

# The Experience of Romantic Transcendence in Thomas Merton's *Eighteen Poems*

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## Abstract

This article explores Thomas Merton's experience of romantic transcendence in his collection of poems entitled *Eighteen Poems*. These poems were written by Merton in 1966 and published posthumously in 1985. In 1968 Thomas Merton made the following remarks to a writing class in Louisville: 'We have to write poems that are Poems. We have to learn the knack of free association, to let loose what is hidden in our depths, to expand rather than to condense prematurely. [We need] to release the face that is sweating under the mask and let it sweat out in the open for a change...' The article examines Merton's poetic release. The first section is the introduction and framework of the paper. The second section focuses on the *Eighteen Poems* and investigates Rosemary Haughton's theory of romantic breakthrough. Sections three and four explore Merton's Proverb dream, integration and obedience.

**Keywords** romantic transcendence, romantic breakthrough, integration, obedience

## 1. Introduction and Framework for Investigation

It could be said that Thomas Merton had a series of 'births' in his lifetime. These events were carefully documented in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in his *Journals*, selected letters and poems. Merton states the obvious when he writes that birth is an interdependent process between mother and child.

No one ever got born  
All by himself: it takes more than one.<sup>1</sup>

These two lines are also significant as they pertain to the examination of *Eighteen Poems*, romantic transcendence, and Merton's relationship

1. Thomas Merton, *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985). Note: *Eighteen Poems* does not have page numbers—poems will be identified by title only.

with 'M'.<sup>2</sup> If one believes that the spiritual journey includes not only biological birth, but conversion, a rebirth experience as well, it too, 'takes more than one'. As Jesus taught Nicodemus: 'Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to the Spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying "You must be born again"' (Jn 3.6-7). Unequivocally, Merton poetically sums up the biological within the spiritual process. As Victor A. Kramer has observed in correspondence, a distinction has to be made between Merton as poet (and his experiences) and the persona in his poems. Many of the poems in *Eighteen Poems* can be read as autobiographical though they are not always so. 'Untitled', I believe, is the poetic expression, one of many in the collection of his experiential event, his relationship with 'M'.

Rebirth, as defined in this context, is an equation made up of one person plus an 'other' and lead to the first section, the framework for investigation: establishing the connection between Rosemary Haughton and Thomas Merton followed by a brief analysis of Haughton's model of exchange.

Although Rosemary Haughton had been reading Merton since her conversion to Catholicism as a teenager, they did not meet until October 1967. His writings remained important to her, but at the time of their meeting she was unaware of Merton's relationship with 'M'.

Merton symbolized for me through many years the unattainable good that always eluded me. He remained the sign and guarantee of the still, vivid, and incorruptible heart in a religion that had all too many obviously deathly and trivial aspects.<sup>3</sup>

It was much later that she sensed things about him which allowed her to make connections between her work and his experience.<sup>4</sup> In a letter dated February 1998 she wrote:

I myself had only a brief acquaintance with Thomas Merton, though I have a few of his letters. But I'm told after I met him he expressed the opinion that this might one-day be referred to as the age of the 'Mother of the Church' because of the importance of the female point of view, experience as insight.<sup>5</sup>

2. See Thomas Merton's *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; Journals, VI; 1966-67; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. xiv.

3. Eilish Ryan, *Rosemary Haughton: Witness to Hope* (St Louis: Sheed & Ward, 1997), p. 53.

4. Interview with Rosemary Haughton, Gloucester, MA, December, 1996.

5. Personal correspondence between Rosemary Haughton and Andrea Cook, December 1996-August 2000.

A few days after their fall meeting, Merton wrote in his journal:

The other day Rosemary Haughton came out (between lectures in Minneapolis and Chicago). It was curious to meet a theologian who is six months pregnant. In a long black cloak with hair blowing in the wind she sat on the concrete dam of Dom Frederick's lake. I hope my picture of that is good. She is quiet, intelligent, not the obstreperous kind of activist concerned about a real contemplative life continuing, etc.<sup>6</sup>

Rosemary Haughton recalling that meeting remembered 'his complete humanness, one that did not reject secular culture or bow down to it, but made it fully human by the presence of Christ'.<sup>7</sup> For a few hours that day in October, the abbey of Gethsemani was the setting for a meeting between the contemplative and the mystic, the theologian and the poet.

In 1981 Rosemary Haughton published a book entitled *The Passionate God*. One of its major themes is the identification and explication of the four stages in the pattern of transforming breakthrough. There is convincing evidence that Haughton's model of exchange not only substantiates the transforming relationship that occurred between Merton and 'M' but supports the theory that their relationship reached a stage of final transformation or full conversion. This conversion is representative of the total acceptance of change. Haughton's perception of this transformation is a personal salvation event.<sup>8</sup> Merton's relationship with 'M' can thus be viewed as a personal salvation event.

The model of exchange occurs in four stages. Haughton categorizes these stages as *remote* and *immediate preparations*, *actual breakthrough*, and *final phase*. Remote preparation usually means a lengthy process. There is restlessness within the person. It is inward and spiritual. There is a sense of obscure need, a desire for something or other, without any clear notion of what is desired.<sup>9</sup> *Immediate preparation* evolves from this restlessness and desire. A 'weak spot' is thus created. The weak spot can be a person, a place, an event; 'something that happens which shakes the person loose from normal expectation and settled attitudes'.<sup>10</sup> To help clarify these two stages: remote preparation can be emotional and intuitive; one has a vague sense of something. Immedi-

6. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (ed. Patrick Hart; Journals, VII, 1967-68; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 4.

7. Ryan, *Rosemary Haughton: Witness to Hope*, p. 54. See essay as cited: 'Bridge Between Two Cultures'.

8. Ryan, *Rosemary Haughton: Witness to Hope*, p. 87.

9. Rosemary Haughton, *The Passionate God* (Mahweh, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 59.

10. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 59.

ate preparation is focused and defined leading to expectation and anticipation. There might also be fear in this stage of the unknown that lies ahead. The actual breakthrough 'occurs in the often-painful self-giving response to the offer of some intensely desired wholeness'.<sup>11</sup>

The breakthrough is not private; by its very nature it is other-directed. The results of this process of breakthrough are dependent on a shared language. The shared language of Thomas Merton's breakthrough is illustrated in *Eighteen Poems*. Section 2 will more closely examine and illustrate Haughton's four stages but as a means of introduction first consider the allusion to the experience of breakthrough found in the final stanza of the poem entitled, 'Louisville Airport':

There is only this one love  
which is now our world  
Our foolish grass  
Celebrated by all the poets  
Since the first beginning  
Of any song.

The tension of breakthrough is conveyed through Merton's use of language. Uniqueness is compared with the universal 'one love, our world, our foolish grass' and counterpoints the 'celebration of all the poets'. The immediacy of the 'now' contrasts with 'the first beginning' of life, of love, 'of any song'.

Following the actual breakthrough comes the final phase, which is the integration and interpretation of the event. This processing, of full conversion, represents the total acceptance of exchange.<sup>12</sup> Merton's *Eighteen Poems, Retrospect, A Midsummer Diary for 'M'* and journals are the textual explorations, integration, and interpretation of his remote and immediate preparations. These lead to the actual breakthrough and final phase of integration and conversion. In the poem, 'Six Night Letters', Stanza 6, integration is implicit in the lines

Writing to you  
Is like writing to my heart  
You are myself

Merton's journal *Retrospect* is not presently available to scholars. However, Michael Mott did have access to it and wrote the following comment regarding Merton and 'M': 'They both knew their relationship had changed'.<sup>13</sup> Mott also quotes from isolated pages of Merton's

11. Ryan, *Rosemary Haughton: Witness to Hope*, p. 97.

12. Ryan, *Rosemary Haughton: Witness to Hope*, p. 97.

13. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 443.

journal, unpublished from the James Laughlin Archives: 'There is something deep, deep down in us darling, that tells us to let go completely... But the far more thrilling surrender...where there is no veil of illusion between us.'

The 10,000 word journal entitled, *A Midsummer Diary for 'M'*, begins with the sentence, 'On the account of how I once again became un-touchable'.<sup>14</sup> Within the first few pages of the diary Merton poses this question to 'M': 'Do you wonder what I am thinking at a given moment? Think of the deep and lasting essence of our love: it is the root of all my thoughts.'<sup>15</sup>

A few pages later he more fully develops this statement:

On the level of pure fact: we love each other as we have never loved anyone else, and the love remains. Neither of us will do anything to destroy it or falsify it. It will live as long as we live, and we will live forever. Your presence is pure and quiet and secure, the more so as I myself am free, attuned to the reality and absurdity of my life, and obedient to God.<sup>16</sup>

Rosemary Haughton wrote, 'the experience of genuine Romantic passion is of quite central importance in understanding the nature of human beings as God-created and God-centered'.<sup>17</sup> Merton's love for 'M' was an opportunity for him to understand his human nature as created by God and as defined within his vows of obedience and stability as a Cistercian. His poetry articulates the tension of their relationship and his deep love and friendship for a woman named 'M'.

## 2. Eighteen Poems and Romantic Breakthrough

Rosemary Haughton closely examines the use of poetic language, and views it as

the accurate language of total integration, the expression of passionate love, the accurate language of theology. The languages of poetry and theology are always searching for words that will convey a truth whose essence is infinitely precise yet never capable or complete articulation. Poetry is the most accurate way that some inkling of an incommunicable experience is communicated. This too, is theology.<sup>18</sup>

14. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 303.

15. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 306.

16. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 316.

17. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 60.

18. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 6.

The 1989 spring edition of *Cross Currents* included an essay written by Doug Burton-Christie entitled, 'Rediscovering Love's World: Thomas Merton's Love Poems and the Language of Ecstasy'. In this essay, Burton-Christie refers to Merton's book, *Eighteen Poems*, as his 'testimony regarding his experience of love'. Merton's particular 'experience of love' is the central theme of this paper in the context of his poetic language. *Eighteen Poems* articulates Merton's passionate breakthrough and exchange and according to Haughton, the resulting poetry of this experience is personal and particular. The paradox is that often a universal is tucked within the particularity. The poem, 'For M. in October' illustrates this point. Stanzas 1 and 3 begin 'If you and I could...' What experience of love has not had the 'if you and I could' moments, those times of poignant longing for what could have been. Stanza 2 begins,

If we could come together like two parts  
Of one love song

This is the expression of desire for union, completion, the mystery of two becoming one. The particular of the relationship between Merton and 'M' is in Stanza 3, Line 11: 'You wake in another room'. Merton writes from the room of his hermitage to 'M' who lives in her dormitory room in Louisville. He will always write from this room, as she will always wake in hers. Her bed can only be 'a nest in my heart'. This poem conveys the cruel irony of their relationship. Love desires union but their reality dictated separation would be their fate.

Did Thomas Merton glean new theological insights from his experience of love? Poetry is also defined as 'an art which has for its object the creation of intellectual pleasure by means of imaginative and passionate language'; theology is 'the science which treats of God and man and all their known relations to each other'.<sup>19</sup> In 1966, Merton wrote, *Raids on the Unspeakable, Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander*, and the text for *Gethsemani: A Life of Praise*. He revised the Preface for the Japanese edition of *Thoughts in Solitude*. His journals were later compiled as Volumes 6 and 7, from 1966 through 1968.<sup>20</sup> In a review of *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*, Anne Carr wrote, 'Throughout this journal, Merton's Christianity is vivid'.<sup>21</sup> Scholars have not ranked Merton as a theologian, yet his prose reveals countless theological insights and a profoundly Catholic witness. The prose writings are not

19. *Webster Encyclopaedic Dictionary* (Chicago: Consolidated Book Publishers, 1971), pp. 640, 868.

20. Merton, *Learning to Love*, and *The Other Side of the Mountain*, respectively.

21. See *America*, 3 October 1998.

only theological in nature but can stand up to the scrutiny of examination in the light of his particular experience of romantic breakthrough. For within the experience is also the paradox of solitude and love. Merton wrote, 'Who knows anything at all about solitude if he has not been in love, and in love *in his solitude*?'<sup>22</sup> The true answer to the question of living in solitude and loving lies within the human experience, and it is my premise that Merton's poetry is his other attempt to probe and explicate this dilemma of solitude and love.

*Eighteen Poems* sheds new light on the idea of human salvation through unconditional, passionate love. The validity of his experience of love rests on its being a reflection of the divine, salvific, incarnational love of God. Salvific love is transforming and Merton's writings clearly indicated that he had a glimpse of the divine in his experience with the feminine other. His writings move out of the realm of intellectualized theology and into the new experiential language of poetic revelation. Thomas Merton was a truth seeker who passionately pursued God. He writes in Stanza 4, 'Untitled Poem':

Heaven weeps, without cause  
Forever if I do not find  
The question that seeks me.

His vocation was to find the question that would bring him home.

The bird finds this doubt  
Broken in the fever  
And knows: 'You are my glory  
And I your answer –  
If you have the question.'<sup>23</sup>

All creation was created in the image, likeness, and glory of Creator God. And only God has the answers. Perhaps it is the vocation of humanity to ask the question. The question leads us home, gives us

A way home to where we are  
Epiphany and Eden  
Where two lost questions  
Make one orbit.<sup>24</sup>

Merton desired, above all else, simply to love and please God, in obedience. At first glance, it seems as if he had met all the necessary requisites: as Cistercian monk, priest, and hermit, he embraced silence

22. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 315.

23. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'Untitled Poem', Stanza 11.

24. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'Untitled Poem', Stanza 14.

as his salvational milieu. All these appeared as strengths, but in truth they made him vulnerable. These virtuous choices, in some paradoxical fashion, seem to have provided the weakness that allowed for the passionate exchange of human love and grace. Merton's personhood was more wholly realized in his empowered exchange with 'M' and his breakthrough fused the feminine to the masculine within him. This integration was part of Merton's 'disentangling of the deepest self, a transformational process familiar to every saint and mystic'.<sup>25</sup> His love for 'M' was the grounding from which he confidently answered God's ultimate question to him: 'Tom, what do you want me to do for you?' With love and tenderness, he answered the question, quite finally, with his life.

Romantic breakthrough is a fundamental fact of human experience. It is signified in the 'breakthrough' of spiritual power and vision occasioned by the encounter of passionate love.<sup>26</sup> What is passionate love? Haughton clarifies the adjective *romantic* and the encounter of *passion* by stating that

Romantic love concentrates on the experience of passion, the release of spiritual power in and between, a man and woman through their specifically sexual, but not primarily genital encounters. Passion *might* be expressed in physical intercourse, but this was in a sense *tangential to the central experience*.<sup>27</sup>

The characteristics of romantic breakthrough are universal. The question that leads up to and surrounds the event and those answers are where individuation occurs within the experience of love. Romantic breakthrough can be understood as a poetic and theological paradigm when it is examined within the context of Haughton's four point criteria:

1. How did the exchange occur?
2. Why with this person?
3. Why then?
4. Why thus?<sup>28</sup>

Thus there is a specific order to romantic breakthrough. First, there is the *remote preparation*, which is the foundation for the *immediate preparation*. From within the *immediate* is a *vulnerable point* that makes,

25. Ryan, *Rosemary Haughton*, p. 145.

26. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 45.

27. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, pp. 44-45 (my italics).

28. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 58.



causes, or discovers the *breakthrough* itself. Once breakthrough occurs, the last requirement of the affective experience is a *language*. Furthermore, remote preparation is usually a lengthy process, whereby the person, both consciously and unconsciously, is inclined to recognize and *want* something similar to romantic experience. Haughton importantly connects this preparation with adolescence. If 'nothing' happens in adolescence it is because growth has been, somehow, arrested.<sup>29</sup>

The remote preparation leads to the immediate, the encounter with the person who will be 'the' person, but in whom the 'Beatrician' experience has not yet appeared. There is within the person *something* which is on the lookout for itself. All is new—yet this is 'home'. The response to this recognition is passion: the thrust of the whole personality towards the strange 'home' it perceives. It is accompanied by intense emotion. Passion is the thrust which leaps void, a leap of faith, and powerful emotion is released by it.<sup>30</sup>

The language of the experience is communal. The breakthrough cannot be 'private' since its results depend upon a shared language. Merton was a prolific writer of prose. According to Haughton's definition, this was not *the* language of Merton's articulation of his breakthrough experience. Poetry was the shared language of the experience of passion. Passion is the release of spiritual power between a man and a woman in the universal context, and also in the particular. *Eighteen Poems* is the result of Merton's *breakthrough*.

'The Geography of Lograire', one of Merton's later 'experimental poems, is prefaced with his 'Author's Notes'. He wrestles with the vocation of a poet and writes:

A poet spends his life in repeated projects, over and over again attempting to build or to dream the world in which he lives. But more and more he realizes that this world is at once his and everybody's. It grows out of a common participation that is nevertheless recorded in authentically personal images.<sup>31</sup>

With Merton's experience of romantic breakthrough, this full energy of exchange of life became available *because* something was 'wrong' with the situation.<sup>32</sup> In order to identify the wrong, and this is not usually an isolated event but one that many experiences are built upon, it is important to examine the maternal weak spot which was a major

29. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 59.

30. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 60.

31. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 457.

32. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 36.

contributing factor in the familial estrangement in Merton's life. The connection can then be established within the theological paradigm.

Merton's mother, Ruth Jenkins, died in 1921 from stomach cancer at the age of 34. Merton was only six years old. His father died 10 years later and his brother, John Paul, died in 1943 during World War II. All of these tragedies contributed to Merton's remote preparation as well as being instrumental to his conversion to Catholicism. Merton's memory of his mother's death was the fact of her cremation. There were no memorial or burial services. Decades later he wrote, 'I realized today after Mass what a desperate despairing childhood I had'.<sup>33</sup>

Because of Ruth's premature death, Merton was deprived of a feminine, maternal presence in his formative years. This event can be categorized as remote preparation which laid the base for what would become immediate preparation. The vulnerability or 'weak' spot is as identifiable in his search for the feminine as his lack of religious upbringing was in his search and conversion to Catholicism. These two weak spots converged during a visit to a church in Rome in 1933. Merton experienced an 'attack of religion' and thought about buying a candle for his father—and one for his mother. Then he thought how mystified she would have been at this impulse. She had made so little of dying, or tried to make little of it and failed.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout his life, Merton remained intimidated by his mother. His memories were of a woman who could be cutting, cold and intellectual. Forty-five years after her death he dreamt of her: 'I see a tangle of dark briars and light roses. My attention singles out one beautiful pinkrose, which becomes, luminous...my mother's face appears behind the roses which vanished.'<sup>35</sup>

The Ruth who had been cutting became beautiful in Merton's dream. The mother who was cold was now transformed amid the thorns, revealed within the beauty of a single rose that lingered, and suddenly disappeared. Perhaps this dream for Merton was a moment of maternal resolution, approval, and healing. It is significant to note that this dream occurred a few months after meeting 'M'.

John Paul Merton's death and the impact it had on Thomas can also be examined in light of remote preparation. By 1943, Merton had converted to Catholicism and was a Cistercian monk living at Gethsemani. There he was notified that his brother had drowned in a war-related accident. Grief-stricken with the news, he wrote the poem, 'For

33. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 11. Journal entry dated 24 January 1966.

34. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 68.

35. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 87. Journal entry dated 25 June 1966.

My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943'. A breakthrough of sorrow had occurred, and Merton turns to poetic language for expression.

Sweet brother, if I do not sleep  
 my eyes are flowers for your tomb  
 The silence of whose tears shall fall  
 like bells upon your alien tomb  
 Hear them and come: they call you home.<sup>36</sup>

The emotional intensity of this poem, its grief-filled remote preparation, resonates years later in the poem, 'With the World in My Bloodstream'. Merton was again experiencing feelings of loss and estrangement in his relationship with 'M'. Disconnected and wandering within the confines of his hermitage, poetic language relieves the pain. In this poem, Merton writes about home, which is ironic in light that home held no particular familial memory.

What recovery and what Home?  
 I have no more sweet home.<sup>37</sup>

Home, a word associated with nurturing and protection, is not part of Merton's familial experience. He was deprived of an environment that fostered security through maternal nurturing. Home, which should have provided comfort and consolation, 'is strange' in this poem.

Home makes another appearance in the poem, 'Evening: Long Distance Call'. The place that should connote unconditional love, acceptance and familiarity, is again a place that is strange.

We are separate in strange places  
 Home is strange  
 For the desolate

Home should be the place where the desperate are welcomed. Merton cannot elicit those memories from his own experience.

'Untitled Poem' and 'Certain Proverbs Arise Out of Dreams' are two poems which probe feelings of deep grief and abandonment. Meaning becomes incarnated as flesh and a personified heaven cries:

Across the river my meaning has taken flesh  
 Is warm, cries for care  
 Across the river  
 Heaven is weeping.<sup>38</sup>

36. Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 35-36.

37. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'Untitled Poem'.

38. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'Untitled Poem'.

Agonizing human grief disorients Merton's heart and hearth. It suggests that the human spirit can quickly plunge into despondency that is as black and unfathomable as the ocean:

I wake with a cry and loud tears  
My house and my heart founder  
In deep darkness.<sup>39</sup>

The experience of grief, rooted in the very depths of Merton's being, is a critical component of his 'remote preparation'.<sup>40</sup>

The feelings of abandonment and loneliness continue to echo in 'Aubade on A Cloudy Morning':

I am waiting now pacing up and down  
In this uneasy and lonely place  
Waiting once again to live.

The 'place' is the hermitage, home, and yet those old unresolved memories of home make their way into this poem once again. Those powerful memories are full of agitation. There is no solitude of place, only loneliness. 'I' has become a player in the waiting game, emotionally crippled, biding time until death.

The poem, 'May Song' conveys the poet's feelings of loss and helplessness in its water imagery. Merton's voice has shifted from the 'I' persona to 'We' who shares the feelings and perhaps fear of suffocating and drowning:

We are lost  
In the unexpected light  
We drown in each other  
Can you still breathe?

There is an implicit tension between the unmoored 'we' that is drowning in 'other'. Can one drown and still breathe? Can two drown, while one remains breathing?

Haughton identifies five additional components of remote preparation. They are restlessness, a sense of obscure need grabbing at trappings of luxury, heroism, sensuality, and an expressive desire for something or other.<sup>41</sup> All of these characteristics can be identified in *Eighteen Poems*.

'Aubade on a Cloudy Morning' reveals the *restlessness* of Merton's spiritual journey as it explores his unsettled relationship with 'M':

39. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'Certain Proverbs Arise Out of Dreams'.

40. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 59.

41. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 59.

Even though I am at war with my own heart  
Because I am never by your side.

The unrest is also documented in his journal:

But that is in me too, the instinct to suddenly go and not know where or why I am going...a throwback to my natural self, the guy that used to vanish into the heart of France or Germany and just wander.<sup>42</sup>

The allusion to a sense of *obscure need* to perhaps sleep, dream, when tempted by wealth, appears in Stanza 2, 'Six Night Letters':

How can I sleep exhausted  
In the midst of fortune  
Or dream of this day  
Deeper than any day

The persona of a *romantic hero* is revealed in the poem, 'A Long Call is Made Out of Wheels':

Princess of my world  
In your fabled river tower  
You run from room to room  
Til your sweet joy  
Is very near  
  
And the boom of my freights  
Can crowd you with glory

The 'prince' gives his command and the horns of the freight trains give glory to the princess who lives in her dormitory room. The common wail unites the princess with her distance prince.

Your blue skirt  
is wet with melted ice  
And Sauterne  
  
The sun dries us  
You tell me last night's movie  
One I never saw.

These lines from the second stanza of 'May Song' are wonderfully impressionistic in their *sensuality*. The setting is erotically tense, and the mundane talk about yesterday's movie acts as a controlling restraint. Restraint yields back to sensuality in Stanza 4:

Lost, lost the words of poem sound  
And in your listening heart  
Are finally found  
In this heaven let me lie down  
Under the fragrant tent  
Of your black hair.

42. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 320.

The *expressive desire for something or other*, something ambiguous, perhaps suggestively pagan, is expressed in Stanza 1 of 'Cancer Blues'.

It's a long hot night for cancer blues I sing  
I listen to the tree frogs and rain while someplace  
Else my Baby grows to be a magic Indian healer  
My sweet Babe with special ways to fight a fever and cure  
The biting black root-idea  
With level-headed advice and love for the hopeless hunted  
SOUL.

How does one heal a 'hopeless hunted soul'? Is the longing for something, 'to be a magic Indian healer', instead of a nurse? This might suggest romantic *heroism* as well. In the midst of pursuing an *expressive desire*, might one become feverish, need 'Baby's' cure, and need pragmatic advice for a 'hunted soul'?

Stanza 2 continues:

It is a long night or rain to pass my time  
with cancer of the heart  
But my Baby glows like medicine out there in the dark

The ambiguous dark, the only medicine for heart cancer is a Baby that glows. The mention of cannibals and tribes in the last two lines of this stanza as well as other like terminology throughout the poem anticipate imagery that Merton will use again in 'The Geography of Lograire'. This imagery refers to the Cargo movement. In a letter to Naomi Burton Stone, dated 27 February 1968, he explained some of the special significance which the Cargo myths had for him:

Cargo movements properly so called originated in New Guinea and Melanesia around the end of the 19th century and developed there especially after World War II...

A Cargo movement is a messianic or apocalyptic cult movement which confronts a crisis of cultural change by certain magic and religious ways of acting out what seems to be the situation and trying to get with it, controlling the course of change in one's own favor (group) or in the line of some interpretation of how things ought to be.

Cargo is relevant to everyone in a way. It is a way in which primitive people not only attempt by magic to obtain the goods they feel to be unjustly denied them, but also and more importantly a way of spelling out their conception of the injustice, their sense that basic human relationships are being ignored, and their hope of restoring the right order of things.<sup>43</sup>

Baby is a metaphor for hope and restoration of the 'right order of things'. In Stanza 7 she is encouraged:

43. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 604-605.

But hold on Baby and believe and be a healer  
 Be an Indian photo-electric  
 CURE  
 And if you don't know any winner bet on the  
 kind that runs

This world of remote preparation is explored through the poet's participation and record of what rings true according to personal experience. Poetry, by its nature, explores the universal experience, sometimes from the lens of the personal. In light of these statements, the last stanza (9) of the poem is a triumph of justice over oppression and disease, and a celebration of the restorative power of love.

It is a long time to forget how low we grow  
 Another night older Baby and alone while I  
 Am kicking the bitter cancer bucket out of my heart  
 While you become a lucky Indian  
 STAR  
 And now while you draw closer you point silently down  
 You never miss you point right down to the  
 ROOT CURE  
 All the way down in the sweet summer earth to clean  
 The hunted heart of the hell-blues because you are grown  
 Into a healer. You kicked the fever  
 And you won me Honey for keeps you won me  
 In the summer finals  
 Complete with cancer of the heart.

### 3. Immediate Preparation and the Proverb Dream

The discussion of the foundational components of *romantic breakthrough* has been important because it is the underpinning for *immediate preparation*. Immediate preparation creates a 'weak spot'. Something happens: 'And now I fear a chain of events has started that cannot be stopped – only slowed down, directed, guided (I hope!)'.<sup>44</sup>

Merton's 'something' was someone who shook him loose from all previous expectations and attitudes. He lost his 'vague sense of need' while something within him was 'on the lookout for itself'.<sup>45</sup> To lose one's life is to gain it; to become vulnerable is to become strong. The 'weak spot' creates new sense of urgency which leads to joy.

To sing is to begin a sentence  
 Like 'I want to get well.'

44. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 44.

45. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 60.

'I am not born for nothing  
And neither are you:  
Heaven never wept  
Over nothing.'<sup>46</sup>

Singing is often an expression of joy. Perhaps the joy allows the courageous statement; 'I want to get well'. Merton's physiological 'weak spot' was multiple health problems which included insomnia, colitis, dental problems, chronic dysentery, dermatitis, and cervical spondylosis.

In the midst of *immediate preparation* can be a moment of *immediate recognition*. The image of 'home' makes this point clear:

So all theology  
Is a kind of birthday  
A way home to where we are  
Epiphany and Eden.<sup>47</sup>

Merton, like Haughton, described the paradox of knowing what is new can also be a recognition of what is familiar. Mythic Eden, the primordial, universal home, is the place

Where we eternally come home.  
To taste the creation of life  
At that soft point  
Where the heart somersaults.<sup>48</sup>

No one gets there alone; '*we* eternally come home'.

The immediate recognition, then, is the culmination of the remote experience. As stated, the primary event that shaped Merton's remote experience was the death of his mother and his resulting homelessness. In *Eighteen Poems*, home is a metaphor for feminine and masculine integration. This 'soft point' of love is another 'weak spot'. Love makes the heart somersault; love gives one freedom for exploration. Freedom is not easily won and Merton continued to struggle, deeply aware of the hazards in coming home:

What recovery and what Home?  
I have no more sweet home.  
I have no more sweet home.<sup>49</sup>

46. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'Untitled Poem', Stanza 12.

47. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'Untitled Poem', Stanza 14.

48. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'May Song', Stanza 5.

49. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'With the World in My Bloodstream', Stanza 5.



On Easter Sunday, 10 April 1966, Merton wrote, 'I do feel a deep emotional need for feminine companionship'.<sup>50</sup> The 'companionship' with 'M' had begun prior to this date. Merton calls their relationship one of 'spiritual love': 'I do so much want to love her as we began, spiritually—I do believe such spiritual love is not only possible but does exist between us, deeply, purely, strongly'.<sup>51</sup> Merton poetically translates this statement in the poem, 'Evening, Long Distance Call'. The irony of their relationship of companionship is their separation. In Stanza 3 'M' is

...two hundred miles away  
 With people I am not able to imagine  
 You might as well be gone  
 Into another country where love's language  
 Has never been spoken.

Unreconciled to the fact of their geographic separation, he continues (Stanza 6):

What is sweet about this bitter  
 Division? It is death  
 It is the devil's kingdom  
 We are two half-people wandering  
 In two lost worlds.

Merton is neither here nor there. His 'feminine companionship' is with 'M's voice on the telephone. Divided by space and time, they are both trapped in the 'devil's kingdom'. If being in love is like heaven, this is the antithesis. There is no wholeness; they will never be 'one' and as 'two half-people' they are doomed to wander in two separate and 'lost worlds'. Stanza 5 of 'Six Night Letters' is somewhat hopeful but emphasizes the 'abyss' of their separation:

You come to me like a cry  
 Born of my own abyss and wild  
 Gulf born of my mystery  
 Breaking out of the untranslated heart-song.

Merton is on the journey, trying to go home, within the kingdom of God. Now 'M' has become his companion in what becomes their spiritual journey. The distance is great for they have been

...born a thousand  
 miles away from home.<sup>52</sup>

50. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 38.

51. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 46.

52. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'Untitled Poem', Stanza 2.

Their spiritual journey becomes a theology, giving reason and substance for its being:

So all theology  
Is a kind of birthday  
A way home to where we are.<sup>53</sup>

Stanza 14 brings a resolution of sorts to the dilemma posed in Stanza 1 of the poem:

All theology is a kind of birthday  
Each one who is born  
Comes into the world as a question  
For which old answers  
Are not sufficient.

We are born alone in order to be reborn in an other. Within this context, Merton was faced with another paradox of living a spiritual life: the healthy balance of contemplation and companionship.

Merton experienced a glimpse of the holy and the feminine in the Proverb Dream. Rosemary Haughton's paradigm allows a close re-examination of the dream within the context of the 'M' encounter. How did Merton 'know' what he had dreamt, and in catching this particularized glimpse, recognize her years later in the exchange that took place when he met 'M' on 31 March 1966 in his hospital room in Louisville, Kentucky? Some people only get one glimpse, one sighting in an entire lifetime.

The feminine principle in the world is the inexhaustible source of creative realizations of the Father's glory. She is His manifestation in radiant splendor! But she remains unseen glimpsed only by a few. Sometimes there are none that know her at all.<sup>54</sup>

Merton was graced with dreams that anticipated the exchange that occurred that morning. 'Such is the awakening of one man, one morning, at the voice of a nurse in the hospital.'<sup>55</sup> Their first meeting established an immediate familiarity, limited conversation, and touch—'M' had arrived in his room to give him a sponge bath. 'In the cool hand of the nurse there is the touch of all life, the touch of the spirit.'<sup>56</sup>

I will never forget that morning of March 31st. I will never forget that Wednesday in Holy Week, that rainy night when you came in before

53. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'Untitled Poem', Stanza 12.

54. Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, 'Hagia Sophia' III, xiv, p. 369.

55. Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, 'Hagia Sophia' III, xiv, p. 364.

56. Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, 'Hagia Sophia' III, xiv, p. 364.

going to Chicago, and when we were too tongue tied to say what we almost knew. And the night after that when I lay awake and realized I that I loved you. How glad I am that they led to such wonderful days together.<sup>57</sup>

All of these details are important in light of Haughton's criteria: *Why with this person, why then, and why thus?*<sup>58</sup> In order to understand this event, it is necessary to examine Merton's account of his earlier dream.

February 28, 1958

Yesterday turned into a day of frustrations—minor ones, anyway.

But, after all these things, I had a dream. It may have no connection with them whatever.

On the porch at Douglaston I am embraced with determined and virginal passion by a young Jewish girl. She clings to me and will not let go, and I get to like the idea. I see that she is a nice kid in a plain, sincere sort of way. I reflect, 'She belongs to the same race as St. Anne.' I ask her her name and she says her name is Proverb. I tell her that is a beautiful and significant name, but she does not appear to like it—perhaps the others have mocked her for it.

When I awake, I rationalize it complacently. 'I loved Wisdom and sought to make her my wife'—Sophia (it is the *sofa* on the back porch...etc., etc.) No need to explain. It was a charming dream.<sup>59</sup>

Merton's journal entry, 14 April 1966, Easter Thursday, records his first dream after meeting 'M'.

I dreamt that I was talking to Dom Vital and that he made sense; [and was] sitting in prayer before the Bl [essed] Sacrament. For my part I too am becoming once more myself, deeper and deeper. It is shocking to realize that you sometimes have to get yourself back when some great trauma has broken in on you... One thing has suddenly hit me—that nothing counts except love and that a solitude that is not simply wide-openness of love and freedom is nothing. Love and solitude are the one ground of true maturity and freedom. Solitude that is just solitude and nothing else (i.e. *excludes* everything else but solitude) is worthless. True solitude embraces everything, for it is the fullness of love that rejects nothing and no one, is open to All in All.

One worry remains—numbness in the right leg. Is there another problem?

57. Merton, *Learning to Love*, 'A Midsummer Diary for "M"', p. 347.

58. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 58.

59. Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton: His Life from his Journals* (eds. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), pp. 123-24.

...I have got to be faithful, detached, obedient, concerned not only for my own life as I want to live it, but for God's will that remain to be realized in and through me. That is all.<sup>60</sup>

The Proverb Dream is followed by two 'letters' to her; one written in the journal on 4 March 1958 and the other on 19 March. Merton's dream eight years later has two important details: meditation before the Blessed Sacrament and the hospital experience. The Proverb Dream is an interactive discussion between the young Jewish girl and Merton. His dream that shortly follows M's exchange of 'affection—undisguised and frank',<sup>61</sup> is a restatement of theological convictions regarding love, freedom and solitude within his monastic vows of stability (faithfulness) detachment and obedience. A hint within his faithful determination illustrates a *breakthrough* has occurred. Merton has 'one worry' and asks, 'Is there another problem?' Human integration and its resolution are at the core of his concern.

The day before the Easter Thursday dream Merton wrote the poem, 'With the World in My Bloodstream'. Recapping Haughton's statement regarding poetry and theology, it is not surprising that Merton responded to these dreams by writing, since it is through 'the languages of poetry and theology' one searches for words that will reveal truth.<sup>62</sup>

March 4, 1958

Dear Proverb,

For several days I have intended to write you this letter, to tell you that I have not forgotten you. Perhaps now too much time has gone by and I no longer exactly know what I wanted to tell you—except that, though there is a great difference in our ages and many other differences between us, you know even better than I that these differences do not matter at all. Indeed, it is from you that I have learned, to my surprise, that it is as if they never existed.<sup>63</sup>

The major difference between the letter and the poem is the letter confidently states the fact that 'differences do not matter at all'. The 'difference' between Merton and 'M' is implicit in the poem and quite possibly provokes the question. If he chooses to risk loving 'M', loving her as Christ loves, in the context of *agape*, can a monk ever 'risk' loving a woman?

60. Merton, *Learning to Love*, pp. 39-40.

61. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 38.

62. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 6.

63. Merton, *The Intimate Merton*, p. 123.

Evasion is no answer, and I am not sure I have a real answer or know just what to do. I have only in the end to trust God in this as in all my other perplexities and He will bring me through all right.<sup>64</sup>

It is not surprising that Merton also acknowledges his fear.

I will do the only thing possible, and risk loving with Christ's love when there is so obvious a need for it. And not fear!  
 ...I have got to dare to love, and to bear the anxiety of self-questioning that love arouses in me, until 'perfect love casts out fear.'<sup>65</sup>

The poem 'With the World in My Bloodstream' wrestles with the emotion of fear and the questions of identity. The last line of Stanza 1 set the tone of the poem: 'I wonder who the hell I am'.

Stanza 2: *Whose life is this?*<sup>66</sup>  
 Thanks to this city  
 I am still living  
 But whose life lies here  
 And who's invented music sings?

Stanza 3: *What has awakened the question?*  
 All the freights in the night  
 Swing my dark technical bed  
 All around overhead  
 And wake the question in my blood

Stanza 5: *What is the question and what does it mean?*  
 While in my maze I walk and sweat  
 Wandering in the low bone system  
 Or searching the impossible ceiling  
 For the question and the meaning

Stanza 6: *Heal thyself?*  
 World's plasm and world's cell  
 I bleed myself awake and well

Stanza 8: (conclusion) *The questions reach resolution: Life without an identity is emptiness.*<sup>67</sup>  
 Love without need and without name  
 Bleeds in the empty problem  
 And the spark without identity  
 Circles the empty ceiling.

The second paragraph of the 4 March 1958 journal entry expresses Merton's thankfulness to Proverb:

64. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 45.

65. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 44.

66. Italics introduce my questions that summarize cited stanza.

67. Italics introduce my statement that summarizes the final stanza.

How grateful I am to you for loving in me something that I had thought I had entirely lost and someone who, I thought, I had long ago ceased to be. In you, dear, though some might be tempted to say you do not even exist, there is a reality as real and as wonderful and as precious as life itself. I must be careful what I say, for words cannot explain my love for you. I do not wish by my words to harm that which in you is more real and more pure than in anyone else in the world – your lovely spontaneity, your simplicity, the generosity of your love.<sup>68</sup>

The 4 May 1966 journal entry alludes to the Proverb passage. Merton, writing about 'M' states:

...it makes sense. Here is someone who, because I exist, has been made much happier and who has made me happier, and revealed to me something I never thought to see so intimately again – the beauty of a girl's heart and of her gift of herself. But this is one of the great, deep realities...<sup>69</sup>

The Proverb letter continues:

In your marvellous, innocent love you are utterly alone: yet you have given your love to me, why I cannot imagine. And with it you have given me yourself and all the innocent wonder of your solitude.

Dear, should I ask myself seriously if I will ever be worthy of such a gift?<sup>70</sup>

'M' has a similar innocence. She is 'familiar' to Merton. She is someone he has 'remembered'.

She was perfectly happy and at peace, with a blissful, childlike kind of happiness about our meeting.

...There is in her a wonderful sweet little-girl quality of simplicity and openness and I suppose this is closest to being her true self.<sup>71</sup>

She has settled down to a sweet little girl happiness that completely disarms and ravishes me. I just don't know what to do with my life, finding myself so much loved, and loving so much...<sup>72</sup>

The second Proverb letter, 19 March 1958 prophetically anticipates the dream of 2 July 1960 as well as the meeting between Merton and 'M' on 31 March 1966.

Dear Proverb, I have kept one promise and I have refrained from speaking to you until seeing you again. I knew that when I saw you again it

68. Merton, *The Intimate Merton*, p. 123.

69. Merton, *Learning to Love*, pp. 50-51.

70. Merton, *The Intimate Merton*, p. 123.

71. Merton, *Learning to Love*, pp. 46-47.

72. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 50.

would be very different, in a different place, in a different form, in the most unexpected circumstances. I shall never forget our meeting yesterday. The touch of your hand makes me a different person. To be with you is rest and truth. Only with you are these things found, dear child sent to me by God!<sup>73</sup>

Merton's tone in this letter is one of awe and wonder. He recognizes his new wholeness: 'the touch of your hand makes me a different person', and his being rests in her peace and truth. Proverb/Wisdom appears again in a dream on the Feast of the Visitation. Merton is a patient at St Anthony's Hospital in Louisville when

at 5:30, as I was dreaming in a very quiet hospital, the soft voice of the nurse awoke me gently from my dream—it was like awakening for the first time from all the dreams of my life—as if the Blessed Virgin herself, as if Wisdom had awakened me. We do not hear the soft voice, the gentle voice, the feminine voice of the Mother; yet she speaks everywhere and in everything.

...all that is sweet in woman will awaken him. Not for conquest and pleasure, but for the far deeper wisdom of love and joy and communion.<sup>74</sup>

Merton's childhood had been deprived 'of the soft voice' after the death of his mother. But deep within him was the memory of his distant, artistic mother, and the remembrance of the feminine. Once again, a dream recalls what 'is sweet in woman'. Proverb reawakened the memory he recognizes as peace and truth, perhaps maternal security. In this dream the Mother awakens the deeper triad: 'love, joy, and communion'.

Merton and 'M' meet. There is an immediate *exchange*. There is recognition, response and action. 'All that is sweet in her will speak to him on all sides in everything, without ceasing, and he will never be the same again.'<sup>75</sup> 'Why "M"? Why at this time?' There is only one answer according to Haughton's criteria. It happened 'at this time' because Merton had a particularized moment of breakthrough. All of his past experiences led to one moment of recognition. Merton 'sees' Proverb in the very flesh of his beloved, 'M'.

It is like being awakened by Eve. It is like being awakened by the Blessed Virgin.

It is like coming forth from primordial nothingness and standing in clarity, in Paradise.<sup>76</sup>

73. Merton, *The Intimate Merton*, p. 125.

74. Merton, *The Intimate Merton*, p. 158.

75. Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, 'Hagia Sophia' II, vi, p. 366.

76. Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, 'Hagia Sophia' I, vii, p. 364.

Merton's *remote* and *immediate* preparations are evident in the second paragraph of his journal entry:

My heart is broken for all my sins...  
for the rottenness of our spirit of gain that defiles wisdom in all beings –  
to rob and deflower wisdom as if there were only a little pleasure to be  
had, only a little joy and it had to be stolen, violently taken and spoiled.

The death of Merton's mother robbed him of his childhood. His early adult relationships with women were mostly 'for conquest and pleasure'. Both events 'defiled wisdom'; his heart was broken 'for all my sins'. In light of his past, Merton seeks forgiveness.

'Hagia Sophia' is Merton's imaginative poetic expression of his 'glimpse' of Sophia. Part 3, Stanza 15, enumerates the qualities of 'Sophia, the feminine child':

[she is] mercy, tenderness, kindness, the yielding and tender counterpart of the power, justice and creative dynamism of the Father.

The qualities have become self-evident and will manifest themselves again in the person of 'M' and within the *Eighteen Poems*.

'Certain Proverbs arise out of Dreams' is his poetic account of the incarnational exchange between himself and 'M'. In Stanza 1 the glimpse is caught within his dreams and again he recognizes the feminine reality.

Certain proverbs arise out of dreams which are not known to the analyst, when a sleeper wakes up with the cry that he has seen everything. But before the cry is silent he has already forgotten all that he saw.

The 'cry' is one of enlightenment, but can also signal recognition of the past 'dreams', and rebirth. 'Everything' is familiar. Merton specifies that 'certain proverbs' wisdom or truths, come from dreams, and cannot be interpreted or 'known to the analyst' because they have been sent 'from the depths of the divine fecundity'.<sup>77</sup>

'Hagia Sophia' cross references not only with the journal accounts as cited, but also with this poem. Section 1.4, recalls Merton's poetic insights when awakened in the hospital. Later, it seems he had a sense that it all 'was too good to remember':<sup>78</sup>

I am like all mankind awakening from all the dreams that ever were dreamed in all the nights of the world.  
It is like the first morning of the world (when Adam, at the sweet voice

77. Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, 'Hagia Sophia' I, ii, p. 363.

78. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'Certain Proverbs', Stanza 2.



of Wisdom awoke from nonentity and knew her), and like the Last Morning of the world when all the fragments of Adam will return from death at the voice of Hagia Sophia, and will know where they stand.

Merton's dreams are the 'certain dreams [that] reveal a day which is not on the calendar'.<sup>79</sup> His dreams break out beyond spatial, human time, and transcend the calendar. When Merton promised not to speak to Proverb until he saw her again, he made that promise in faith and trust believing he *would* see her again in the reality of God's time.

The biblical Hebraic concept of time is not unlike Rosemary Haughton's concept of *breakthrough*: the moment that something *happens*. The Hebrew definition 'means not time in its duration—as a dimension—but rather the moment or point of time at which something happens'.<sup>80</sup>

His faithfulness to the promise is rewarded. In Stanza 12 the dream and the memory is realized and

Together we create the light of this one day for  
each other. This is love's Genesis, always beginning and  
never ending. We are at all times the first day of creation.

The constraints of temporal time are broken in this passage. Genesis is revisited. Immortality has been achieved, death is overcome, and life becomes eternal. Hope re-enters the Garden.

A second memory is retrieved through the senses of touch and sound and alluded to in this poem. Proverb, in 1958, 'clings to me'. In 1960, 'as I was dreaming the soft voice of a nurse awoke me'. Merton is recovering from back surgery in 1966 when

yet another student nurse came in to announce she had just been appointed to this floor...she was 'his nurse' and she was going to begin by giving him a sponge bath. Merton groaned inwardly and identified her as a 'talker'.<sup>81</sup>

Michael Mott also made the connection between 'M' and Proverb: 'If her ancestry was 'dark Irish' there were connections with the Jewish girl, only a few years younger, in the dream...' <sup>82</sup> Reawakened, Merton is released from his promise and can speak again because he has seen again.

After the Wednesday meeting, Merton cannot rest without 'M'. He walks in the hospital garden hoping to see her, misses her the first

79. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, Stanza 3.

80. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. George Arthur Buttrick; Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), p. 64.

81. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 435.

82. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 435.

weekend they are 'apart', fearing that she had been transferred to another ward when she had only not been scheduled to work. When he sees her on Monday he is elated. Two days later they exchange good-byes. He has been discharged from the hospital, and returns to Gethsemani. It is not until March 1967 when Merton writes the full account of their separation.

Holy Thursday

Last night—remembered the Wednesday of last year's holy week, in the hospital—the rainy evening when M. came to say good night before going to Chicago and when I was so terribly lonely, and lay awake half the night tormented by the gradual realization that we were in love and I did not know how I would live without her.<sup>83</sup>

Night allows the dreamer to dream, but it also can be a time for terrifying nightmares or pragmatic reckoning. In Stanzas 6 and 7 Merton has sorted through the dreams and realizes

...There is one dream more  
solemn than judgment day in which the dreamer  
knows that without his Beloved he is lost. So lost that  
no trace of him will ever be found even in hell.

In my sleep I know that without you I am lost and in  
your sleep you know that without me you can no longer exist.

The interdependency of their relationship is acutely painful because of their forced separation. Merton acknowledges that without her he is 'lost'. This anguish is given voice in 'A Midsummer Diary for "M"':

On 18 June 1966 Merton is writing late at night because he cannot sleep; he is physically and spiritually in pain: his arm, his back, his heart is 'empty and desolate'. He 'lay there thinking. And thinking some more.'<sup>84</sup> Merton had become obsessed with the idea that somehow 'M' would find her way to his hermitage, 'even though she has never seen the place and could not possibly find it in the dark, etc. If only there were a soft knock on the door, and I opened it, and it was she standing on the porch.'

In the night, when sounds can be deceiving and one can give into wishful thinking and dreams, Merton gets up and goes outside to stand on the porch:

Nothing. Silence. Vast silence of the woods full of fireflies. The stars...  
Not a light from any house or farm. Only fireflies and stars and silence.  
A car racing by on the road, then more silence. Nothing. Nothing.

83. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 208.

84. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 316. All citations following are from this source.

I am a complete prisoner under these stars. With nothing. Or perhaps everything.

I sit on the porch and deliberately refuse to rationalize anything, to explain anything or to comment on anything. Only what is there. I am there. Fireflies, stars, darkness, the massive shadows of the woods, the vague dark valley. And nothing, nothing, nothing.

Is she thinking of me? Loving me? Is her heart calling to mine in the dark? I don't know. I can't honestly say that I know. I can't honestly say I know anything except that it is late, I can't sleep, there are fireflies all over the place, and there is not the remotest possibility of making any poetic statement of this. You don't write poems about nothing.

And yet.

Somehow this nothing seems to be everything.

Poetry, however, does emerge from Merton's prose, from the 'nothing'. There is a vague hint of something within the nothingness – perhaps it is ambiguity which Haughton defines as 'the essence of poetry'.<sup>85</sup>

Rosemary Haughton's insight regarding the poet and poetic images are significant: poets seldom know completely what they are writing about as they write. Haughton believes that all life is *exchange* and exchange permeates everything. Poetic images are not sourced solely in the conscious mind of the poet, but also from the deeply unconscious sources...as the underlying reality is rediscovered and recreated.<sup>86</sup>

Poetry is often ambiguous – there is the 'and yet' of anticipation, hope, presence, that coexists in a world often filled with the fear of annihilation, finality, nothingness.

In blackest misfortune this comfort comes to the very sorrowful whose pillow is wet with tears.<sup>87</sup>

The 'comfort' is the realization of our human interdependency; 'without you I am lost'. Only in seeking otherness, will there be hope and protection from nothingness. It is in the night, 'when nothing can be seen' humanity must 'turn to the Beloved' for it is in her trusted voice, security and hope can be rediscovered. Beloved Mother, Hagia Sophia, Proverb, Wisdom, 'M' give solace when nothing can be seen but everything heard, having suffered through the dark (Stanza 10).

There is no assurance in daylight that has not been prepared by the dark. In the night when nothing can be seen I turn to my Beloved and her voice is my security.

85. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 137.

86. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 137.

87. Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, 'Certain Proverbs', Stanza 8.

The original sin of pride is faced in Stanza 9 and the penance is swift and just:

My sin was this: I wanted to understand my own  
problem. In punishment for which I was instantly given  
a problem to understand. All understanding then be-  
came impossible until, in my sleep, I turned again to you.

One must become submissive, trusting, when faced with impossibilities. Sleep allows the 'I' the ego, to become vulnerable and yield to the heart. The wrestling with the 'problem' continues in 'A Midsummer Diary':

It is so easy to assume that love is somehow a solution to a problem.  
Like: life is a problem which is impossible until someone comes along  
that you can love. Or man is himself a problem, solved by love. Love is  
a key to a hidden answer in us. And so on. But is it true?<sup>88</sup>

Love may very well be one of the keys that unlock the hidden answer that lies within each person. Jesus said, 'You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free' (Jn 8.32), acknowledging that truth is the first key to unlock a hidden answer. Love rests upon trust. These are the truthful solutions Merton seems to be wrestling with if 'man is himself a problem. It is in 'turning to you' that the problem can be resolved (Stanza 11).

I turn to you and see I have no problem.

Richard DeMartin, in his essay, 'The Human Situation and Zen Buddhism', wrote the genuine quest to 'solve' the koan [problem] is the quest of the split and divided ego to come to its own reconciliation and fulfilment.<sup>89</sup> The authentic struggle is for self-fulfilment. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, this is impossibility without the grace and mercy of God. Enlightenment and compassion are the gifts from God that all humanity longs for. These gifts can be found only in solitude and in love.

Erich Fromm further stated, 'the koan makes it impossible to seek refuge in intellectual thought. The natural koan, a mode or expression of the actual 'question' and the struggle for its 'solution' are equally tortuous life death struggles.<sup>90</sup> To confront the question is to immediately

88. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 307.

89. Erich Fromm, D.T. Suzuki and Richard De Martin, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 159. Note: Merton read this book in 1966.

90. Fromm, Suzuki and Martin, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, pp. 126, 161.

come face to face with one's predicament, wrestle with it and win. For ultimately, 'the winner is he who needs no problem'. There is the struggle between the intellect and the soul. The resolution comes in the integration of not only mind and body, but also male and female. We are God's creation and 'in the image of God he created him male and female he created them' (Gen. 1.27).

The solution for the problem is within the question:

Why has God created you to be in the center of my  
being? You are utterly holy to me, you have become a  
focus of inaccessible light. Suns explode from the light  
you spread through my guts and torn with love for you  
my cry becomes a hemorrhage of wild and cool stars.<sup>91</sup>

The blinding light of the feminine, Sophia, Proverb, 'M', causes suns to spontaneously ignite, and there is fire. The fire unites the divided head and body. His very being is gutted and ripped open by it. Free, 'my cry' rejoices in its rebirth, full of blood and spirit, it soars with the 'wild and cool stars'.

The poem reveals a complete transcendence from the intellectual sphere to a sphere of authentic human integration, awake 'with the knowledge of my whole meaning which is you'.<sup>92</sup>

#### 4. Integration and Obedience

'I Always Obey My Nurse' is the poetic struggle of the integration of knowledge and wisdom, within the context of human integration. Integration, *exchange* occurs because of love, and its integrity is obediently honored. To embrace wisdom is to embrace obedience. Rosemary Haughton states that wisdom 'is the exchange of divine life, love, that is received and given back. Without wisdom there can be no full understanding of why exchange is the stuff of being'.<sup>93</sup>

The book of Wisdom was written in Greek by a member of the Jewish community at Alexandria in Egypt about one hundred years before the birth of Christ. Its literary style is patterned on Hebrew verse. The theme of ch. 1 is God's justice. The book begins (Wis. 1.1-2) with the exhortation to justice, goodness, and integrity.

Love justice, you who judge the earth;  
think of the Lord in goodness  
and seek him in integrity of heart.

91. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'Certain Proverbs', Stanza 13.

92. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'Certain Proverbs', Stanza 13.

93. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 116.

The poem's first stanza is about woundedness and obedience.

I always obey my nurse  
I always care  
For the wound and fracture  
Because I am always broken  
I obey my nurse.<sup>94</sup>

To 'always care for the wound and fracture' means to be mindful of the wounded and fractured body of the One who is 'your servant, the son of your handmaid' (Wis. 9.5), and through obedience, endured all suffering.

Of the 22 words that comprise this stanza, there are only eight words that are added to the initial sentence. Those first five words are arranged and rearranged in the next four lines. This establishes a simple staccato rhythm that echoes the prose of 19 June 1966:

I love you as I always have...  
...purely because love is love and has been given us by God.  
And they cannot stop it.  
God made love, not death. Love is stronger than death.  
Our love is stronger than their denial of it.  
It always will be.<sup>95</sup>

Obedience and caring are honored. To be broken, to be wounded and fractured is the human condition. Healing, the restoration of human wholeness happens through obedience.

God did not make death is the repetitive chorus of this poem. It is restated six times with a change in the seventh and final chorus. The last line adds the word 'and' and the entire verse is italicized and punctuated: *And God did not make death*. The poem's purpose is derived from its final ultimate affirmation. But the poem also addresses human misconceptions regarding God and the human condition (Stanza 2):

He did not make pain  
But the little blind fire  
That leaps from one wound into another  
Knitting the broken bones

God is a God who heals (Stanza 4):

He did not make pain  
Or the arrogant wound  
That smells under the official bandage

94. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'I Always Obey My Nurse', Stanza 1.

95. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 317.

God is a God of justice (Stanza 6):

Where God did not make death  
But only vision

God is a God of hope (Stanza 10):

For God did not make death  
He did not make prisons  
Or stalking canonical ravens  
The dirt in the incision

God is a God of mercy, 'and in your wisdom have established man to rule the creatures produced by you, to govern the world in holiness and justice, and to render judgement in integrity of heart' (Wis. 9.2-3).

The *exchange*, 'the stuff of being' is alluded to in Stanza 5:

Because I am always broken I obey my nurse  
Who in her grey eyes and her mortal breast  
Holds an immortal love the wise have fractured  
Because we have both been broken we can tell  
That God did not make death

To be human means to be 'always broken' searching for wholeness and 'immortal love' God's love. The condition of human brokenness allows us to 'tell' the truth because brokenness has revealed it: and the truth is quite simple, although it has been 'fractured' by those who think themselves 'wise'.

Merton chooses to 'obey the little spark' that becomes fire. He is obeying the wisdom of Scripture. His obedience to 'the spark' is a reminder that Moses was also obedient to fire. Moses saw a bush on fire. This bush was not consumed by the flames, but remained burning. He walked toward the bush 'to look at this remarkable sight and see why the bush is not burned. God calls out to him from the bush' (Exod. 3.3-4).

When God called Moses, he obediently answered. Like Moses, Merton (Stanza 6) listens to God as the one whom

...did not make death  
But only vision.

He puts his trust in the One of Vision. He is also (Stanza 3) obedient to

...my nurse who keeps this fire  
Deep in her wounded breast

Nurse, Wisdom, the Feminine is the keeper of the fire and has the power to make it spark for those who are obedient. The divine spark, hidden in our hearts, is always seeking us. Despite the fractures of the human condition, each one of us is called (Stanza 6) to

obey the little spark  
That flies from fracture to fracture  
And the explosion

— the explosion of love when our hearts burn with the fire of Divine love.

God did not make death, but ‘calls out’ inviting us to life. Jesus comes ‘to set the earth on fire’ (Lk. 12.49). The paradox of the divine Fire is that the flame does not burn, creating ash, but consumes the human heart by its love. It never ‘rejoices in the destruction of the living’ (Wis. 1.13). The divine spark, hidden within the hearts of all people, is always seeking recognition, love, and obedience.

There is power (Wis. 1.14), Presence within the ‘little spark’ the God within

for he fashioned all things that  
they might have being;  
and the creatures of the world are  
wholesome,  
And there is not a destructive drug among them.

From all that is broken emerges the hope of wholeness. To obey the broken heart is to allow healing (Stanza 7):

I will obey my nurse’s broken heart  
Where all fires come from  
And the abyss of flame  
Knitting pain to pain  
And the abyss of light  
Made of pardoned sin  
For God did not make death.

A ‘broken heart’ will be mended through obedience. All fire comes from a heart that is broken. The ‘abyss’ is filled with light, ‘flame’. Fire does not destroy it ‘knits’. Each person’s pain becomes joined to another’s transforming the ‘abyss of flame’ into an ‘abyss of light’. Our sins have been ‘pardoned’. We have been redeemed by the wounded, broken resurrected body of Christ. ‘For God did not make death’.

## 5. Conclusion

The final phase of exchange, is integration and interpretation of the event. *Eighteen Poems* poetically illustrates the process of exchange that occurred between Merton and ‘M’ as well the thematic incorporation of masculine and feminine integration. As Rosemary Haughton has said,



there can be no love, where there is merely oneness as opposed to union.

Love is known only in the exchange between one and another.<sup>96</sup>

The lover takes into the new world of vision his or her kind of awareness of life, and the poetry made will be personal and particular, never general. And those who read this poetry will be changed too, challenged in some way.<sup>97</sup>

Merton, man, monk, poet, lover, has brought a 'new world of vision, a new awareness of life' to his poetry. This 'vision' challenges the reader of *Eighteen Poems*.

On 27 October 1966, Merton wrote the following journal entry:

Tonight walked up and down on the cool clear evening, in the full moon, meditating and enjoying the quiet, the peace, the cool silence of the valley, and the freedom. All I have ever sought is here: how foolish not to be content with it—and let anything trouble it, without need. True, the moon did make me think of May 5th at the airport—and that was something else again! I can't regret it. It still seems so obviously to have been a gift of God.<sup>98</sup>

The harvest moon of autumn catapults Merton back into another season—springtime. What happened in May that so focused Merton's awareness and laid the foundation for integration and interpretation? With the innocence 'of shy children' (Stanza 3)

We...have permitted God  
To make again His first world<sup>99</sup>  
...children permitting God  
To make again that love  
Which is His alone.

The setting is the Louisville airport, Derby Weekend, 1966. 'This paradise of grass' alludes to the Garden of Eden, in the beginning, when 'God's own love [was made] in us'. This was

Where the world first began  
Where God began  
To make His love in man and woman  
For the first time

By giving witness to paradise, one has the '...tears/Of the newborn'.

96. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 93.

97. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 87.

98. Merton, *Learning to Love*, p. 151.

99. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'Louisville Airport, May 5, 1966', Stanza 2.

There is a tone of awe in the stanza because of the sheer grandeur of the event (Stanza 7).

When one voiceless beginning  
Of splendid fire  
Rises out of the heart  
And the evening becomes One Flame  
Which all the prophets  
Accurately foresaw  
Would make things plain  
And create the whole world  
Over again.

The heart becomes one, the evening sunset melts as one flame, the world in its vast complexity becomes simple and plain again. In all of this wonder, the world is created 'over again'. The process is triggered by '...this one love / Which is now our world' (Stanza 8).

Man and woman were created to be united; 'they will become one flesh', holy in their true personhood as God created them 'and saw that it was *very good*' (Gen. 2.24).

A door opened for Merton and his world changed.

The door between the worlds, opened with pain and glory, can never be completely closed again and there is a traffic through it, however modest and unnoticeable. Also—and this is important—this happens in *time*. There is a story, a before and after something is going on which continues and grows.<sup>100</sup>

Merton caught a glimpse of the Holy through an 'opened door'—'M'. The story of that glimpse was told in his poetry and prose and lived within his prayer.

The paradox of passion is that the thrust of love seeking love consists in being vulnerable. It is the undefended self being offered, the naked appeal of the absolute person for the gift of life.<sup>101</sup>

Merton shares his 'undefended self' in the poetry of *Eighteen Poems*. This 'germ of poems'<sup>102</sup> serves as a source of seed, grounded in his search for love, his willingness to become vulnerable, within the mystery and 'paradox of passion'.

100. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 87.

101. Haughton, *The Passionate God*, p. 149.

102. Merton, *Eighteen Poems*, 'The Harmonies of Excess', Stanza 5.