

Two Poems

By Miguel Hernandez

Translated by Thomas Merton

Miguel Hernandez (1910-1942) was one of the major Spanish poets of the first half of the twentieth century. Though born in rural Orihuela and not highly educated, he became celebrated upon the publication of his second volume of poems, *El rayo que no cesa* (*The Unending Thunderbolt*) in 1936 and was part of the artistic circle in Madrid that formed around Pablo Neruda. He fought in the Spanish Civil War on the loyalist side and was imprisoned and tortured after the victory of the nationalist forces in 1939. Briefly released, he was rearrested and condemned to death, a sentence commuted to thirty years imprisonment. He contracted tuberculosis in prison and died March 28, 1942, the third anniversary of the end of the war. An edition of his complete works was published in Argentina in 1960,¹ but a more complete and accurate edition of the poetry appeared in Spain only in 1976,² after the death of Francisco Franco.

Thomas Merton became interested in Hernandez's poetry in the summer of 1966. On September 5, in a letter to Cid Corman, Merton calls Hernandez "a very good Spanish poet who died in prison and wrote a lot of very good lonely prison stuff."³ On August 26, 1966, Merton included in his reading notebook⁴ a translation of Hernandez' poem "The Two Palm Trees," which was written from prison to his wife and which almost certainly reminded Merton of his own relationship with the student nurse. (It begins: "Love rose up between us / Like the moon between the two palm trees / That never embraced" and concludes: "We are two specters seeking / Each other: Finding / Each other far.")⁵ On the following day, he records in his journal, "Wrote poem on Miguel Hernandez (whose poetry moves me deeply)."⁶ The poem, "For the Spanish Poet Miguel Hernandez," was first published in the *Sewanee Review* in Autumn 1966 and was part of Merton's collection "Sensation Time at the Home," which is included in *Collected Poems* but never appeared as a separate volume (CP 641-42).

Though only "The Two Palm Trees" appears among the translations in the *Collected Poems*, Merton actually translated seven other Hernandez poems between September and November 1966, which are contained in a subsequent reading notebook.⁷ In a September 27 letter to his publisher, James Laughlin, he writes, "I am really interested in translating Miguel Hernandez, some of his poems I mean, Spanish poet died in jail about 20 yrs back. . . . I have translated two or three already and intend to do about a dozen . . ."⁸ Through a Spanish publisher he made contact with Josephina Manresa, Hernandez's widow, and wrote her two letters, in Spanish, copies of which are in the archives at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, along with her reply to the first. His initial letter, written on November 9, 1966, requests permission to translate and publish a dozen poems by Hernandez. He evidently sent her a copy of his poem on Hernandez as well, as in her reply, on November 16, she thanks him for it, and inquires about remuneration for allowing publication of the translations. His second letter, written December 15, assures her that he will try to get the

best payment possible for the poems, though he warns that it will not be much; he expresses his admiration for Hernandez and asks if she can recommend written sources about him, but if she replied the letter is not extant. On December 16, 1966, he notes in the journal, "Wrote again yesterday to Josefa Manresa, Miguel Hernandez's widow. Learned more of his tragic innocence. How he foolishly treated Franco's police and let himself be captured again – jailed near home, but with TB could not see his wife and child etc. On March 28, 1942 – a month after I got the novice habit" (LL 171).

On May 22, 1967 Merton tells Laughlin that he intends to type up the Hernandez translations he has made (SL 321) but he still hasn't done so by July 12 (SL 324) or August 1 (SL 325). On August 15 in the midst of discussing other projects he writes, "Meanwhile I'll not rush in getting Hernandez typed" (SL 331). Apparently the translations were never typed up and consequently, except for "The Two Palm Trees," were never published. The seven additional poems from the Syracuse reading notebook will appear in this and two succeeding issues of *The Merton Seasonal*, in the order in which they are found in the notebook. They are transcribed as they appear in final form, except that "+" is expanded to "and" in all cases where it appears. They are published with the permission of the Merton Legacy Trust.

The two poems printed below were both translated in mid-September 1966. On September 17, 1966 he writes in his journal, "Translated another poem of Miguel Hernandez yesterday (onion lullaby)" (LL 134). This translation of "Nanas de la cebolla," and the first, "The Child of Night" ("El Niño de la noche") are written in different colored inks on the same pages of the notebook. "The Child of Night" is a poem on the death of his infant son Manuel Ramón, who died at the age of ten months in October 1938; it appears in *Ultimos Poemas*, a group of 25 poems written between 1938 and 1941, when he stopped writing poetry.⁹ "The Onion Lullaby," also from *Ultimos Poemas*, was dedicated to his son Manuel Miguel, born in 1939 while Hernandez was in prison. Merton includes in his translation the prose note the poet prefixed to the poem: "Dedicated to his son on the grounds of a letter received from his wife in which she said that she no longer ate anything but bread and onions."

1 Miguel Hernandez, *Obras completas*, ed. Elvio Romero and Andrés Ramón Vazquez (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1960).

2 Miguel Hernandez, *Obra poética completa*, ed. Leopoldo de Luis and Jorge Urrutia (Madrid: Zero, 1976).

3 Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 247.

4 The notebook, housed in the George Arents Research Collection of the Syracuse University Library, Syracuse, NY, is labeled "Aug-Sept 1966" on the cover and consists mainly of Merton's notes on his reading of Camus, Michael Harrington's *The Accidental Century* and Marshall McLuhan.

5 Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 958; subsequent references will be cited as "CP" parenthetically in the text.

6 Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 118; subsequent references will be cited as "LL" parenthetically in the text.

7 This notebook, also housed in the Arents Collection, is labeled "Sept – Oct – 66" and includes reading notes on Sartre, Camus, McLuhan and Milton.

8 Thomas Merton and James Laughlin, *Selected Letters*, ed. David D. Cooper (New York: Norton, 1997) 300; subsequent references will be cited as "SL" parenthetically in the text.

9 For all his translations, Merton used the 1960 Argentine text, which for this poem differs in a few particulars from the definitive 1976 edition; most notably the version Merton translated reads "sol" ("sun") in l. 31 (l. 33 in the translation) while the later edition reads "sal" ("salt").

The Child of Night

Laughing, with clear light mocking the day
 The child who wanted to be
 Twice over, plunged into night.
 No more of light? Well why? Not to come out
 Again from silences, from darkest places.

I wished to be – for what? – I wished to land
 In joy at the sphere's center of all that is.
 I wished to bring laughter as most beauty
 Smiling I died, serenely sad.

Child twice child or three time comes.
 Returns to roam the opaque world, the womb.
 Back, love! Back, child! I do not want to go
 Out there where light may meet great sorrow

Back to the plastic tiger my unconscious cheered
 Back to explore, aware of the covering sleep
 In sensitive shadow of transparency
 In inward space to wander
 From October to October

Womb's central flesh of all that is
 Cave so eternally blue, so red, so dark
 Final night in whose abyss is heard
 The voice of roots, the sigh of heights

Under your skin I march, distance is blood
 My body orbits in a block of stars
 The cosmos groups its wandering resonance
 There where man's history is written down.

To look and see around desert and mountain
 Seas through the window of a total heart
 Which lately grieved at being no horizon
 Open to a less changing and less dying world

To pile up stone and child for nothing.
 Live without wings and darkly for a day.
 Pyramid of fearful, limited sun

With neither fire nor freshness. No.
My life return!

So am I gripped by some despair and fall
In dawn of time, of past. They drag on
From night to imperious light
It is weeping naked, tiny and returned.

The Onion Lullaby

An onion is frosty
Reticent and poor.
Frost of your days
And of my nights.
Hunger and onion
Black ice and great
Round frost.

In the cradle of hunger
There lay my child.
There was he nursed
On onion blood.
But your blood,
Frosted with sugar
Onions and hunger

A dark woman
Melts into a moon
Comes apart thread by thread
Over the cradle
Laugh, little son
That I bring you the moon
Whenever you need it

Lark of my house
Laugh all you like
Your laugh in your eyes
Is the light of the world
Laugh so much
That when I hear you
My soul beats the air

Your laugh sets me free
It gives me wings.
It ends my solitude
It lets me out of jail
O flying mouth
And heart on your lips
Flickering like a storm

Your laugh is the truly
Winning sword
Conquering the flowers and larks
The sun's rival
Promise of my
Bones and love

Fluttering flesh
The quick eyelid
More alive than ever
And Butter colored
Such a goldfinch
Rising and flying
From your body!

I have woken from childhood
May you never wake:
My mouth is sad
May you ever laugh
Ever in your cradle
Defending laughter
Feather by feather

May your flight range as wide
And go as far
As your flesh is now
Newborn sky
O if I could return
To the original source
Of your adventure.

Eight months old you laugh
With five lemon blossoms
With five small size fighters
With five teeth

Like five jasmine
Blossoms growing

Tomorrow they will be
Your kisses' frontier
When between your teeth
Attack is known
And you feel fire
Darting under them
To seek the center

Fly child to the double
Moon of breasts:
The breast tired of onions
And you satisfied
You don't have to worry
You don't have to know
What is happening
What is going on.