribution (117-28), a thorough and enlightening discussion of Merton's poem "With the World in My Bloodstream," the first of the *Eighteen Poems* written in 1966 about his brief romantic relationship with the student nurse generally known as M. She provides a smooth transition from the first to the second section by suggesting that "By the time he wrote the poem Merton seemed to have reached or to be on the verge of reaching a global and transcendental vision of reality beyond false divisions," and adding: "Needless to say that the unity alluded by Merton differs greatly from any of the notions fostered by the advocates of 'economic globalization' viewed as the current process of marketization of the world and the set of pseudo-theological arguments which seek to legitimate it" (117). She includes pertinent biographical background for the text (for example the fact that the reference to "the Chicago plane" in the poem's fifth section [l. 47] alludes to M.'s trip to that city over Easter vacation in 1966 [118 n. 46]) and goes on to provide an excellent close reading of the entire poem, stressing the "continuum between the physical condition of the individual narrator and a cosmic perspective" (119), as Merton's post-operative period of continued vulnerability becomes a kind of objective correlative not only for his own self-emptying but for an openness to the

brokenness of the world. She notes the influence of Meister Eckhart's concept of "absolute poverty" (124) and summarizes: "in that difficult situation in hospital, Merton had an experience of true void, solitude, poverty, or desert, and he lived the within and the beyond of this nothingness as a source of rich inexhaustible possibilities. . . . By overcoming his alienation from the inmost ground of his identity, he reached a fresh awareness of his true self, as hidden in the ground of Love" (both human and divine) (125-26). Circling back to the shared focus of both parts of the presentation, she affirms that Merton's vision of unity is not one of soulless globalization but of "a communion of hearts that share the same love for the living truth" (127). This analysis truly recognizes and responds to the sapiential insight at the heart of this important poem in the Merton canon.

Perhaps the most fascinating essay in the entire volume is "Translation as Recreation: The Case of Thomas Merton" (129-49), the text of a 2004 presentation at the University of Zaragoza, which both summarizes current scholarly controversies on translation theory and illustrates her own conviction of both the validity and necessity of literary translation by providing four examples from her own extensive body of translations of Merton's poetry. While most accessible to readers with some fluency in Spanish, the essay (unlike that reprinted in chapter 2) includes both the original English text and the corresponding translations, and provides sufficient concrete commentary to make her challenges and her responses clear even to those unable to compare the versions on their own. She sees effective translation as both the product and a part of the process of attentive reading, and recognizes that a "definitive" reading is neither possible nor desirable – rejecting Nabokov's demand for "absolute fidelity" (132) to the original text as too confining and inevitably unfaithful to the living reality of the new language into which the poem is rendered. It is an act of authentic "re-creation" (the lack of a hyphen in the title of the article providing an intriguing if unintended suggestion of additional meaning – translation as a sort of play). She notes particular instances where a more literal or a more free rendition seems preferable, where alteration of syntax provides a smoother reading and/or a clearer meaning, where the demands of sound as well as sense need to be taken into account. In two of the four examples that she provides, she makes available not only her own translations but those of Merton's friend and former novice, the Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal, pointing out both her reasons for different word choices and some of the variations between continental Spanish and that of Latin America. Not every word choice may be completely satisfactory (she seems unaware, in one instance, that

"morning-glory" in the poem "The Harmonies of Excess" is the name of a flower and thus perhaps impossible to be rendered successfully by a Spanish equivalent [141]) but her translations reveal her to be a very thoughtful, perceptive, sensitive and masterful interpreter – in both senses of the word – of Merton's poetry, performing an invaluable service in making much of it available to a Spanish-speaking audience.

The final chapter, "Sophia, the Unknown, the Dark, the Nameless: Questioning the Male-Female Dichotomy through Thomas Merton's Poetry" (151-64), originally written for *Universal Vision*, the British *Merton Journal*'s expanded issue of reflections by European scholars for the centenary of Merton's birth,[12] is the most challenging and controversial essay in this book. It considers Merton's prose-poem *Hagia Sophia* (for some unexplained reason referred to as a "mysterious lyrical fragment" [151]) in the context of the "ceaseless search for the reconciliation of the masculine and feminine poles," an effort that the author implies in the previous sentence, with its reference to "that incurable wound that constitutes the male-female dichotomy" (151), can never be fully successful. Sure enough, while she finds in Merton's meditation on Sophia, the figure of Wisdom in Proverbs and elsewhere, "that powerful spiritual *locus* of personal and communal transformation where the *sexus* or separation between the male and female sides is transcended, and where true Love and Communion become possible *utopias*" (152-53), ultimately she questions the identification of Sophia with the "abstract concept of 'God'" (158) and with the human person of Christ – rejecting any specification of "the unknown, the dark, the nameless" Sophia, particularly one that "becomes objectivized in gender binaries as soon as she reflects on herself" (160). Petisco champions a radical apophaticism that renounces all particularities, and proposes that in *Hagia Sophia* Merton "fails to escape from the theological discourse he as Christian has inherited, and, he ends up inserting Wisdom in too human a paradigm which turns 'I,' the Speaker, the intelligent, into a God or a human person" (161) (a rather puzzling statement as Sophia herself is never the speaker in the poem). She imaginatively calls on Merton "to free himself from the need to sustain such concepts as God, Mother, Father, Son, Man, etc. . . which are being imposed upon that initial Wisdom that was and is bare of all names and free from any kind of human division" (162-63). In this final discussion Petisco seems to be advocating a "self-dissolution" that dissolves the actor into pure act, the speaker into "the act of speaking" (161), that sets the

12. *Universal Vision: A Centenary Celebration of Thomas Merton – European Perspectives from* The Merton Journal, ed. Fiona Gardner, Keith Griffin and Peter Ellis, *The Merton Journal* 21.2 (Advent 2014) 99-116.

apophatic over against the cataphatic, that recognizes a "pure simplicity" (162) beyond all limitations imposed by language and concepts. While not every reader will be willing to accompany the author to the ultimate point of her critique here, her examination of the poem and its implications invites a salutary reexamination of presuppositions and conclusions about the relationship of wisdom on its most profound level to all efforts to articulate that wisdom without distorting it.

In his Foreword to this volume, Peter Ellis alerts the reader to Sonia Petisco's consistent effort in the chapters that follow to respond to Merton's poetry in a way that is "not simply scholarly enquiry" but that is "dedicated to changing the damaged and damaging thought structures of the modern world itself" (15). This collection of essays, he suggests, finds its "depth and meaning" in continued engagement with issues that were important to Merton and remain important today, "concerns with violence and war, with racism, with cruelty" (14), as viewed through the lens of worship and contemplation. "Their author's reaction to our world condition is not simply to point out its lies, as Merton did, but to follow him in seeking for seeds of hope, newness and change" (14). This thoughtful and stimulating volume provides evidence that these seeds of contemplation and wise action first sown by Merton more than a half-century ago continue to germinate and put forth fresh shoots in our own day.

Patrick F. O'Connell

PAULSELL,William Oliver, ed., *Merton & the Protestant Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2016), pp. vii + 200. ISBN 978-1-891785-74-0 (paper) $25.

Merton and the Protestant Tradition is the sixth volume in the Fons Vitae Thomas Merton series, a project that seeks to study the "world religions through the lens of Thomas Merton's life and writing" (x). The project is ambitious and important. Merton thought the study of other religious traditions should be an engaged discipline, one that seeks "to introduce into our study of the humanities a dimension of *wisdom* oriented to contemplation as well as to wise action."[1] In other words, he thought the study of world religions should not only inform but also transform students in their relationship to God and the world. His perspective and example is sorely needed in our universities and in the world today. My own experience bears witness to this: I was first introduced to Merton as an undergraduate student at the University of Calgary in a course on religious

1. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 80.