

Beyond the Divide with Merton

Review of

Thomas Merton's Poetics of Self-Dissolution

By Sonia Petisco

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Reviewed by **Deborah Kehoe**

A foreword by Peter Ellis (13-15) offers a unifying perspective from which to view this deceptively thin volume of previously published or presented papers and lectures. Briefly, Ellis establishes that Sonia Petisco aims to show how Merton's poetry reveals his progression through and beyond illusive boundaries set by society and language to embrace and reconcile apparent oppositions (see 14). Furthermore, she implicitly and explicitly invites others to walk a similarly transformative path. While there is no summary of Petisco's credentials for the reader who lacks in-depth familiarity with contributors to Merton studies, the author's introductory statements and the book's numerous footnotes make evident that she is an international professor of linguistics and literature with a record of scholarship concerning Thomas Merton.

In less than 200 pages, *Thomas Merton's Poetics of Self-Dissolution* yields a copious amount of material including compelling, sometimes provocative, remarks regarding Merton's poetic output. Petisco introduces the book by explaining how the idea for the project came about in the year of Merton's centenary as a response to the complexities and conflicts associated with the contemporary world's "dream of fictitious individualism" (17). Further, in this introductory section (17-22) she voices her intentions to "accompany [Merton] in this endless path towards real communion with the divine beyond the limits of our own constrained subjectivities" (21).

Following the introduction is a chronology (borrowed from The Thomas Merton Center website) of Merton's life and works (23-26). Although knowledge of the timeline of Merton's biography and publications is not essential to understanding the author's vision for this collection, such information is a convenience that may enhance one's grasp of Petisco's rationale for ordering her chapters, which in part parallel the progression of Merton's spiritual life story.

The body of the text includes eight chapters, each focusing on a specific aspect of Merton's poetry. Chapter 1, "Thomas Merton's Poetic Evolution from World's Denial to an Experience of Universal Love" (27-37), addresses the ways in which Merton's entire poetic output reflects his changing relationship with the world. With references to Merton's *Early Poems (1940-1942)* at the outset and to *The Geography of Lograire* (1968) at the end, the first chapter overviews this poetic

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“evolution from solitude to solidarity, from *contemptus mundi* to universal love” (27).

Chapter 2, “O Sweet Escape! O Smiling Flight!: Commentaries on a Selection of Poems by Thomas Merton” (39-56), explains the title of Petisco’s collection as she illustrates via a group of selected poems how Merton’s spiritual growth involved an ongoing process of dissolving false perceptions of himself and others to make way for his true self to emerge. Petisco offers such poems as “Macarius the Younger” and a passage from *The Geography of Lograire* as revelatory illustrations of the varieties and vicissitudes of Merton’s contemplative path. According to Petisco, these poems capture Merton’s eventual understanding that “the battle against the falseness of his own self” is “the only battle worth fighting” (53).

Chapter 3 briefly addresses Merton’s antipoetry as “A Revolution in Language and Thought” (57-64). Petisco leads into this chapter by calling this experimental element of Merton’s poetics “an answer to [the] need for transformation or resurrection, which is becoming especially acute in our post-modern times” (57) and concludes by stating, “Merton’s antipoetry brings us a new love, a new vision, a new fire that purifies our language of lies and hatred” (64).

In Chapter 4, “Silence as the Path to Joy in the Poetry of Thomas Merton and T. S. Eliot” (65-84), Petisco comments at length on the kinship between the two writers. She points out their respective religious conversions and their shared “lifelong struggle between the contemplative experience and the aesthetic thrust” (66). But, Petisco claims, the most powerful similarity between Merton and Eliot is that in their most mature poetry, they both recognize “silence as a loving self-surrender” and paradoxically a way to “communicate the joy of holistic awareness to which we are all called” (89).

Chapter 5, “Recovering Our Innocence: The Influence of William Blake on the Poetry of Thomas Merton” (91-101), continues in the vein of linking Merton to other poets. Here Petisco discusses Merton and Blake as two poets of “self-dissolution” who chart the loss and recovery of radical innocence. Petisco stresses the mystical connection between Merton and Blake in their awareness of “cosmic unity” and asserts the relevance of their “sapiential vision” to the world today when she states that their poetic efforts to “give a new shape to experience based on an emergent solidarity that . . . could only flourish if we leave our individualism behind” (91).

In Chapter 6, “Thomas Merton’s World Discourse: Economic Globalization vs Religious Universality” (103-28), Petisco and co-author Fernando Beltrán Llavador devote considerable attention to discussing the “contrasting discourses of Merton’s universality – as conveyed in both his prose and poetry – [with that of] economic globalization, [which] . . . claim[s] the right to act in a god-like manner demanding submission, faith, and new rituals” (103-104). The chapter ends by thoroughly analyzing “With the World in My Bloodstream,” one of Merton’s *Eighteen Poems* written for M, in order to demonstrate Merton’s fully formed “poetic and prophetic witness” to the power of love to overcome alienation among people, a witness that Petisco declares could “contribute to creating . . . a new global politics of sharing” (128).

Chapter 7, “Translation as Recreation,” displays Petisco’s linguistic expertise as she rejects the prevailing theoretical tenet that poetic texts are essentially untranslatable. On the contrary, she puts forth literary translation as another way to bridge “the apparently insurmountable but only illusory differences between cultures and individuals” (129). To reinforce her point, Petisco shares her own translations into her native tongue, Spanish, of four of Merton’s poems (side by side with the originals), along with a different, yet also Spanish, version by Ernesto Cardenal of “Whether

There Is Enjoyment in Bitterness” and provides detailed explications of each version. She follows up this exercise by returning to the topic of literary theory and its enduring questions as to the limited possibilities of verbal communication. While acknowledging the validity of such questions, Petisco restates her belief that “a poem or a translation should be able to break the [boundaries] imposed by the specific vocabularies . . . and bring us into the presence of the unsayable” (149). Implicitly, she claims that all the variant renditions of the selected poems provided in this chapter point to that transcendent reach.

Chapter 8, “Sophia the Unknown, the Dark, the Nameless . . .”: Questioning the Male-Female Dichotomy through Thomas Merton’s Poetry” (151-64) is arguably the most ambitious item in the book’s treatment of Merton’s poetic dissolution of the divisive forces within the human experience. Here Petisco turns her attention to the fundamental division between male and female, which she describes as “that incurable wound” (151). The chapter contains an extensive interpretation of Merton’s prose-poem “Hagia Sophia,” a “reflection” (complete with a chart illustrating the poem’s conceptual flow) in which Petisco both praises and takes issue with Merton’s rendition of the incarnation of Wisdom. She explains that her study “aims at highlighting those moments within Merton’s poem when the male-female distinction is overcome, but also at cross-examining those other occasions when his language becomes part of the established discourse dealing with this complex issue” (153). As promised, Petisco’s reflection becomes contentious when she charges Merton’s poem with inconsistency for speaking of an “urgent need for dying to the knowledge of self” while containing “still too many traces of a strong belief in human categories” (157). Petisco acknowledges her own audacity as she wraps up the exegesis with an arresting “invitation” to Merton to “‘revise and reformulate’ his own theology in the poem” so as to “free himself” from the restraints brought about by naming Wisdom in terms that only reinforce “human division” (162). She goes on to conclude, however, that the poem contains “splendid occasions” (163), praise that she punctuates by quoting from Part II of “Hagia Sophia” – “for though they have bound her, she cannot be a prisoner” – ultimately allowing Merton’s poetic voice to have the last word (164).

The additional features of an appendix containing the transcripts of two interviews Petisco conducted, one with George Kilcourse (165-68), the other with Paul Quenon, OCSO (168-72); and a diverse list of references for further research into literary and theological dimensions of Thomas Merton’s work, maximize the remarkable generosity of this volume.

Although it is not without features that might strike some readers as weaknesses of excess, such as a repetitiveness likely brought about by the fact that this is a gathering of previously produced work, and the recurring didactic intensity with which the author delivers critical analysis, *Thomas Merton’s Poetics of Self-Dissolution* altogether offers an authoritative, passionate and insightful tracking of Merton’s spiritual journey toward wholeness manifested throughout his poetry. As such, Petisco’s book is another in a series of tributes to Merton’s legacy of reminding humanity of our essential sacred unity.