

WHY THE BLIND LION CRIES

— by Anthony G. Banet, Ph.D.
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(Editor's Note: Interest in Thomas Merton at Bellarmine College and by the members of the college community is a strong tradition. One of the earliest student productions is this twenty-five year old essay on Merton, written by sophomore **Tony Banet**. It was published in *THE FLAGON*, then the literary magazine of the College, in 1957. The title refers to Merton's fourth published book of poetry, *THE TEARS OF THE BLIND LIONS* (New York, New Directions, 1949). The article is copyrighted by Bellarmine College and is reprinted with the permission of Dr. Banet.

Dr. Banet wrote to Robert E. Daggy: "I am very happy that you want to use "Why the Blind Lion Cries" in the Merton Seasonal. Please do so. I re-read the essay and it brought back many pleasant memories of Merton, Gethsemani and Bellarmine." Dr. Banet now lives in San Diego, California, and is currently a member of the faculty of the School of Human Behavior, United States International University.)

There are many kinds of poetry, and each individual may have a personal concept of poetry. Poetry may be printed words locked in a volume, or poetry may be the click of engine wheels on a railroad track or the murmur of autumn leaves in some forgotten forest. There is poetry everywhere for those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

Poetry always has a meaning. To some, poetry means only a clever combination of rhyming words that delights or interests for a moment, and then fades. To some, poetry is a method of advertising, as in cigarette commercials or on Burma Shave signs along the highways. And to others, poetry means an experience to be lived and breathed as life itself. To these, poetry is life, and life without poetry is death.

All poetry has a purpose, and all true poetry has the same two-fold purpose. The natural, essential purpose of poetry is to represent truth, and to cause delight in the knowledge and experience of representation. The extraneous, extrinsic purpose of poetry is to make men dispose to acquire virtue and to avoid vice. Poetry, by fulfilling these purposes, brings a rational order into the irrational complexity of the lives of men.

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, is a modern poet with a message. Most of Merton's poetry has been published in the last decade. He is, like most poets, individual in his style and method of presentation. A study of his style and the beautiful ways in which he uses poetic devices would be interesting, but that is a labor for the dilettante, not the simple layman. The author will attempt merely to discover the meaning and purpose of the verse of Thomas Merton.

The best way, and probably the only way, obviously enough, to find the meaning behind a group of poems is to read them and analyze the feelings and impressions received after reading. Merton discusses the problem of poems and their meaning:

... Poems have a meaning—although the poet has no obligation to make his meaning clear to anyone who does not make an effort to discover it. But to say that poems have a meaning is not to say that they must necessarily convey practical information or an explicit message.

In poetry, words are charged with meaning in a far different way than are the words in a piece of scientific prose. The words of a poem are not merely signs of concepts: they are also rich in affective and spiritual associations. The poet uses words not merely to make declarations, statements of facts. That is usually the last thing that concerns him. He seeks above all to put words together in such a way that they exercise a mysterious and vital reactivity among themselves, and so release their secret content of associations to produce in the reader an experience that enriches the depths of his spirit in a manner quite unique.

A good poem induces an experience that could not be produced by any other combination of words.² It is therefore an entity that stands by itself, graced with an individuality that marks it off from every other work of art. Like all great works of art, true poems seem to live by a life entirely their own.

Merton's poetry is a many-faceted thing. His subjects are not confined or limited; he is catholic and cosmopolitan in his range. He writes of the contemplative life and rivers, of history and saints, of nature and his own personal feelings. But always does he write about God and the things of God, "the one subject that is truly worthy of a Christian poet." Throughout the lines of his verse, one meaning is repeated and repeated until it sounds as clear as a bell-clap: only in the contemplative life can man find the God he is searching for. Through his verse, Merton wishes to "call men from the Christless avenues, the walls of traffic, to share with him the blessings of contemplative prayer."

Because Thomas Merton is a religious and a member of a contemplative order, and since his message concerns the contemplative life, it may seem reasonable and logical to assume that his poetry is for his fellow Trappists, and that there is little or no meaning for anyone outside the walls. A first glance at his poetry would seem to confirm this, for Merton's similes and metaphors are frequently built around circumstances known primarily in the cloisters.

But to say poetry must be restricted to a certain group or section of readers contradicts the essential nature of poetry. Poetry must be universal, something for everyone in the world, because poetry is essentially a form of truth and truth is universal.

Although Merton's implicit message is present in a large number of his poems, several which convey his meaning most clearly are presented. First, he advises a departure from the world:

... Fly away
 From the city full of sulphur
 From the wide walks where antichrist
 Slips us his cruel snare.
 The dawn bides like a basilisk
 In the doors of the Frankenstein building,
 And the cops come down the street in fours
 With clubs as loud as bells.

Time, time, to go to the terminal
 And make the escaping train
 With eyes as bright as palaces
 And thoughts like nightingales.
 It is the hour to fly without passports
 From Juda to the mountains,
 And hide while cities turn to butter
 For fear of the secret bomb.
 We'll arm for our own invisible battle
 In the wells of the pathless wood
 Wounding our limbs with prayers and Lent
 Shooting the traitor memory
 And throwing away our guns—
 And learning to fight like Gideon's men
 Hiding our light in jugs.



TONY BANET
 1959



DR. ANTHONY G. BANET
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Merton gives several reasons for a withdrawal from the world. One of them is the threat of nuclear destruction:

. . . When the hot globe
Shrivels and cracks
And uninhibited atoms resolve
Earth and water, fruit and flower, body and animal soul,
All the blue stars come tumbling down.
Beauty and ugliness and love and hate
Wisdom and politics are all alike undone.

For the other reason he frequently tells of the joys of the contemplative life. He narrates the feeling of escape:

But in the dazzled, high and unelectric air
Seized in the talons of the terrible Dove
The huge unwounding Spirit
We suddenly escape the drag of earth
Fly from the dizzy paw of gravity
And swimming in the wind that lies beyond the track
Of thought and genius and desire.

The happiness of the contemplative's solitude:

. . . Silence is louder than a cyclone
In the rude door, my shelter.
And there I eat my air alone
With pure and solitary songs
While others sit in conference.

. . . Thus I live on my own land, on my own island
And speak to God, under the doorway
With rain, (sings light) rain has devoured my house
And winds wade through my trees.

Again, the contemplative's feeling about his state:

. . . And I go forth with no more wine and no more stars
And no more buds and no more Eden
And no more animals and no more sea:
While God sings by Himself in acres of night
And walls fall down, that guarded paradise.

Merton speaks of his personal satisfaction with his chosen way of life, and of his new home at the Abbey of Gethsemani. This poem seems to express best the way he feels about the contemplative life:

This holy House of God,
Nazareth, where Christ lived as a boy,
These sheds and cloisters,
The very stones and beams are all befriended
By cleaner sun, by rarer birds, by lovelier flowers.

Lost in the tigers' and the lions' wilderness,
More than we fear, we love these holy stones,
These thorns, the phoenix's sweet and spikey tree.

More than we fear, we love this holy desert,
Where separate strangers, hid in their disguises,
Have come to meet, by night, the quiet Christ.

We who have some time wandered in those crowded ruins,
(Farewell, you woebegone, sad towns)
We who have wandered like (the ones I hear) the moaning
trains,
(Begone, sad towns!)
We'll live it over for you here.

Here all your ruins are rebuilt as fast as you destroy
yourselves,
In your unlucky wisdom,
Here in the house of God
And on the holy hill,
Where fields are the friends of plenteous heaven,
While starlight feeds, as bright as manna,
All our rough earth with wakeful grace.

And look, the ruins have become Jeruselems
And the sick cities re-arise, like shining Sions!
Jeruselems, these walls and rooves
These bowers and fragrant sheds,
Our desert's wooden door,
The arches, and the windows, and the tower!

The glorious climax to a contemplative's life is the meeting with God. In the next excerpt, Merton
reveals the fruits of the long, hard labor:

. . . Mother Church's hidden children—
Those who by vow lie buried in the cloister or the hermitage,
The speechless Trappist, or the grey, granite Cartheusan,
The quiet Carbelite, the barefoot Clare,
Planted in the night of contemplation,
Sealed in the dark waiting to be born.

Night if our diocese and silence is our ministry
Poverty our charity and helplessness our tongue-tied
sermon.
Beyond the scope of sight or sound we dwell upon the air
Seeking the world's gain in an unthinkable experience.

We are exiles in the far end of solitude, living as listeners
With hearts attending to the skies we cannot understand:
Waiting upon the first far drums of Christ the Conqueror,
Planted like sentinels upon the world's frontier.

But in the days, rare days, when our Theotocos
Flying the prosperous world
Appears upon our mountain with her clothes like sails,
Then, like wise, wild baby,
The unborn John who could not see a thing
We wake and know the Virgin presence
Receive her Christ into our night
With stabs of an intelligence as white as lightning.

Cooled in the flame of God's dark fire
Washed in His gladness like a vesture of new flame
We burn like eagles in His invincible awareness
And bound and bounce with happiness,
Leap in the womb, our cloud, our faith, our element,
Our contemplation, our anticipated heaven
Til Mother Church sings like an Evangelist.

These selections convey Merton's invitations: flee the woebegone world and become a contemplative, so that you may rejoice in the spirit of the God Who seeks you.

At first, the idea seems too gigantic and startling and impossible, to the Church, who undoubtedly would delight in this fulfillment of her most idealistic dream. But Merton's invitation needs an explanation: he does not wish to imply that the abbeys and convents and cloisters of the world should prepare to barricade their bellgates for a deluge of admission-seeking postulants who run with copies of Merton's verse tucked tightly in their armpits.

The life of contemplation that Merton proposes for his readers is not a life behind his walls; rather, he urges them to find their own private Gethsemani out in the world. A dual life of regular everyday existence and active contemplation is his true proposal.

He explains the difference between the contemplative orders and the contemplative life:

It (the contemplative life) is a life that can be led, and in fact must be led by every good Christian. It is the life for which we were created, and which will eventually be our everlasting joy in heaven. By the grace of Christ we can begin to lead that life even on earth, and many in fact do so begin. Some of them are in cloisters, because the vows and rules of religious orders and congregations make the necessary work of preparation easy, and, as it were, almost a matter of course. But many more "contemplatives" are out in the world. A lot of them may be found in places like Harlem and wherever people suffer and perhaps many of these have never even heard of the word "contemplative."

The life that Merton advocates through his poems is a life filled with God and all the things that God is—truth, beauty, love, knowledge, all the things which men hope one day to possess.

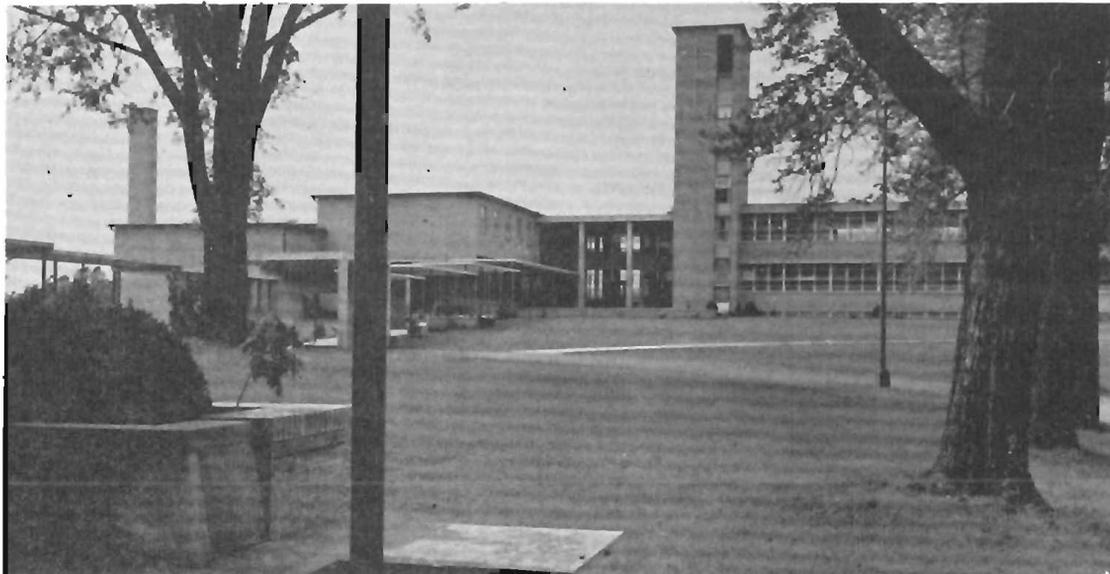
The contemplative life that we outsiders may practice is the life of infused contemplation, which is, in reality, the fullness of the Christian life—"the flowering of grace and the gifts and beatitudes which perfect the work of the three theological virtues."

Merton reaches some touchy ground in his proposal, and he is careful that we do not get a wrong or misleading meaning. He does not wish to breed within us a distaste for the normal ways and means of the Church—the Mass, sacraments, devotional services, spiritual readings, etc., or, as he has said, "the dry verbiage of theologians." Neither does he suggest that we strip ourselves of the world and go out into the desert to eat sand and worms in a futile attempt to see God. He warns of the mystics who see such perfection in their penances that they begin to think the Mass and the sacraments are no longer necessary.

One of Merton's severest critics calls him a "propagandist of mystics for the masses." This critic does not seem to realize that the plan which the poet presents is in direct opposition to "mysticism for the masses."

Merton urges us to stay in our Christless world, where, paradoxical as it may seem, we can possess Christ in our own souls. In this way, our infused contemplation is gained in labor, and hence, it is more rewarding.

With infused contemplation, we experience a contact with God in the depth of our soul. We feel His Presence in our inmost selves and yield ourselves completely to the work of His Spirit, which transforms us inwardly, from things of the world to the things of God.



BELLARMINE COLLEGE in 1957

Contemplation is not an absolute necessity or a prerequisite for entering the kingdom of heaven. Man can reach his goal without it. But contemplation makes his goal more readily attainable than does an absence of it. For an analogue, consider a man who is going on a journey. He has two choices about getting there: he may walk, or he may use some means of conveyance, such as a plane or a bus. He must do one or the other, and either method—walking or riding—will get him to his destination. Quite obviously, he gets to his travel's end much faster and easier when he rides. And so it is with contemplation. Because God is everywhere in all things, man can find Him in the world. But when man attempts to elevate his spirit, God can find him more easily. Unhampered by the obstacles of life, such as personal satisfaction and pleasure, or the achievements and success of the world, both God and man become clearer and closer to each other. Because of contemplation, man's search for his Creator has a greater fulfillment than was before possible.

Of course, the process of leading two lives—one of regular activity, and one of inward, infused contemplation—is by no means a simple task. Ordinary men do not desire to introvert their lives, because it creates difficulties which are hard to overcome. And yet, the world does not offer a true solution to man's search. As Merton phrases it, "Man fears solitude, yet the society in which he seeks refuge does not protect him adequately from his own insufficiency."

That is precisely the reason that Thomas Merton has chosen verse as his medium of communication, rather than a lesser art form that might be more readily attainable to the average man.

Poetry, as was noted before, is an experience, just as all art is an experience. The appreciation of poetry is not an innate quality, but a gift of the highest natural order. A gift, it might be added, that needs cultivation and integration after it is received. Not everyone appreciates poetry, but everyone can appreciate poetry if he makes a sincere effort to do so.

To many people, the enjoyment of art is nothing more than a sensible and emotional thrill. They look at a picture, and if it stimulates one or another of their sense appetites they are pleased. On a hot day they like to look at a picture of mountains or the sea because it makes them feel cool. They like paintings of dogs that you can almost pat. But naturally they soon tire of art under these circumstances. They turn aside to pet a real dog, or they go down the street to an air conditioned movie to give their senses another series of jolts. Obviously for such people art is not even a remote preparation even for the lowest degree of contemplation.

But a genuine aesthetic experience is something which transcends the sensible order (in which, however, it has its beginning) but also that of reason itself. It is a supra-rational intuition of the latent perfection of things.

Poetry, then, goes beyond the natural, sensible order. To understand and appreciate poetry, we must enter what Merton calls an "inner self." This "inner self" is the real soul of a person, his "heart of hearts." It is here that all the activities of the mind and intellect come together and join to initiate a spiritualized activity. This "inner self" is where contemplation really begins. Only when we have divorced ourselves from the medium of sense species will God instill in us His gift of infused contemplation. Only when man has withdrawn from the world in this secret, inward manner will he be prepared to experience contact with God.

Poetry, even godless poetry, introduces us to our "inner self," because it carries us away from the things of earth. It places us on the threshold of our meeting place with God.

However, we have now reached the limit of what we can do. The next stage after infused contemplation is mystical contemplation. This is a pure, outright gift from God. No effort or sacrifice on our part will buy this gift for us, and we are not assured that we will receive mystical contemplation even after we have entered the "inner self." But because poetry has placed us in a position where this gift is possible, poetry leads us indirectly to God. "Poetry can . . . help to bring us rapidly through that part of the journey to contemplation which is called active."

After considering these things, it is simple enough to see why Thomas Merton has chosen poetry for his medium. Considering his purpose, it is the only logical method to use.

Has Merton been successful in imparting his message to us? Have the "tears" of this "blind lion" cleansed our souls from worldly attachments so that we can prepare to see our God? The answer can be found only in our own minds. We will know in our own "inner self" if we have reached contact with our Creator.

Merton gives one clue that will tell us of our condition. When we hear the celestial Voice that he has heard, we will know that we have found our God. The celestial Voice says, "What was vile has become precious. What is now precious was never vile. I have always known the vile as precious: what is vile I know not." This is the fullest truth we can know, or try to know.



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