

Thomas Merton's Poetic Incarnation of Emptiness

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I. Introduction: A Heaven of Naked Air

Thomas Merton's later poetry is an emblem of his transcending his previous desire for explanatory, propositional, theological demarcations, a geography of the "unknowing" and "emptiness" of the sacred. Thus, the progression of Merton's poetic work can be seen as a poetics of disappearance: the disappearance of an old, corrupt world in favor of a vision of a kenotic, new world; the disappearance of the false self or empirical ego in favor of discovering the true self in and inseparable from God; the disappearance of traditional religious imagery in favor of spontaneous imagination and antipoetry; the disappearance of an exclusively supernatural category of the sacred in favor of a humanized and intimate experience of the sacred in the center of the profane. Merton was a man and poet of transformation. This article seeks to interpret the topography of that transformation in Merton's poetry of the 1960s and especially within *Emblems of a Season of Fury*.

In his early monastic years the sacred for Merton tended towards a super-essential conception of a divine reality beyond the immanent boundaries of this world. His poetry of the 1940s and 1950s is filled with images of a theological dualism between the natural and the supernatural, between the profane and the sacred. It looks mainly towards the future for consummation:

And every burning morning is a prophecy of Christ
Coming to raise and vindicate
Even our sorry flesh.¹

"The Trappist Cemetery—Gethsemani,"
A Man in the Divided Sea, 1946

1. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 118.

Merton tended to condemn the profane and praise the sacred without acknowledging any need of the one for the other, any coincidence of opposites.

The early Merton believed mystical experience directed him towards silence, but the poetic vision compelled him to speak: "Words and silence, standing face to face / Weigh life and death. . . ." ("A Responsory").² Sr. Therese Lentfoehr would later use the phrase, "Words and silence," as the title for her book on Merton's poetry. The spoken, the unspoken, the unspeakable will become the pillars of Merton's necessary paradox:

We must receive new seeds from an old harvest
Old truths out of a time newborn. . .

"A Responsory"³

The view of a re-created, primal paradise as the goal would be displaced by a view of the sacred in a process of intimate interaction with the profane towards the union of these nonopposite opposites. By the late 1950s the transformed sense of the sacred was changing Merton's anthropology. In Christ Merton found both the sacred and the profane. The sacred was emptied and thereby the profane disclosed the sacred.

One of the discernments for an authentic mystical life has always been a growth in love in any yielding to the sacred. Even in the darkness the mystic loves. In "A Psalm" Merton writes:

The Spirit sings: the bottom drops out of my soul
And from the center of my cellar, Love, louder than
thunder
Opens a heaven of naked air.⁴

It is "naked" precisely because it is empty of ego configurations. Merton's poetics of disappearance reimagined his vision of love which in turn led to a further incorporation of an "incarnation of emptiness." Merton's sacred became more paradoxical the more simply empty it became. In later years he began to risk more spiritual and psychological nakedness than ever before and it was leading him to places the younger Merton would not have been very capable of imagining.

2. *Ibid.*, 672.

3. *Ibid.*, 678.

4. *Ibid.*, 220.

What follows is a sketch of the historical, poetical, and spiritual trajectories of Merton's imaginative quest for compassion through a strange and unpredictable incarnation of emptiness.

II. An Incarnational Transformation

The continued transformation of Merton's mystical vision moved away from the danger of becoming extremely individualistic and disembodied and towards a new sense of responsibility for human involvement, even if from behind the monastic enclosure. The boundaries of his experience merged with the experience of others as more of his religious conceptual idols evaporated or were smashed. The twentieth century had lost touch with meaningful symbolism and its spiritual power. In his poem "The Lion" Merton addresses this loss of symbolism, imagination, enchantment and the sacred:

All classic shapes have vanished
From alien heavens
Where there are no fabled beasts
No friendly histories
And passion has no heraldry.

I have nothing left to translate
Into the figures of night
Or the pale geometry
of the fire-birds.
If I once had a wagon of lights to ride in
The axle is broken
The horses are shot.⁵

Are purely individual myths and symbols really myths and symbols at all?

Merton's poetry in the 1960s was a continual experimentation with forms and content. Some of it has been called antipoetry because it seems to defy the traditional view of what poetry should be. He included prose in the poetry, "found poems," surrealist imagery that moved swiftly from one impression to another, Zen paradox and metaphorical lyrics. Little of this kind of work was original with Merton as he tried poetic approaches that had been used decades earlier in American poetry. But his mystical perspective and the monastic

5. *Ibid.*, 643.

rhythm of life gave his work a unique point of view. He would have agreed with Henry Rago that "the true poet is willing to give up poetry in order to find poetry."⁶ The poem may end in silence, the contemplative goal of the aesthetic work. Merton "in one of his taped lectures . . . took the view that a good poem was 50 percent silence and what was not said in a literary work was just as important as what was made explicit, if not more important."⁷ What he tried to do in his later work was to give words to his experience of love in the darkness and unknowing for "Only in the Void / Are all ways one. . .," ("The Night of Destiny").⁸

Deeply important to further understanding the mystical insights and the forms of the later poetry and the changing form of the sacred for Merton is an awareness that his theology became profoundly incarnational *and* apophatic. In the traditional mystical literature the image of "ascent" is used to describe the movement from the self to union with Ultimate Reality. Neoplatonic sources are evident in such a scheme that passes through the stages of purification, illumination, and union. It would be more accurate in Merton's case to portray his development as a spiraling inward and outward simultaneously where the contemplative, or liturgical experience of God was the ground for the experience of God horizontally in the world. In his Christ-mysticism Merton believed God is found in the center of the self.

This view of Christ as the human face of God and the divine face of humanity expanded Merton's poetic vision to encompass the totality of human experience. He believed that in Christ God emptied himself and took on the weakness and ordinariness of a human being, but "not only 'this' man, but also, in a broader and more mystical sense, yet no less truly, 'everyman.'"⁹ Even more directly, he said that "if we believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God, there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ."¹⁰ In a prose poem, "Hagia Sophia," Merton speaks of

6. Nathan Scott, *Adversity and Grace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) 248.

7. Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1979) 21.

8. *Collected Poems*, 635.

9. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962) 294-5.

10. *Ibid.*, 296.

Sophia (Wisdom, Mother of all) crowning the *Logos* with his human nature, thus

She crowns Him not with what is glorious, but with what is greater than glory: the one thing greater than glory is weakness, nothingness, poverty.¹¹

For Merton Christ disappeared and disappears into humanity as the ultimate *mythos*, the sacred empties itself of itself and becomes as nothing, with the mission to love unto death. The poem concludes with an image of this incarnational hiddenness in humanity:

The shadows fall. The stars appear. The birds begin to sleep. Night embraces the silent half of the earth. A vagrant, destitute wanderer with dusty feet, finds his way down a new road. A homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identification, without even a number, a frail expendable exile lies down in desolation under the sweet stars of the world and entrusts Himself to sleep.¹²

The image of Jesus for Merton had ranged from the Son of God, the King, the cosmic *Logos* and Pantocrator to the universal man and hidden center of human existence. The eschatological, universal work of Christ was to be found in the historicity of humanity and the history of human persons. The incarnation was seen more as a present involvement of God in the world and not only as a one-time historical engagement. Merton believed that religion has a share in the responsibility for the destructive isolation of Christ from the existential nexus of life in the world.

A disincarnate theology became for Merton a flagrant absurdity that obscured experience of authentic human life and the sacred. It was such conventional theology that helped pave the way for the rise of atheism and agnosticism in the modern world. Regarding such an accepted conflation of supernaturalism, power and will, Kilcourse says "Merton goes on to diagnose the Christian fault in imaging Christ as Prometheus. This image had justified war, pogroms, crusades, Auschwitz, the atomic bomb."¹³ It is one reason Merton felt a special bond with those atheists who refused to accept the image or idea of a God that seemed to deny the full integrity of human life.

11. *Collected Poems*, 363.

12. *Ibid.*, 370-1.

13. George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993) 200.

Merton wrote a number of essays on the work and thought of Albert Camus and sensed a closeness with the French atheist because of Camus' fierce desire to seek truth. Camus dismissed the idea of God "as irrelevant because it is *inaccessible* to the mind and experience of so many modern people."¹⁴ Merton believed Camus failed to realize that love for God and love for people were the same love, that love of God did not negate the value or dignity of human life. Merton focused upon Camus' novels and upon his depiction of the mythical figure of Sisyphus. Camus had said that for moderns the only real philosophical question is whether or not to commit suicide. Camus' Sisyphus, the "hero of the absurd," faces an impossible task symbolized in his being condemned to roll the stone up the hill over and over again because it rolls back down just as he reaches the top. Merton sees in Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* a statement against suicide as an authentic response to the absurd. Sisyphus faces his impossible situation and "having finally elected to give it meaning by freely embracing its absurdity, he has overcome absurdity."¹⁵ Merton admired Camus' courage and commitment to facing the absurd and death in the name of freely deciding to live his life. For Merton, life as absurd was a more genuine response than theological idols that both trivialized God and debased being human.

An awful sense of being a victim of love, especially when all seems absurd, is welcomed by the mystic for as Merton said, "love is the epiphany of God in our poverty."¹⁶ The old ideas/idols are to be abandoned as one travels the darkness of faith (i.e., dark to the discursive understanding towards God). Merton saw that darkness as the agony of truth gradually being disclosed in the ancient sense of *aletheia*, or un-hiddenness. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* he wrote, "it is precisely anguish and inner crisis that compel us to seek truth, because it is these things that make clear to us that we are sunk in the hell of our own untruth."¹⁷

Kilcourse has added to Woodcock's characterization of Merton's poetry as "poetry of the choir" and "poetry of the desert" by examin-

14. Patrick Hart, ed., *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1981) "Terror and the Absurd: Violence and Nonviolence in Albert Camus," 248.

15. *Ibid.*, "Three Saviors in Camus: Lucidity and the Absurd," 286.

16. "As Man to Man," *Cistercian Studies* IV (1969) 93.

17. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965) 183.

ing the "poetry of paradise consciousness" and "poetry of the forest." A lost, forgotten (but not totally unremembered) unity is dissolved, for Merton, in a profane(d) life lived in the isolation of the empirical (false) self. The contemplative "return to paradise" is both psychological and ontological. The sin is to forget, neglect or reject one's true self or nature. Kilcourse explains that "what becomes crucial is Merton's appreciation of sin as an ontological lapse, not merely a moral lapse. Sin violates the person's very *being*."¹⁸ by making being itself banal. Therefore, Merton's incarnational vision of reality is a path of reconceptualization and reincorporation of the sacred in relation to human consciousness and identity. His poetry then becomes an emblem of the metaphor of metaphor-making within contemplative awareness of the paradox of a "paradise" regained that was never actually lost.

What is this "paradise consciousness" for Merton? It is the true self come to realize that it never has and never could exist except in a unity with the sacred. This is a universal and unique trauma of the human heart that helps connect Merton to his readers.

Much of the power of Merton's appeal to readers revolves around his autobiographical wrestling with the superficiality of an external persona, a seductive "false self" that paralyzes the authentic power of love and communion. The "true self" is easily chased into hiding or appears wearing a disguise.¹⁹

This kind of disguise is to Merton the persona of a veritable hell.

III. Emblems for a Pilgrim

A key collection of poetry for this study is *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963). The Second Vatican Council was in its second session. Merton was still Master of Novices. Late that year President John Kennedy was assassinated. *Emblems* is a varied collection of poems of social protest and poems clearly influenced by Merton's study of Zen. The previous year Merton had been ordered by his superiors not to publish anything further on the issues of war and peace. The conflict within him about his desire for more solitude continued. In 1960 a building was constructed on the monastic grounds which Merton was allowed to use alone for a few hours each day. His abbot discouraged

18. Kilcourse, 53.

19. *Ibid.*, 76-7.

Merton's ideas about joining another, more eremitic, order such as the Carthusians or the Camaldoli.

Merton's apophatic contemplation continued, but a long-suppressed openness to the world had begun in the late 1950s and can be found in the social protest poems in *Emblems*. The very word "fury" is not too strong for the emotions now released within Merton. He not only protested war and racism, but his own illusions. It was a time of crisis. His inner dark night was not only about solitude and contemplation, but about love. He had felt that he could never really, fully love because he was not worthy of love. The paradox is that the more solitude he was to have, the greater became his passion for the state of the world and his compassion for others. As his theology became more incarnational, his poetry became more simply paradoxical.

In a 1963 letter Merton constructed the image people had of him and how distorted it was. Fr. M. Louis Merton, O.C.S.O., was not the serene and detached monk and mystic of light that the early image may have projected. He would always struggle with and against the image manifested by the popularity of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He said that those who believe in such an image

do not know how unwilling I would be to have anyone repeat in his own life the miseries of mine. That would be flatly, a mortal sin against charity. I thought I have never done anything to obscure the lack of anything that a monk might conceive to be a desirable quality. Surely this lack is public knowledge, and anyone who imitates me does so at his own risk. I can promise him some fine moments of naked despair.²⁰

"Naked despair" is an appropriate way to describe the mystic night where knowledge seems to have been lost and love is more dreadful, demanding and "awful" than consoling, more an incarnational experience of emptiness than of fullness.

Poetry marks Merton's inner longing for only that which will suffice. This explains, as Kilcourse describes, Merton's interest in the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, who "grew more and more important in Merton's understanding of poetry. He described him as the poet of *Innerlichkeit*, inwardness or interiority."²¹ Merton's other interests in-

20. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston, Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1984) 393.

21. Kilcourse, 53.

cluded Pasternak, Suzuki, Weil, Russian mystics, Central and South American poets, Sufis as well as nuclear war, racial equality, Asian religions, modern monasticism and fourteenth century mystics. In 1961 he wrote

I am still a 14th century man: the century of Eckhart, Ruysbroeck, Tauler, the English recluses, the author of "The Cloud," Langland and Chaucer—more an independent and a hermit than a community man, by no means an ascetic, interested in psychology, a lover of the dark Cloud in which God is found by love. This is what I am: I must consent to be it and not be ashamed that I am not something more fashionable.²²

As his poetry became more simple, "flattened," freer of traditional meter, poetic diction and imagery, he worked to allow the words, the semantic associations, to speak for themselves. Sometimes the result was more didactic than poetic vision, but *Emblems* is a collection that tries to hold together Merton's far-reaching sides. It is the emergence of Merton's dialectical synthesis of mystical and social, monastic and worldly, poetic and religious, sacred and profane. *Emblems* "proved a watershed in Merton's transformation as a poet . . . (he) wrestles openly with spiritual crisis. The poems open to a more universal experience."²³ His incarnational mythopoetics unites the unique with the universal.

Emblems of a Season of Fury opens with "Why Some Look Up to Planets and Heroes." For Merton the real voyage is into the fathomless reaches of the true self where God is found, not simply into the space-time continuum. He sees a "hero" as one willing to "travel" into the void of God in order to experience God *and* one's true self. His critical attitude towards the use of technology sees it as a modern pseudo-religion where ". . . the computers are convinced / Fed full of numbers by the True Believers."²⁴ One can only speculate on what Merton's thought would have become in today's artificial intelligence, Information Processing System, technophilic, virtual reality age. Just as he saw the use of drugs as a futile attempt at an infantile, instant mysticism, so too he saw the idolizing of technology as a modern form of magic that seeks a mechanical solution to spiritual questions. Merton did not

22. Mott, 362.

23. Kilcourse, 62.

24. *Collected Poems*, 307.

live to see humans land on the moon in 1969, but he tended to see space as symbolic of the mystic's darkness, cold and forbidding, but also beautiful, revealing and compelling. Space was more a theological and poetic reality for Merton than a scientific one and to ignore the inner chaos led to great danger because in such a world "Your own ill-will / . . . Peoples the world with specters" ("Macarius and the Pony").²⁵

The incarnation of Christ meant for Merton a progressive incarnating of the sacred in the profane where each was transformed. As the sacred was described in terms of silence or darkness or emptiness, it lost its previous conceptual limitations. Thus, the night was an essential "sickness" prior to union with the divine. Merton also believed Zen could enliven the heart of the Christian faith which for him was not "doctrinal formulas, juridical order and ritual exactitude . . . (but) a living experience of unity in Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulations."²⁶

"Song for Nobody" is a brief poem where a flower is a concrete image for existence itself, where words cannot say what the flower "says" simply being what it is. One is reminded of Eckhart saying that if one understood something as simple as a flower and how it has its existence in God, one would know more than the world. By not turning the flower into a "thing" as in Tennyson's "Flower in a Crannied Wall" where the flower is picked, objectified and thus killed, Merton sees that the flower is empty of the ego-attachment which is a millstone and albatross to human awareness.

A yellow flower
(Light and spirit)
Sings by itself
For nobody. . .

(No light, no gold, no name, no color
And no thought;
O, wide awake!)

A golden heaven
Sings by itself
A song to nobody.²⁷

25. Ibid., 318.

26. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 39.

27. *Collected Poems*, 337, 338.

The flower is a symbol for the sacred and the way the sacred is more than any possible idea of the sacred. The Zen influence is apparent. A little flower can lead to insight or enlightenment as much as anything else for "the ordinary experience of everyday life is the 'place' where enlightenment is to be sought."²⁸ Quoting D. T. Suzuki, Merton emphasized the need for the little flower to be left alone by the grasping mind and simply to be seen as, of all things, a little flower:

Zen always aims at grasping the central fact of life, which can never be brought to the dissecting table of the intellect. To grasp the central fact of life, Zen is forced to propose a series of negations. Mere negation however is not the spirit of Zen. . . . When the spirit of Zen is grasped in its purity, it will be seen what a real thing that (in this case a flower) is. For here is no negation, no affirmation, but a plain fact, a pure experience, the very foundation of our being and thought. All the quietness and emptiness one might desire in the midst of most active meditation lies therein. . . . Zen must be seized with bare hands, with no gloves on.²⁹

The flower is to be seen in its suchness, in its original innocence with the "bare hands" of pure consciousness in the immediate moment, with what Christian contemplative tradition calls "purity of heart." As Kilcourse says, "the flower's wakeful presence to the inner self depends on the absence of all other identities. . . ."³⁰

In this poem and others such as "Song: If You Seek. . .," "O Sweet Irrational Worship," "Night Flowering Cactus," "Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing," and "The Fall," Merton is both disclosing a Zen influence upon him and reacting against a centuries-long tradition in the West that went from medieval universalism to modern nihilism to reductionistic relativism to an ontological, psychological sense of absolute autonomy. G. K. Chesterton had said that if God or the sacred is lost or forgotten, it is not that people will believe in nothing, but that they will believe in anything. The sociologist of religion, Peter Berger, agrees with this view when he calls our time an "Age of Credulity" where no ideas or practice, no matter how implausible or destructive, can not find its followers. The medieval cosmos was a living vine of symbolic truths about God and reality. By the twentieth

28. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Dell, 1969) 223.

29. D. T. Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (London, 1960), cited in *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 49.

30. Kilcourse, 65.

century the shared meanings had dissipated and writers, artists and poets were careening to create their own symbol systems and mythic patterns, or else abandoning the need for such ancient truth-telling vehicles altogether.

Where was the place for the divine in such a scheme of things? Initially it had seemed like a great liberation, but the loss of the power of the symbol (and an incarnational, sacramental vision) came at high cost. Eric Heller in "The Hazard of Modern Poetry" portrays the change this way:

Reality, freed from its commitments to the symbol, became more really real than before. The hand of man, reaching out for his reality, was no longer unsteadied by the awe and fear of the symbolic mystery. He acquired the surgeon's hygienic dexterity. And reality, pressed the mechanic way, yielded ample nourishment real, if not divine. As reality became more real, so the symbol became more symbolic and art more artistic. . .

But there were also signs of uneasiness. They mounted to a climax of tension in the seventeenth century. What was first felt to be a liberation appeared more and more as a robbery. Robbed of its real significance, what did the symbol signify? Robbed of its symbolic meaning, what did reality mean? What was the State on earth? A Leviathan. What was God? More and more a *deus absconditus*, an infinitely remote and impenetrable veiled God.³¹

An inevitable Enlightenment, rational utopia in a machinomorphic cosmos beckoned.

In the nineteenth century the biological theories of evolution were also transposed into cultural and sociological theories of a momentum of momentous "progress." Thomas Huxley coined the term "agnosticism." For the first time in human history, theoretical atheism was not only the view of a growing number of people, but it was hailed as more moral and intellectually honest than theism. By the twentieth century logical positivism and analytic philosophy were saying that the traditional questions of religion and philosophy, such as whether there is a God or spirit, refer to nothing real, i.e., "verifiable" by empirical investigation. They were deceptive, even illusory language games and thus, "non-sense." This was the atmospheric impetus for Merton's subsequent antipoetry, "to give the world back its language, to

rescue us from the tyranny of logical positivism's absurdities. . ."³² A brief look at Merton's antipoetry will conclude this examination.

A societal focus upon facticity and technology did not bring the psychological, moral and spiritual "progress" as had been expected. Merton recognized this and sought a way to return poetry to its truth-telling capacities as the mother tongue of humanity and the vision quest. It was in the Zen poems that he expressed an alternative to the trivialization of metaphysics through the experience of darkness, emptiness and the void. As a Christian, Merton found that "God Himself, the personal God, is the *deepest center* of consciousness and unification,"³³ but that God was No-thing, not an object as other objects that exist. God was empty and void of "God," God was dark to the intellect. Merton came to echo Eckhart's words that "there is something in the soul so closely akin to God that is already one with him and need never be united to him."³⁴ In the incarnational experience there is no-where to go since one has been found already by whom one seeks. An emblem of this vision is a spiraling circle going nowhere and, thus, everywhere. Dogen, a foundational figure in Zen, said that "if you can't find the truth right where you are, where else do you think you will find it."³⁵

Zen greatly helped Merton to a deeper understanding and experience of the sacred by pointing him towards direct, unitive experience empty of abstractions and corrective of his tendency towards wordiness. In both Zen and mysticism in general the paradox is that "emptiness is the fullness, the fullness the emptiness; the darkness is the light, the light the darkness."³⁶ Suzuki says that "as Buddhists would say, the realization of Emptiness is no more, no less than seeing into the nonexistence of the thingish ego-substance. . . (and that) to be absolutely nothing is to be everything"³⁷ for to seize upon something as an object is to limit the experience of all else. For Suzuki the void or zero is a creative womb and source of all good which he puts this way: zero = infinity, and infinity = zero. Merton accepted the saying that "Zen is your everyday

32. Kilcourse, 171.

33. *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 69.

34. Raymond Blakney, trans., *Meister Eckhart* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941) 205.

35. Stephen Mitchell, ed., *The Enlightened Mind* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993) 101.

36. Walter Stace, *The Teaching of the Mystics* (New York: New American Library, 1956) 237.

37. *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 109.

31. Giles Gunn, ed., *Literature and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 172-3.

mind" where enlightenment, or what Merton called "metaphysical intuition of the ground of being," is to be "found" in the midst of concepts and contradictions, anywhere and everywhere, because "you cannot find it anywhere at all, because in fact it is nowhere in the first place."³⁸

In "Song: If You Seek. . ." solitude is portrayed as the teacher who leads into emptiness, "Opening the windows / Of your innermost apartment." It is the "now" that "cuts / Time like a blade" and is the silence beyond distinctions which enables God to be heard. If solitude is followed, it will lead to "golden-haired suns, / Logos and music, blameless joys, / Innocent of questions / And beyond answers. . ." The closing lines identify the solitude as the person's true self where nothingness and all are one. Silence has the final word because it encompasses all that is and is not:

For I, Solitude, am thine own self:
I, Nothingness, am thy All.
I, Silence, am thy Amen!³⁹

"O Sweet Irrational Worship" shows the change from Merton's early analogical dualism between the natural and the supernatural. As far back as *The Ascent to Truth* (1951) Merton was saying that "in mystical experience, God is 'apprehended' as unknown. . . He becomes present not in a finite concept but in His infinite reality which overflows every analogical notion we can utter of Him."⁴⁰ In the poem Merton speaks of a union of the self with nature:

By ceasing to question the sun
I have become light,

Bird and wind.

My leaves sing.

I am earth, earth.

The world becomes more real in the union of natural and supernatural. It is no longer simply analogous of the sacred, but is the sacred in its profane identity. Thus, Merton proclaims

38. Ibid., 33.

39. *Collected Poems*, 341.

40. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981) 83.

My heart's love
bursts with hay and flowers.
I am a lake of blue air
In which my own appointed place
Field and valley
Stand reflected.

I am earth, earth.

The transformation of the self which is so key to Merton's incarnational idea of the sacred is given mystical expression in "Night-Flowering Cactus." The usually thorny, thus perilous, cactus blooms suddenly during the night. Just as mystical experience is often characterized as momentary and ineffable, so too is this flowering: "I know my time, which is obscure, silent and brief / For I am present without warning one night only."⁴¹ In the dark the real flowering appears, a symbol for the true self which is empty of all the ego-serpents of the daylight, or discursive consciousness. The flowering is "my timeless moment of void" which Lentfoehr sees as reflecting both Zen consciousness and

the Eckhartian concept of "perfect poverty" that occurs only when there is no self left as a "place" for God to act in, and hence He acts purely in Himself. It is only then that one comes to his true "self" or, in the Zen terms, the "no-self," in which one achieves his true identity which consists in "the birth of Christ in us."⁴²

The transformed self is innocent and "As a white cavern without explanation" that speaks with a silent voice:

When I open once for all my impeccable bell
No one questions my silence:
The all-knowing bird of night flies out of my mouth.

The mystic vision not only startles, but starts a change in all who experience it:

You live forever in its echo:
You will never be the same again.

41. *Collected Poems*, 351.

42. Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1979) 61.

"Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing" is about the emptiness and creative darkness of spiritual experience. The scene is winter. There seems to be no life, no words to speak. Yet, there is something here that is full of life though it is hidden by the snow and barrenness. The seeming death is an image of the dark night which Merton interpreted as "the necessary condition of the soul prior to union with God."⁴³ It is a matter of "waiting upon God in darkness."⁴⁴ Inside of nature and more pointedly, inside the human spirit, Merton finds the fire of the sacred at "a burly infant spot," and calls upon silence to "love this growth." The self grows in the fertile darkness of the sacred which is likened to "golden zero / unsetting sun." What seems to all appearances to be purely profane is in reality a womb for the sacred teeming with unlimited life. The poem ends with "Love winter when the plant says nothing."⁴⁵ The cold and dark winter is the mystical darkness which Merton sees as the fire that destroys false persona so that the true self can fulfill its destiny.

In "Grace's House" Merton writes about the drawing of a house on a hill by a four-year old girl. He sees her world as "O paradise, O child's world!" which is separated from our world by an uncrossed river, a "crystal / Water between our ignorance and her truth."⁴⁶ It is a picture of the house as the sacred center of the child's world, on the holy mountain as in some transformed world where the sacred and the profane have become one:

No blade of grass is not blessed
On this archetypal hill,
This womb of mysteries.

But as Lentfoehr emphasizes, the leitmotif of the poem is that

There is no path to the summit—
No path drawn
To Grace's house. . .

Alas, there is no road to Grace's house!

43. John Teahan, "A Dark and Empty Way: Thomas Merton and the Apophatic Tradition," *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 58, no. 3 (July 1978) 271.

44. Thomas Merton, *What is Contemplation?* (Holy Cross, Ind.: St. Mary's College, 1948) 24.

45. *Collected Poems*, 353.

46. *Ibid.*, 331.

The house itself is the geography to travel, it is both the path or road and the map of the path. As Merton writes in "The Fall,"

This is the paradise tree. It must remain unseen
until worlds end and arguments are silent.⁴⁷

IV. The Pilgrimage Goes Public and Profane

Merton came to see that the aesthetic and the mystical were to serve each other in acting against what was to him the murderous anesthetic, necrophobic mentality of the age. His poetry loses its detachment and becomes "flattened," the theological imagery replaced by realistic reporting. There are several poems in *Emblems* that illustrate this low-toned approach to what Merton sees as evil.

"Chant to be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces" is a droning poem spoken by the commander of a Nazi death camp. The matter-of-fact tone, the quotations, the obsessions with cleanliness amidst the killing of children, women and men, the mechanical recitation of events, the grotesque euphemisms are powerful:

How we perfectly cleaned up the people and worked a big heater

I was the commander I made improvements and installed a guaranteed system taking account of human weakness I purified and I remained decent. . .

I made cleaning appointments and then I made the travellers sleep and after I made soap. . .

When trains arrived the soiled passengers received appointments for fun in the bathroom they did not guess. . .

Another improvement I made was I built the chambers for two thousand invitations at a time the naked votaries were disinfected with Zyklon B. . .

I guaranteed the chamber and it was sealed you could see through portholes. . .

How I could tell by their cries that love came to a full stop I found the ones I had made clean after about a half hour. . .

How I commanded and made soap 12 lbs fat 10 quarts water 8 oz to a lb of caustic soda but it was hard to find any fat. . .

47. *Ibid.*, 355.

You smile at my career but you would do as I did if you knew yourself and dared

In my day we worked hard we saw what we did our self-sacrifice was conscientious and complete our work was faultless and detailed. . .⁴⁸

For Merton this view is the result of a world without the sense of the sacred to disclose the value of the profane. All becomes mechanistic and death-bound, a brutal compound of necrophobia and necrophilia. The murderers seem so sane in many ways, they can appreciate music, love their families and dogs and then go to work where they commit genocide all in a day's labor.

The more Merton's incarnational transformation continued, the more his image of Christ embodied the sufferings of people. Dietrich Bonhoeffer had a view of God as suffering with people:

God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. . . The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help.⁴⁹

Bonhoeffer wants to take the world and human suffering in all seriousness.

Nearly twenty years after Bonhoeffer's death Merton was himself engaged in a dialectical process with the world. In a letter to Czeslaw Milosz in 1959 Merton talked about Christ being "profaned" in the suffering of the death camps:

Whatever the mystery of Providence may be I think it is more direct and brutal in a way. But that is never evident as long as we think God apart from the people in the concentration camp, "permitting them to be there for their own good" (time out while I vomit). Actually it is God Himself who is in the concentration camp. That is, of course, it is Christ. Not in the collective sense, but especially in the defilement and destruction of each individual soul, there is a renewal of the Crucifixion. . .⁵⁰

48. *Ibid.*, 345-9.

49. Eberhard Bethge, ed., *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1953) 360-1. This passage is from July 16, 1944.

50. Merton to Czeslaw Milosz, May 21, 1959, as cited in Mott's *Seven Mountains*, 358-9.

Merton emphasizes that it is in the self that Christ is found, the self that lives in the world, even the hellish world of the camps, not in the disincarnate empirical ego that is without any world because it is totally and only with and for itself. This all meant for Merton an acceptance of the profane as both real and necessary for the *kenosis* or emptying of the true self and the sacred. He wrote that God was not a working hypothesis or stop-gap for holes in the scientific worldview, but present in the self and world.⁵¹ Kilcourse calls this Merton's kenotic and incarnational Christology where

the Christ of kenosis subverts for Merton any complacency in his own spirituality. He discovers the epiphany of Christ in the human experience of poverty, in historical discontinuities, at the margins of Christendom, and in the rejection and vulnerability of the world's scarred victims and despised outcasts.⁵²

In 1963 four black children were killed in Birmingham by a bomb during Sunday school. Merton's response is found in "Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll."⁵³ The bombing was for Merton both an indictment of personal and societal evil and a horrible manifestation of the need of love: "(Yet how deep the wound and the need / And how far down our hell. . .)." The poem is addressed to one of the little girls murdered, Carole Denise McNair, a victim of those she was so far beyond because she knew the need for a love ". . . without malice / And by a better instinct. . . ." For Merton a disembodied compassion is an oxymoron, an impossible delusion. His Christocentric, incarnational, contemplative theology led him to see individual and collective egoism as unabashedly evil.

Emblems of a Season of Fury was a pivotal work written at a pivotal time in Merton's life. His own dark night had begun to find some initial dawning. The Indian poet, Tagore somewhere calls a mystic a "bird of dawn" and Merton was such a bird. The dark dawn disclosed a conscious union with a God who was more radically incarnational than ever before to Merton and a union with the experiences of people all over the world, past and present. He came to see that the sacred was to be found in the center of history, historical consciousness and the profane. In his theology of kenotic compassion the furies of the dark night became strange

51. *Conjectures*, 320.

52. Kilcourse, 43.

53. *Collected Poems*, 626-7.

emblems of an awful and necessary season of the true self's emptiness into Christ. Besides, for Merton there were few emblems of anything.

Although a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, the attitudes that created *Emblems* and were created by it issued in the anti-poetry of Merton's final major volumes of poetry, *Cables to the Ace* (1968) and *The Geography of Lograire* (1968).

Cables to the Ace chronicles the incarnation of the sacred in its prosaic disguises. In this volume Merton continues his life-long theme of union with God, cables to "the ace of freedoms." Christ is mentioned only late in the poem. This meditation is an attempt, an experiment, to experience the sacred in an age that seems to have abandoned even the memory of the sacred. The poem is political, social, anthropological, eschatological and mystical.

Near the close of the poem Merton mentions the "ace" for the first time:

I am about to make my home
In the bell's summit
Set my mind a thousand feet high
On the ace of songs. . .⁵⁴

While the manipulative and anti-communicative world burns itself out, the image of free-flying birds is used to intimate inner freedom:

But birds fly uncorrected across burnt lands
The surest home is pointless:
We learn by the cables of orioles.

The ground for this freedom is the "ace of freedoms" which is Merton's way of speaking of God and of union with God "in the bell's summit." In the swarm of spiritual numbness that Merton has talked about in much of the poem he is able to find the still point that transforms the entire world for the self by mystical oneness with God. Merton's inner geography had expanded to include everyone's geography. The "cables" are as the support for a bridge to the summit. Is it strange to see this whole book as a love poem? Lentfoehr does:

This message to the age, an ironic and witty variously structured antipoem, rich in allusion and aimed at a technological

54. *Ibid.*, 453.

society that dehumanizes man, can have its genesis only in a heart permeated with God's love and love for all human-kind.⁵⁵

The poem is an antipoetry poetics of incarnated love.

Cables did not fully succeed and suffers from what many modern poets have found in trying to create a work without culturally and religiously formed symbols and imagery, namely, a subjectivist expression that sometimes eludes the reader's understanding. But what Merton began in *Cables*, he developed more fully, and more successfully, in his final major poem, *The Geography of Lograire*.

The poem remained unfinished at the time of Merton's death. In the preface he said that it was "only a beginning of patterns, the first opening of the dream. . . (the) struggle of love and death." It is a vision of the fundamental unity of humanity with Merton, as narrator, serving as the hub for the various times, places, cultures, events. Through "found poetry" and by a continuation and expansion of the mosaic kind of collage begun in *Cables*, Merton developed what he called a surrealist meditation. By contrasting primitive kinds of cultures with the modern, he implies that much is to be gained by a renewal of contact with the unconscious forces and symbolic vitality of the old ways. With alternations of prose and poetry based upon extensive readings in the hermitage at Gethsemani, the poem attempts to manifest the worth of all people. Merton called it his offbeat anthropology. It sees history as a contemporaneous whole in the experience of each person. In the Prologue to the North canto, Merton feels the unity of human geography:

Explain the air of all
Feel it under (me)
Stand
Stand in the unspoken
A cool street
An air of legs
An air of visions

Geography.
I am all (here)
There!

55. Lentfoehr, 45.

The whole work ends in despair. There is no appended theological caveat which rescues the situation from its tragic reality. *Geography* is Merton's geography of the way to realize that the sacred has no meaning in the modern world apart from an intimate knowledge of its incarnation in the midst of human idols, hells, worldliness. Thus, to hold that a monastic life was a retreat and escape from the "world," as the young Brother Louis did in the 1940s, was an insult against the world, the monastic life and the sacred. Merton's paradise became less a nostalgic look at a primal unity and more an embrace of the bloody, beautiful world where Ranters, Cargo cults, Arctic expeditions, sterile technological flights and tragic Indian ghost dances were all part of the flesh and spirit of that world.

Merton's incarnational vision combined with the influence of Zen to yield for him a sacred season of love and death where, as he stated in connection with his mystical experience at the Buddhist shrine at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka shortly before his death, "everything is emptiness and everything is compassion." Electrically burned in death, Merton in life had burned for a union with his God and with all peoples. His poetry incorporates the intellect and the furies of the unconscious as it integrates contemplation with social concern, aesthetic with religious meaning. It helps to restore to poetry its truth-telling, myth-sharing, shamanistic, prophetic role by disclosing the incarnated experience of the sacred. The mystical and the worldly unite in his idea of the sacred.

Midnight!
Kissed with flame!

See! See!
My love is darkness!

Only in the Void
Are all ways one:

Only in the night
Are all the lost
Found.

In my ending is my meaning.

("The Night of Destiny")⁵⁶