Jacob's Ladder with a Few Missing Rungs

Review of
Spirituality and Metaphor: The Poetics and Poetry of Thomas Merton
By Waclaw Grzybowski
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Reviewed by **Malgorzata Poks**

What compelled the author to write this book was his realization that European students of American literature were at best only vaguely familiar with Thomas Merton's poetry and knew almost nothing of his views on literature. Therefore Grzybowski has taken up the challenge of a critical appraisal of both: the Gethsemani monk's poetic output and his views on poetry and art. The task is doubtless of vital importance, though why the author has left out any references to American readers or Merton scholarship outside Europe is anybody's guess.

The book consists of an introduction, two chapters of unequal length, and a conclusion. The first chapter, entitled "Poetic Knowing and Contemplative Experience," develops the theoretical apparatus for the analysis of Merton's poetry. Chapter Two, "Christ the Word – in Search of the Fount of All Art," offers an exegesis of Merton's evolving poetics, complete with very thorough explication of a representative sample of poems.

The idea of spirituality and metaphor as the leitmotif of the project comes from Merton's conviction, expressed in his essay "Blake and the New Theology," that the Scholastic concept of God as Pure Being is consonant with William Blake's poetic vision of the source and ground of life. Contrary to the Platonizing St. Augustine, with whom he is often compared, Blake intuited beauty in the Particular, which intuition seems to parallel Aquinas's concept of *claritas* – the glory of form (*splendor formae*) shining through matter according to the degree of likeness between an individual created being and the uncreated Pure Being which in-forms everything. *Claritas*, then, is the ontological secret of things, the principle of intelligibility, the "suchness" or "isness" of beings. As we can grasp this ontological secret *per analogiam* only, the Thomist notion of *analogia entis* (analogy of being) must underlie not only the contemplative "ascent to truth," but also the poetic metaphor's ascent from visible to invisible reality. In other words, Grzybowski believes that Merton's poetic vision should reflect his contemplative climb and thus must be governed by the rising movement of metaphor. "The poetry that feeds on the contemplation of the Paschal mystery," states the author, "is likely to reflect this sapiential analogous knowing" (55).

A deeply contemplative reading of "Song for Our Lady of Cobre" leads off the more interesting, analytical Chapter Two, although at times an interested Merton reader may have the impression that the book merely states the obvious in very elaborate terms. This may be partly due to the delay in

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Malgorzata Poks teaches American Literature at the English Teacher Training College in Sosnowiec and at the Academy of Business Administration and Foreign Languages in Katowice, Poland. She wrote her doctoral dissertation on Thomas Merton and the poets of Latin America, and has contributed articles and reviews to *The Merton Annual* and *The Merton Seasonal*.

bringing out the book, originally completed in 1998 as a Ph.D. dissertation, when some Merton texts (particularly the journals) were either still unpublished or just going to press, and the monk's poetry was a relatively new area of research.

One of the strengths of this monograph is that it places Merton's poetic opus in the context of American poetry of the forties and fifties. Grzybowski carefully documents the influences as well as the convergence of visions between Merton and such acknowledged masters of twentieth-century spiritual poetry as Robert Lowell and T. S. Eliot, but, not surprisingly, finds St. John of the Cross to be the clearest model for Merton's early contemplative poems. He also shows how the excessive use of metaphor and literary allusion prevents Merton from visualizing – rather than talking about – the spiritual dark night and the resulting *metanoia* so successfully integrated in the poetry of the Carmelite mystic. The simplicity and ascetic realism necessary to make such a vision credible were to come in the fifties due to the impact of T. S. Eliot. Although Grzybowski claims that Merton intuitively started using the poetic diction and the meditative mode popularized by Eliot before he actually discovered *Four Quartets* as the greatest spiritual poem of the twentieth century, he finds the coincidence of their visions and attitudes telling. Combined with the realization that long before his actual conversion to the Anglican Church Eliot intuitively recognized the regenerative Word of God as the cornerstone of the cosmos (Grzybowski derives the "Da" closing Eliot's *The Waste Land* from the Hebrew *Davar*), this coincidental discovery seems to confirm the primacy of poetic intuition with respect to theological knowing, a belief Merton would find congenial.

Naturally, much space is devoted to the metaphysical poetry of Merton's coeval, Robert Lowell, a celebrated American convert to Catholicism (albeit a temporary one) and practitioner of the New Critical poetic idiom which Merton followed in the forties. Integration of personal experiences with spiritual interpretation of the cultural crisis of the West is what they share, but Christology is where they differ most. Grzybowski claims that in Lowell's poetic vision Christ is the center of an entropic universe and, consequently, his personal and cultural "dark night" is more Sartrean-existential than mystical. Although both Merton and Lowell registered the profound spiritual crisis of the Western world, only the former was able to combine existential pessimism with contemplative optimism.

Like most reviewers of Merton's poetry, Grzybowski identifies *The Strange Islands* (1957) as a transitional volume. It is not, therefore, accidental that it includes "by far the most Eliotesque production of Merton" (117). The morality play "The Tower of Babel" develops the theology of the Word which Grzybowski has just scrutinized in the poetic output of the great Anglo-American modernist. As in Eliot's, so in Merton's vision Christ the Word becomes the only antidote to the "word of fear" ruling the contemporary waste land.

More importantly, it is also *The Strange Islands* that initiates Merton's new poetics: the poetics of irony and verbal economy that corresponds to the monk's changed perception of reality. About "How to Enter a Big City," the opening poem of the collection, Grzybowski writes: "The poem's title itself becomes a metaphor which shows that the physical act of entering the city is in fact an initiation into a misshapen vision of the world and into the hidden death-wish of the urban mass consciousness" (127). The new poetics, reaching its climax in *Original Child Bomb*, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, recognizes the destruction of traditional metaphysics in the post-modern center-less world in which the ascending movement of metaphor is replaced by fragmentation and horizontal substitution of images. The inverted, "flat" metaphor becomes symptomatic of the disintegrated, alienated consciousness that cannot reach sapiential awareness. (Post)modern

men and women no longer know how to climb Jacob's ladder.

It is still in the innovative *The Strange Islands* that Merton provides an alternative to this disintegrated consciousness – in the third part of the collection, which Grzybowski finds the best. It is there, he claims, that Merton's style finally reaches originality and maturity. Informed by Asian spirituality and sapiential awareness, purged from verbosity and excesses of vision, his poems focus on discernment and enable us to hear "the one word uttered in silence" that unmakes the spiritual void of a world we inhabit.

While such an evaluation of Merton's poetry is true, and while the strengths of the work are numerous, I feel that the author feels more at home with Merton's early poems and cannot quite situate his revolutionary new poetics of impersonality, fragmentation, and irony which first surfaces in the 1957 collection. He skillfully documents this shift, but does not seem to approve of it, as if this new Merton voice was spoiling the underlying thesis of his work: that spiritual poetry must be based on a rising movement of metaphor. Likewise, he has little sympathy with the monk's engagement with M., the student nurse Merton encountered in 1966. Naturally, Grzybowski praises the 1962 prose poem "Hagia Sophia" as the climax of Merton's Mariological intuitions as an apex of his sapiential vision. He provides a detailed biographical context for the development of Merton's awareness of the feminine, inclusive of the monk's 1960 hospitalization when he first conceived an outline of the poem, his Proverb dreams, as well as the encounter with M. that the mystical poem and the dreams seemed to anticipate. But, appearances notwithstanding, the author remains firmly entrenched in a position corresponding to "early" Merton: legalistic, at times even doctrinaire. At this point it is impossible not to raise questions about the implicit ideology of the entire project. In the whole work there is not ONE woman mystic, theologian, saint or poet introduced as an influence on Merton's developing spirituality and poetics. Not even Julian of Norwich or Raissa Maritain? How seriously can one take the wisdom principle presented as an abstract, disembodied ideal comfortably defined by male authorities? Not surprisingly, it is when discussing Merton's engagement with the young nurse that the author glibly launches a diatribe against romantic overemphasis of emotions resulting, supposedly, from Merton's failure to grasp the importance of moral law. What follows is a lengthy didactic footnote with a dogmatic exposition of St. Paul's teachings. Sadly, it is here that the book fails to convince.

Actually, the work's fault line can be spotted already in Grzybowski's somewhat narrow definition of spirituality, which requires a degree of apologetic hair-splitting to accommodate even the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur as a necessary framework for the discussion of Merton's use of metaphor. Exactly why emphasizing "sense" rather than "presence" should make the spirituality of Ricoeur's metaphor suspect is beyond me, despite the author's lengthy argumentation. The moment he shuts spirituality within strict Roman Catholic orthodoxy, he is bound to misconstrue Merton's more mature poetics. Had he read Merton's journals – and a glance at the bibliography suffices to reveal that he had not – he would have understood that *The Seven Storey Mountain* type of spirituality he builds his arguments on is what Merton came to reject in the nineteen-fifties. Already by 1958, the year of the Fourth and Walnut illumination, Merton was prepared to see religious dogmatism as destructive of an authentic monastic experience and gradually started to believe that a monk had to become an "anti-monk" to qualify as a genuine seeker. It is equally important to realize that Merton's subsequent embrace of so-called anti-poetry sprang from his appreciation of the spiritual potential of irony to demystify the modern ego's dogmatic seriousness as a chief ob-

stacle on the path to contemplative knowing and self-knowing. For a proof it is sufficient to revisit such poems as "To a Severe Nun," "Elegy for James Thurber" or "The Moment of Truth," let alone Merton's empathetic renderings of the anti-poetry of Nicanor Parra. In the face of the debasement of language and prevalence of a totalitarian mentality, anti-poetry seemed to him the only poetry still alive. Above all, however, I find it strange that the author's knowledge of Merton's biography, most specifically the events of summer 1966, should have come solely from Michael Mott's monograph. The publication of Merton's journals in the late 1990s provided many missing links in our understanding of his evolving spirituality and no serious research published afterwards can afford to disregard those materials. True, there is *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* on the list of works cited, but in the optics of the text it functions more as a reference than a real presence informing the author's understanding of Merton.

Despite all this, I can repeat once more that *Spirituality and Metaphor* is a valuable book. It is a thorough piece of criticism, handsomely edited, erudite and argued with passion. What is more, it puts Merton's poetry in a solid theological and Christological context and opens a valuable perspective on his "early" poetics, almost entirely governed by the rising movement of metaphor. It is with "late" Merton, however, that Grzybowski's thesis starts to stumble on the ladder of *analogia entis* as its appraisal seems to demand a different theoretical framework.