[TMA 14 (2001) 184-222]

Thomas Merton's Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons

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Abstract
The article attempts to demonstrate that the entire body of Thomas Merton's poetry shows surprising consistency, and that even his late anti-poetry of indignation and protest should be seen in terms of an evolutionary development rather than the sometimes-postulated rupture. From *Early Poems* to the posthumously published *The Geography of Lograire* Merton's poetic work registers a steady broadening of perspectives, an incorporation of themes and techniques towards an integrated (sapiential) vision of reality that would transcend opposites. At the beginning of his spiritual and poetic journey Merton claimed that geography had lost all earthly north ('Sacred Heart 2'). Little did he suspect that this loss was a prelude to a greater task—that of an eventual rebuilding of his geography, a reorientation, not rejection of his map.

Keywords geography, language, compassion, wisdom, contemplation

Upon entering the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in 1941 Thomas Merton had hoped to leave the world behind never to return to it again; he wanted to shut the door on his decadent youth and start an entirely new life under the new monastic name of Frater Maria Lodovicus. In the austere radicalism of the early years the young postulant sought no compromise between the writer he had hoped to be and the monk he was becoming, convinced that one of them had to die. Yet, all his mature life was to be enacted in the tension between these two apparently irreconcilable vocations, a tension with no easy resolution, which used to drive Merton to despair, but which, in the final analysis, proved to be the source of his abiding strength both as monk and poet.

Twenty years on from his postulant days, with humility characteristic of the later Merton, he was to accept his life as 'almost totally paradoxical'.[1] It was in the monastery that he assumed responsibility for the world at large rather than turning away from it; it was his elected silence that made him vocal and shaped his poetry, his constant dissatisfaction that allowed him to find peace. Merton's full identification with Trappist spirituality opened him to the best which other monastic traditions, Christian and non-Christian, could offer to enrich his spiritual life without yielding to easy syncretism. The same rebellious impulse that made him reject ready-made answers and that initially had plunged him into a hedonistic search for freedom, later launched him on the spiritual journey in which he was to discover genuine freedom beyond obsessive systematizations. In 1961, attempting to define his philosophy for the preface to *A Thomas Merton Reader* he could claim that all life tended to grow 'in mystery inscaped with paradox'.[2]

Some commentators tend to read Merton in terms of discontinuities and contradictions, but most, like Michael Mott, point out that when put in perspective his life and work show surprising consistency. It is convenient to accept the late 1950s as a watershed decade in this American contemplative and writer's life, with the *aggiornamento* of the Second Vatican Council just round the corner and Merton's own 1958 epiphany, due to which he awakened from the illusion of a 'professional' spiritual man's separation from the world to the reality of oneness with and responsibility for others who have become 'my own self'.[3] At this point Merton becomes more openly involved in current political and social issues, his heretofore muted protest grows stronger, more out-, even if soft-, spoken. His rising militancy coincides with formal experimentation in poetry, interest in Asian spirituality and Latin American poets. Much of the earlier Merton seems to be gone by this time, the ornate 'poetry of the choir' and the more ascetic 'poetry of the desert'[4] being largely replaced by the prosaic anti-poetry of indignation based on parody and collage. However, these developments are more properly seen in terms of evolution rather than rupture—as a broadening of perspectives, an incorporation

1. Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader* (ed. Thomas P. McDonnell; New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 16.

2. Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, p. 17.

3. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1968), p. 158.

4. George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet. A Critical Study* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1978), p. 51.

of themes and techniques towards an integrated vision of reality that would transcend opposites. As Mott sees it, Merton's anti-poetry of the 1960s may well have had much in common with his early ambition to write an all-inclusive anti-autobiography modeled on Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, whose enthusiastic reader he had been since the novel's first American publication in 1939. Also, the exploration of the potentialities of language and a fascination with macaronic Joyce-talk are manifest in Merton's first ventures into poetry and prose, while the mosaic character of such late poems as *The Geography of Lograire* is already signaled in Merton's early inventory of slogans, fragments of lyrics and trivial details preparatory for writing his intended anti-autobiography.[5]

The Promise of *Early Poems*

Preparing *Thirty Poems* (1944), his first book of verse, Merton decided not to cull into publishable form some of his pre-monastic efforts. It is this rejected juvenile poetry, first published by Anvil Press in 1971, that should be of interest to scholars, since, among other things, it makes one aware of the evolution of the Trappist's poetry. In fact, *Early Poems*, which belongs to the period of an intense search for a meaningful life attendant on Merton's baptism into the Catholic Church, reads as an interpretation and a post-dated prophecy of poems to come. The two dates bracketing these juvenile ventures into poetry, 1940 and 1942, mark two decisive events in Merton's spiritual adventure: the unsuccessful attempt to join the Franciscan Order, and the beginning of his Trappist novitiate respectively. That the poet has reached some turning point is the inescapable conclusion the volume imprints on us:

> Geography comes to an end,
> Compass has lost all earthly north,
> Horizons have no meaning
> Nor roads an explanation:[6]

The colon erratically placed at the end of the volume's epigraph suggests that what follows is an attempted explication of this declaration, even though the attempt proves just as erratic and the explanation itself a code, perhaps no clearer to the poet than to the reader, merely a

5. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Miffin, 1986), p. xxiii.

6. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 2.

draft of a draft, the first installment of Merton's interim reports from an unmapped territory. That the motto turns out to derive from the collection's final poem seems to imply a circularity, but by no means a closure. Where 'geography comes to an end' the notion of closure loses its meaning. But by echoing the beginning, the final poem sends us back to this beginning, as if encouraging a rereading or demanding a more satisfactory treatment of material, a need to rethink, revise, reinterpret, depart and come back again in this truly hermeneutic circle. Clearly *Early Poems* presents the birth throes of Merton's ongoing quest narrative in verse, the first extant draft of a life-long pursuit, at the end of which, in 1968, he will write, 'Geography. / I am all (here) / There!'[7] *Early Poems* and *The Geography of Lograire* are the first and the last stage of an endless inscription, with neither the first the beginning, nor the last the termination.

Despite self-exile from the world, much like Emily Dickinson whom he unconsciously evokes in the poem 'The Philosophers', Thomas Merton kept writing his letter to the world out of an inner urge; for him, as for her, publication was a secondary, though not an unimportant, matter. What mattered most was the experience, the illumination, the clarification of life that each poem brought, and the determination to write everything until it became clear.[8] Such a determination could not but develop into a 'continuing autobiography'[9] and this in turn had to involve Merton in a life-long struggle with the limitations of language. A twentieth-century poet, Merton was only too conscious that language as the tool of communication had lost its transparency, that words had become secretly and silently infiltrated by ideology and power politics. No wonder that he should cultivate an attitude of suspicion towards the medium in which he worked. His concern with the problematic nature of language, his poetic inquiry into the sources and consequences of the breakdown of communication become most evident in his reworking, in diverse techniques and varying approaches, of the Tower of Babel motif. The first extant draft of this inquiry, 'Tower of Babel: The Political Speech' published in *Early Poems,* anticipates the 1953 'A Responsory' with which it blends to become the poetic drama of 1957 entitled 'The Tower of Babel: A Morality'.

7. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 498.

8. The intention of Thomas Merton, the protagonist of *My Argument with the Gestapo*, a pre-Gethsemani novel published posthumously by Doubleday in 1969.

9. See Michael Mott, 'Continuing Conversion, Continuing Autobiography', preface to *Seven Mountains*, p. xix.

This arbitrariness of words and the equally disconcerting sense of the exhaustion of language present a particular challenge to the poet—it is his commitment to language that restores life to it, and, at least for the span of a poem, makes words *mean* again. Merton's poetry seems to be at its strongest when it relies on the simplest, most vulnerable words. To write 'Je crois en l'amour' (1949) so openly, almost unashamedly, requires poetic courage that goes beyond ridicule. Merton discovers that the most potent words are the most innocent, most silent ones, able to touch the elusive core of reality, to say the unsayable not by naming, but by suggesting, pointing, evoking. The best poetry, like prayer, transcends names and concepts to taste unmediated reality.

Early Poems, in all its verbosity and juvenile lack of restraint, already contains seeds of the quieter, more ascetic, more contemplative 'poetry of the desert'. 'Lent' with its insistence on the need to relinquish sensory impressions ('Close, eyes, and soul, come home / senses will seem to perish in the desert'[10]) and remain enveloped in spiritual darkness until the divine light chooses to dispel it, to remain in silence until the divine Word chooses to speak, initiates a quest which will culminate in the eloquent simplicity of 'In Silence'. Merton's private 'geography' has come to an end. In the sensory deprivation of this inner unmapped 'wilderness', in the 'darkness' unrelieved by 'any special borealis', the contemplative poet has an intuition of the 'flaming Heart' which, although as yet 'unseen' and as always 'unimagined', can already be recognized as Reality Itself.[11] Such a recognition of what is real against and in the midst of all the 'unreality' of the 'proud world' is a transforming experience.

Poetic Means and Ends: In Search of a Voice

Merton's noviciate (1942–44) was for him a happy though austere period, during which he wrote little, but what he wrote belongs among the best Gethsemani poems.[12] The remaining part of the 1940s, however, put such a strain on his health that he felt exhausted and after ordination, in 1949, was unable to write at all for more than a year. Nevertheless, following *Thirty Poems*, his poetic debut of 1944, new volumes of Merton poetry kept appearing with amazing frequency: *A Man in the Divided Sea* (1946), *Figures for an Apocalypse* (1947), *The Tears*

10. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 23.
11. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 24.
12. Merton, *Thomas Merton Reader*, p. 15.

of the Blind Lions (1949)—some 140 poems in all within merely five years. In such circumstances the charge of insufficient revision and lack of precision leveled against him by T.S. Eliot and Robert Lowell is barely surprising.

Although linguistic experimentation is all but gone from the first published volumes—the radical absence of macaronic Joyce-talk being a clear indication that the poet's aim is no longer the reform of language, but self-reform—there is at least one reminder of Merton's premonastic fascination with the liberating potential of language. 'Song (From Crossportion's Pastoral)', begun in 1939, is a dream-like, surrealistic poem of substantial lyrical beauty and linguistic inventiveness, less indebted to Hopkins than smacking of e.e.cummings. It is an interesting example of Merton's search for a more flexible language unfettered by rigid rules of grammar, which, like the consciousness of a dreamer, would open a door of perception blocked by the routine. At about the same time when 'The Pastoral' (initial title) was begun, Merton made an observation in his journal that linked the rules of grammar imposed on language to external rules imposed on man.[13] Both were felt as denials of the fullness of life.

However, from the 1940s on, the search for freedom was to develop along other than linguistic lines. The door of perception the Trappist poet was intent on throwing wide open was the door of contemplation and mystical awareness rather than that of dream-consciousness. Sur-reality yielded to heightened reality, the key to which was Christ 'the fount of all art',[14] the true image of God and man. Through his reading of William Blake and Gerald Manley Hopkins, the scholastic philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas and his contemporary commentator Jacques Maritain, Merton came to recognize the analogy between poetic and mystical intuition. Their mode of apprehension being that of connaturality, or affective identification, both the mystical and the poetic experience obliterate the distance between the contemplative and the object contemplated. This results in a unitive knowledge, a direct intuition of essences which leads from objectivization to nonconceptual knowledge. Occasionally a genuine aesthetic experience can penetrate to God himself, a proposition the poet sees confirmed by Augustinian psychology, especially as developed by St Bonaventure. The latter's concept of contemplation *per speculum*, reaching God through the mirror of created things, resembles the natural contem-

13. Mott, *Seven Mountains*, p. 138.

14. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1985), p. 344.

plation (*theoria physica*) of the Greek Fathers, an intuitive perception of the essences or *logoi* of created things.

A son of painters, Merton early demonstrated an unusual sensitivity to the beauty of nature. In his poetry he would observe closely the changing seasons and sing with the whole natural world a cosmic liturgy, 'the mild vespers of the hay and barley'.[15] The mystic poet sees the sun canonizing the somber hills[16] or sowing 'this Indian water with a crop of cockles'.[17] In his vision of nature there are some quieter, haiku-like moments—'when cold November sits among the reeds like an unhappy fisher'[18]—but more frequently it is dramatic, if not downright ecstatic, almost explosive. Like the ancient author of the Psalms, Merton has retained the awareness of cosmic symbolism; like Adam, the archetypal poet, he is a *Leiturgos* offering a hymn of praise for the mute creation.[19] It has been frequently noticed that Merton's intense search for the mystical experience in the first decade of his monastic life made him turn inward and write poetry out of his inwardness; however, it is crucial not to mistake this inwardness for mere subjectivity. Like his masters—Blake, Hopkins or St John of the Cross—the Trappist monk was convinced that the personal revealed objective transcendent reality and that through the unique and the specific the mind was capable of grasping the universal. The author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* early discovered his life as representative of the lives of others and therefore in need of careful exploration. His poem 'The Biography' (1946), though built around personal experiences, is in fact the biography of Everyman—a fallible human being who finds out that his dissipated life 'is written on Christ's Body like a map'.[20] The anguish of the poem is transcended by being inscribed in the mystery of the Cross, whose message communicates hope.

Much as the mystic Christian poet rejoices in the natural world, he is nonetheless aware of evil as an active principle in human history. 'This wolf world, this craven zoo'[21] is a place of suffering, tribulation and spiritual deadness, but this existentialist message is not surprisingly modified by the experience of faith. Actually, Merton saw himself as an existentialist but this appellation needs qualification to be properly understood. Etienne Gilson, whose *The Spirit of Medieval*

15. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 44.
16. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 116.
17. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 35.
18. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 33.
19. Merton, *Thomas Merton Reader*, p. 392.
20. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 104.
21. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 131.

Philosophy made Catholicism respectable to Merton when he was a young student of Columbia University, calls Thomism the *only* philosophy of existence, pointing out that Doctor Angelicus had built his entire metaphysics around the very act of existence. This much granted, Merton's existentialism emerges as a necessary corollary of his interest in scholastic philosophy. Although the Trappist writer was acquainted with Sartrean thought, what he obviously could not embrace was its unredeemed absurdity. Secular existentialism accepted alienation as the basic fact of existence. For Merton alienation was certainly an undeniable fact; however, it was neither primary nor final. Human alienation would be absurd indeed if it had not been for the concept of the Fall seen as the cause of human estrangement; it would be desperate without Redemption and the promise of restoration of the initial unity of all things in Christ. Without the necessity of simplifying the complexity of man's existential situation, Merton's Christian eschatology overcomes the existentialists' *nada*. In a period of a particularly fruitful encounter with existentialism, during the personally and historically anguished 1960s, Merton was to find in Meister Eckhart and Zen mysticism a way of integrating Nothing, with the fullness of pure Being.

Within the Exiles-in-Sion Frame of Reference a Dialectic of Hope and Despair

Biblical poetry frequently uses such symbolic images as exile, bondage or captivity to speak of the fallen human condition alienated from its true nature and ensnared by illusion. Among Merton's poems there is a substantial group centering on similar images. 'The Captives—A Psalm' (1949), besides a telling title, is representative of Merton's existential-eschatological insights. The contemplative poet held the Psalter to be the epitome of religious poetry. In contrast to merely devotional verse, true religious poetry must be the result of a lived event, not merely 'poetic checkers' played 'with a certain number of familiar devotional cliches',[22] argues Merton in 'Poetry, Symbolism and Typology'. The Psalter occupies a privileged position in the biblical canon not only because it sums up the entire history of the chosen people, but above all by virtue of its typological symbolism which testifies to God's continuous intervention in human history and points to the fulfillment of all his prophecies in the New Testament. The author of *Bread in the Wilderness*, a collection of essays on the Psalms,

22. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 329.

stresses that in them the history of Israel becomes the history of each individual believer who, like the chosen people, must experience something of the same exile, hunger and thirst, the same light and darkness, in his struggle to build Jerusalem within his own soul.[23]

'The Captives' is based on Psalm 137 known as 'The Exiles' Remembrance of Sion' or 'By the Streams of Babylon' and referring to the events of the fifth century BCE when Babylon, after the destruction of the Temple, deported a number of Israelites away from their holy land forcing them to live in exile for about 50 years.[24] Babylon's victory over the chosen nation marks a critical point in Old Testament history—the disappearance of God's people as a political entity was a trial of faith for people who had been assured of special divine protection. If in the Hebrew Scriptures settlement is so closely associated with blessing that, in fact, the two become almost synonymous, exile from the promised land, at least at first glance, constitutes its negative: punishment, loss of paradise, loss of blessing. Furthermore, the holy City of Jerusalem as the center of the Old Testament cult, with its most sacred place—the Temple—was a potent sign of God's presence in the midst of his people; therefore exile seemed to imply, in addition to the loss of home, an alienation from God who was the source of their identity, and consequently, a banishment from themselves.[25] To the estranged Israelites the land of Babylon, desecrated by pagan cults, seemed unfit for glorifying the Holy One of Israel: 'How could we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land?'[26] – asks the Psalmist.

The exiles' dilemma is even more dramatically presented by Thomas Merton in whose poem the captive empire 'lynches'[27] the believers'

23. Thomas Merton, *Chleb na pustyni* (trans. Stefan Suminski; ed. Maria Libura; Krakow: Wydawnictwo Benedyktynow Tynieckich, 1998), p. 101.

24. The historical outline is based on Br John of Taize, *The Pilgrim God: A Biblical Journey* (Doublin: Veritas, 1990).

25. It is interesting to see how closely the notions of land, home and God are related, even to the point of identification, so that the loss of one entails the loss of the other two. One cannot make one's home in a foreign land; first this land has to be chartered, its strangeness tamed, inscribed within a circle of familiarity, by which time it is no longer foreign. But although we are tempted to treat God somehow in the same manner, that is, as bound to a place, much in the manner of ancient gods, we must not forget that the God of Israel is essentially a Pilgrim God who cannot be tied to any particular location, not even Jerusalem. Here the connection is more nuanced; the holy land is a prophecy of things to come, a type of the New Testament Kingdom, and only in this spiritual sense can God 'dwell' in it.

26. *The New American Bible* (New Jersey: Thomas Nelson, 1971).

27. This and all subsequent references to 'The Captives—A Psalm' are taken from Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 211-12.

song. The image of cruel torture identifies the foreign land in question as an executioner, a barbarous force. Any cruelty is a blow against order, but cruelty perpetrated on a piece of music, whose very essence is a harmonious coexistence of its parts, is a move away from measure and proportion towards chaos and dissolution. This notion is consonant with the rest of the poem's metaphoricity. The country is most probably engaged in a war with a neighboring power ('Brass traffic shakes the walls') and full of noisy commotion; bargains are being struck; idols fashioned out of mud; images of gluttony, corruption and drunkenness abound. The common denominator for these images is the concept of excess and abandon. The carnivalesque atmosphere makes the city grotesque, its prosperity containing the seeds of its own decay. 'The children of God have died, O Babylon, / of thy wild algebra', laments the speaker. The Arabic *al-jebr* means the reunion of parts or bone-setting; as a branch of mathematics algebra deals with relations between elements. In the 'wild algebra of Babylon', however, relations have gone astray; with lost proportions, order dissolves into chaos. The 'fiery city' is in fact synonymous with Babel, the prototypical city of division, whose landscape was to dominate Merton's morality play of 1957. This, then, is the hostile territory that 'lynched' the exiles' song; this is the *terra aliena* with whose evocation the poem starts.

But Merton's theme is not the desperate situation of a particular people in a particular period of time. The titular captives represent all human beings without distinction, and thus what might be seen as historical inconsistency, the replacement of Babylon by Assyria, in fact only strengthens the universality of interpretation; the term *terra aliena*, understood in its widest context as the landscape of alienation from the ground of our existence, has been at the core of existential analysis for decades and as such it releases a wealth of associations. Exile and a host of related images of existential provenance, like captivity, imprisonment, darkness, etc, all imply an absence—of liberty, of light—certain deficiency over which we have no control, and which, in the words of Gabriel Marcel, expresses 'the impossibility…of rising to a certain fullness of life'.[28]

Merton presents the general condition of man as captivity, by reason of all the enslavements man is called upon to endure, but this need not be a reason for mourning. He would have endorsed wholeheartedly

28. Gabriel Marcel, 'Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysic of Hope' (trans. Emma Crauford), in H.J. Blackham (ed.), *Reality, Man, Existence: Essential Works of Existentialism* (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), p. 171.

Gabriel Marcel's opinion that 'the less life is experienced as a captivity, the less the soul will be able to see the shining of that veiled mysterious light' which 'illumines the very center of hope's dwelling'.[29] Merton's captives sense they have reached a dead end ('Days, days are the journey / from wall to wall'),[30] but suddenly there comes a patch of light against the deadly greyness; a new perspective is being opened allowing a glimpse of a new reality: 'There, butterflies are born to be dancers'.[31] Here is a most unexpected turn for a despairing exile in a hostile wilderness: a vision of intense beauty, a pivotal moment on which the poem turns as the lament changes into a song of praise. The promise is regained, even though temporarily, in a contemplative vision. 'O Sion, city of vision', enthuses the speaker, suggesting that there is no other way of reclaiming the lost spiritual homeland than through contemplation. The change of the poem's voice from the collective 'we' to the personal 'I' suggests that the transformation of reality does not happen automatically. Rather, it depends on the heroic 'dark' faith of the unnamed persona who, like Abraham, believes in the promise against all sensible evidence and refuses to yield to despair even in the most desperate situations. The speaker is representative of Merton's other 'marginal persons'—monks, hermits, saints (later he would add artists)—for whom this reality is very much alive. They reject the anti-values of a godless world to keep vigil on the world's frontier and, through reforming in them the image and likeness of their Creator, refashion the world into a new creation. Such solitary giants as St John the Baptist, Elias, St Paul the Hermit have long been Merton's instructors in the wisdom of the desert, in freedom as experience.[32] Like them he 'went into the desert to receive / the keys of [his] deliverance'.[33]

This deliverance is a simultaneous liberation from the false self and from the false image of God, who is always greater than any concept of him people may cherish. This, then, is the greater gift of the exile, the dark, apophatic faith that knows the true God, that tastes of the Promise beyond expectations. The purity of heart regained by way of self-emptying is the recovery of paradise, a return to the true beginning

29. Marcel, 'Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysic of Hope', p. 172.

30. Merton, 'The Captives—A Psalm', p. 212.

31. Merton, 'The Captives—A Psalm', p. 212.

32. 'Freedom as Experience' is an early poem written by Merton (1947). In the last decade of his life he was to publish translations from the Apophtegmata of the Desert Fathers, an abiding influence on his spiritual life, titled *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960).

33. 'St. John the Baptist', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 125.

of Adamic unity with God, the exiles' recovery of Sion. In the contemplative union with objective transcendent reality the visible world is perceived as filled with spiritual Presence, with 'the Truth that transubstantiates the body's night'.[34] Obviously this transfigurative vision of reality is a hard-won victory. The author of 'Captives' knew how often the chosen people were to despair again and lose their hope; he knew that the contemplative himself would frequently be on the verge of despondency, yet, what really matters is the eruption of the pure vision which gives a foretaste of a much greater liberation. Until that greater liberation, all human beings, much like our biblical ancestors, are sustained only by hope, that prophetic consciousness, that 'memory of the future'[35] which has to be rekindled by prophetic witnesses to the Heavenly City where 'the cruel algebra of war is now no more'.[36] And much as hope, quite unexpectedly, pierces time and springs butterflies from dead bodies, liberation from captivity, which will finally put an end to our status of exiles, shall likewise surprise us with its undreamed-of transfigurations of our expectations. Liberation, to evoke once more the words of Gabriel Marcel, 'is never a simple return to the *status quo*, a simple return to our being; it is that and much more, and even the contrary to that: an undreamed-of promotion, a transfiguration'.[37] Even in Merton's most apocalyptic poetry the final word does not belong to destruction, and all iniquity is likely to die 'in the terror of a sudden contemplation'.[38]

At the height of the cold war the atomic Armageddon seemed inevitable. In 1952 Merton noted in his diary: 'Sooner of later the world must burn'.[39] Yet, this strong conviction did not prevent him from reading signs of hope that would mitigate the apocalyptic message. Poetry, in its attempt to 'seize upon reality in its moment of highest expectation and tension toward the new',[40] as he wrote in 'Message to Poets', 1964, was predestined to bear witness to the as yet inchoate reality in its struggle to become—to be a prophetic witness to possibilities, both positive and negative. The author of *Figures for the Apocalypse* insists that poets are not called to despair, but to hope.

34. 'After the Night Office', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 109.

35. Marcel, 'Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysic of Hope', p. 193.

36. 'The Heavenly City', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 148.

37. Marcel, 'Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysic of Hope', p. 206.

38. 'In the Ruins of New York City', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 144.

39. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* quoted in Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, p. 191.

40. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 373.

They are called to harvest 'new fruits for which the world hungers' with which to 'calm the resentments and the rage of man'.[41] While the dangers were all too apparent, Merton would eagerly see the seeds of 'the redemption of the future' wherever people could actually enter into a fruitful dialogue above all the racial, doctrinal and other divisions; in innumerable gestures of solidarity with the human family, especially with the destitute and the suffering; in spontaneous acts of goodness and love; in peaceful resistance to violence; in the innocence of children; in every attempt of man to rise above himself. These seeds contain 'extraordinary possibilities' to which, as Merton believed, poetry should give prophetic witness.

The Curse of Language and the Gift of Language: The Word beyond All Words

Unlike the collections of the 1940s, *The Strange Islands* (1957), does not form a continuous entity; it is organized into three parts, three apparently estranged islands that, nonetheless, inform each other in their witness to the insular character of modern consciousness and a search for its transcendence. It is clear that the publication of *The Strange Islands* initiates a change in Merton's poetics. The expanded metaphor gives way to the inverted or flat perception of reality robbed of its spiritual dimension in which the ascending movement of metaphor cannot take place.[42] In such poems as the opening 'How to Enter a Big City' the discursive-meditative language is largely replaced by cryptic formulations and landscape is evoked by rapid brush strokes, a mere listing of disconnected images. That is a foretaste of the new Merton, more concerned with simply being, presenting himself, listening, observing and letting the story tell itself. The long period of poetic silence and contemplative self-examination enabled him to recognize his mistakes, expressed by Elias, the poet's *porte parole*, in the closing poem of Part One: 'I have been a man without silence, / a man without patience, with too many / questions'.[43] It is the silent stones, waiting patiently for the promise of spiritual renewal to replenish the human wasteland, that become the prophet's—and the poet's—instructors in

41. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 373.

42. For this insight I am indebted to Waclaw Grzybowski, 'The Poetics and Poetry of Thomas Merton: Spirituality and Metaphor' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Lodz, 1999).

43. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 243.

wisdom. Elias is characterized as a man 'zealous for the Lord' (1 Kgs 19.10), but such zeal in defending God ('Who does not need to be defended'[44]) easily results in a gospel of fear and destruction; it gives false witness to God who remains beyond any conceptual grasp, inaccessible to human concepts of right-wrong (defending him as unrecognizable from blaming), and who always keeps his promises despite appearances to the opposite (the dry creek eventually overflows with water).

In one sense 'The Tower of Babel' breaks the continuum of the volume, separates Part One from Part Three; in another, it is a link between them, a logical continuation of Part One and foreword to Part Three, a gathering together of the author's contemplative and poetic insights. Already 'Sports without Love—A Letter to Dylan Thomas' (Part One) introduces the metaphor of inversion that is to become the key concept for 'The Tower'. In the former poem a river gives an upside-down reflection of the world. This reflected world is an interplay of deception and appearances, a mirror image that confuses spiritual directions and makes believe that the apparent (unreality of the reflection) is reality itself. Once the rule of inversion has been grasped, the image could still give testimony to the truth contained in it. But the oarsmen stir and shatter this reflection beyond recognition; the mirror becomes separated into 'riddles'.[45] This metaphor is repeated in the morality of Part Two, which moves beyond the destruction of the original image towards its restoration 'in the stillness that follows'.[46]

The inverted reflection reduced to a fragmented riddle explains the paradoxical cityscape of 'How to Enter…' The city of Babylon as a repolarized image of the original exemplar, the City of God existing in the mind of the Creator, is the archetype of any city that has become unreal due to the loss of its connection with the Source of Reality. Not accidentally it is Falsehood who usurps the place of God claiming, 'Your city is made in my image and likeness',[47] and whereas God made man his son and equal, the self-proclaimed anti-god orders man to serve him in chains. Enslavement assumes the appearance of freedom, falsehood takes the place of truth, the collectivity of a mass movement supplants the original unity where fear, not love is the spiritual princi

44. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 243.
45. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 236.
46. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 268.
47. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 260.

ple, where war, not peace is the desideratum. The Tower builders have been turned into puppets by their Leader and blind obedience to his commands frees them from any moral responsibility, so that they can commit atrocities with a good conscience, like that model Public Servant of modern times, Adolf Eichmann, whose memory haunted Merton.[48] Merton constructs his morality in such a way as to present the building of the Tower as a parable of anti-creation. The image of the god-like Leader ascending to the garden on top of the Tower to walk and sing under trees upon which he is to hang the heads of 'our common enemies'[49] reverses the moral order of the story of Genesis based on communion and love. The God of the Bible creates by contemplating things in his Logos, the Word that existed *in principio*. Having created everything *ex amore,* God saw that 'it was good' (Gen. 1.31). The Leader's word of un-creation is fear, 'the one word that strikes at the heart of creation, and dissolves it into its original nothingness'.[50] The original fullness of reality has been misconstrued as nothingness, non-existence, unreality.

The 1960s were to bring a consolidation of the author's views on the issues metaphorically treated in 'The Tower…' In *The New Man*, 1961, Merton would demonstrate how, separated from the true center of his existence and therefore self-centered, man has become a 'solipsistic bubble', mis-communicating with other isolated self-enclosed universes.[51] And this turning away from the existential reality of communion with all creation in the Creator to the unreality of alienation is the true source of the rupture of communication, the origin of the project to glorify the self in constructing a prototype of the earthly city as opposed to the heavenly one. In the same *New Man* the author presents the act of naming as a second creation. In Eden the archetypal man was to look at the creatures and 'recognize them for what they are',[52] to draw the *logos* or essence of each creature notionally into being in order to give it a communicable existence in the human mind. Once the primal correspondence between the reality in the mind of God and man's thought about it was broken, language has lost its primary function of communicating what exists. Originally revealed by linguistic signs, reality is now replaced by them; words have become our *only*

48. See, e.g., 'A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann', in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 45-49.

49. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 252.

50. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 252.

51. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (The New American Library, 1963), p. 65.

52. Merton, *New Man*, p. 55.

reality. In his poetic treatment of the 'metaphysics of absence' the watchful contemplative rather accurately defined the postmodern crisis.

In Merton's morality, people, no longer named but numbered—that is, alienated from their inner truth—are condemned to lead the shadowy existence of organization men. They are the true exiles who 'sit down and weep' 'by the ever changing waters'[53] that bear the shattered reflection of their homeland. But their names, even if no longer heard, have not been unspoken. 'You live by the name [the Lord] utters in secret',[54] explains the Prophet. Once heard, their names will liberate the exiles from existential alienation by revealing their innermost mystery, the exiles' secret identity in which they have always existed. Merton's insistence on 'an absolute value in words as the witnesses of essences that are stable and eternal'[55] explains why the Leader of the unreal empire fears Language. Words, declaims Captain, 'are in league with sense, order and even silence'.[56] Since words cannot betray their nature of witnesses to 'what is', in the order of the unreal they are potential traitors, there being still a trace of metaphysical solidity even in the most abused, most emptied of them. The Leader's fear of silence confirms its value as the principle of distinction between reality and illusion. It is in silence that the argument of the Second Philosopher—'nothing has real being, seeming is existing'[57]—the Professor's sophism which reduces history to a series of competing narratives without objective substance[58] and, most of all, Falsehood's title to Truth[59] would be perceived for what they are—as counter-reality. Noise, restlessness, movement for its own sake divert man from the reality that is to be found at the core of his being and in the inner truth of things, and plunge him instead into unreality until he is lost beyond the desire to be found. The Church Fathers have clearly taught Merton the importance of discernment and detachment in avoiding the snares of illusion. At the center of their theology is the concept of the divine image imprinted on God's creation and distorted by the fall, an image that is to be restored in the purity of heart, which implies emptying oneself from the false self and finding one's true self in God. The

53. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 264.
54. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 265.
55. Merton, *New Man*, p. 57.
56. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 255.
57. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 258.
58. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 256.
59. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 259.

builders of the tower are themselves distorted images of the Creator and they project this ontological distortion onto their Babelic caricature of creation. St Bonaventure, another important influence on Merton's thought, explains in his metaphysics of exemplarism[60] that Christ is the Image, the expressed Similitude of the Father, the highest exemplar from which flows all that there is to know. As the expressed Similitude, he contains within himself the principle of being and the principle of knowing; for him to be (*ratio essendi*) is to know (*ratio cognoscendi*). But the Image is also the Word, the expressing Similitude, uttering all the wisdom, and knowledge, and truth of the Father; he is Divine Wisdom, the Truth that presupposes the One. At the close of Merton's morality the 'one Word uttered in silence'[61] undoes the unreality of the inverted city. 'He Who Is has only to be mentioned, and all He knows not is no longer known',[62] says Raphael. Christ the Word, the Verbum that existed *in principio*, is the revealer of the one eternal Truth. Not incidentally does the collection that started with the division and confusion of 'How to Enter…' end with an intuited presence of an 'inward Stranger', 'Our cleanest Light' Who 'is One'.[63] In *The Strange Islands* Merton the poet assimilates the lesson already well known to Merton the contemplative: emptiness is prerequisite for knowing 'in the cloud of unknowing': the highest communication is communion beyond names, beyond images. Merton's increased awareness of the inestimable value of silence for intuiting reality results in a drift toward more ascetic and impersonal poetry, shorter lines, more 'naked' language, less dependent on elaborate visualization. The words of wisdom are now 'listen'[64] and 'be still';[65] ecstatic celebrations of nature's beauty give way to the static iconicity of 'Landscape'.

For the Glory of the God of Job: Towards a Sapiential Perspective

Realizing that 'perhaps the most urgent and practical renunciation is

60. Sister Emma Jean Marie Spargo, *The Category of the Aesthetic in the Philosophy of Saint Bonaventure* (Philosophy Series, 11; ed. Allan B. Wolter; New York: The Franciscan Institute St Bonaventure, 1953), p. 99.

61. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 271.

62. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 272.

63. 'Stranger', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 290.

64. 'Elias—Variations on a Theme' in Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 279-80.

65. 'When in the Soul of the Serene Disciple…' and 'In Silence', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 280-81.

the renunciation of all questions',[66] Merton nevertheless keeps multiplying questions by entering ever deeper into solidarity with the anguished world in crisis. Although the monk is called to be an 'outlaw' and a 'stranger' to any society, his monastic-marginal life, in itself a criticism of 'the world', does not consist in a 'cult of otherworldliness' and a 'spirituality of evasion' as the Trappist was to realize all the more clearly towards the end of the 1950s. The silent protest of monasticism felt no longer adequate, almost a luxury in the most terrible of centuries. In the context of a global confrontation between the two dominant power blocks and the imminence of a nuclear cataclysm, with the war in Vietnam in full swing and racial hatred at home and abroad, an 'innocent bystander' was almost a contradiction in terms—such a one became guilty merely by his presumed dissociation from the guilt of others. Being a monk, whose vocation is to enter into a deep existential communion with the entire human race up to the point of disappearing in this identification, the author of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* embraces the conviction of Dostoyevsky's Zosima as the only answer to the violence and spiritual turmoil of the times—the absolute necessity to take the whole responsibility and the whole guilt upon oneself. Under such circumstances it is the proto-existentialist book of Job that seems to speak more powerfully to the twentieth century than the rest of the Old Testament canon, and it is Job who becomes a model for the Merton Christian. The opening essay of *The New Man*, a book deeply saturated with existentialism, presents human life in terms of an *agonia* of being and nothingness, a struggle 'fought on the brink of infinite despair'. 'Questions that have answers', continues the author, 'seem, at such a time, to be a cruel mockery of the helpless mind. Existence itself becomes an absurd question, like a Zen *koan*: and to find an answer to such a question is to be irrevocably lost.'[67] In the same year of 1961 he declared in a letter to Czeslaw Milosz, a fellow troubled soul, his firm resolution not to exchange his anguished inner struggle for a 'professional' spiritual man's peace of mind; on the contrary, he would rather intensify protests for the glory of the God of Job.[68]

Rather than refute Merton's desire for solitude and silence, these protests and the questions the aspiring hermit could not cease asking,

66. Thomas Merton *The Sign of Jonas* quoted in Merton, *Thomas Merton Reader*, p. 215.

67. Merton, *New Man*, pp. 9-10.

68. Thomas Merton, Czeslaw Milosz, *Listy* [The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz] (trans. Maria Tarnowska; ed. Jerzy Illig; Krakow: Znak, 1991), p. 109.

questions pointing beyond the soothing answers and pious rationalizations of an innocent bystander, constitute, in the last analysis, paradoxical moments of *parrhesia.* The free speech that used to characterize life in paradise is re-achieved as a result of being challenged by the inscrutable mystery of God to the point of daring to address God in one's own turn and thereby gaining spiritual maturity (cf. Job 38–41). Though for the time being the world's tormenting questions were to remain absurd, that is, unanswerable, they paved the way for the epiphany that exploded for Merton from the smiles of the enormous Pollonnaruva Buddhas when he was to realize that 'all problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear'.[69]

In the meantime he sees monastic peace as the very opposite of quietism; the only true flight from the world, the *monachos* claims, is 'the flight from disunity and separation, to unity and peace in the love of other men'.[70] But Merton realizes with clarity that this reconciliation, this healing of the wounds of division must start with himself. True to his intuition, Merton is ready to become a Catholic in the fullest sense of the word—as one who sees and experiences unity in multiplicity, who is 'all things to all men'. In all the spiritual traditions that he studies he perceives glimpses of the one eternal truth: there are correspondences between the *sunyata* of Zen Buddhism and the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of Christianity; Meister Eckhart's *grunde* sounds like Zen's ground, or inner core, and his 'spark' of the soul translates well into the Sufi concept of *sirr*; the cryptic *Apophtegmata* of the Desert Fathers betray spiritual affinities with the *mondo* of Zen masters, and Zen *koans* with Herakleitan paradoxes; both the *Tao* of Chuang Tzu and the *logos* of Herakleitos point to the Word of St John. Even in Sartre's *néant* Merton detects aspects of the dark night of the soul, while in Marx's analysis of alienation he uncovers the author's theological cast of mind. During this time Merton eagerly absorbs the sophianic tradition of Oriental Christianity, becomes impressed with the innocence of Shaker spirituality and makes his long-postponed peace with Protestantism. In a letter to Rabbi A.J. Heschel he expresses his 'latent ambition to be a true Jew under my Catholic skin'.[71] In social and political issues this 'contemplative in the world of action' gives his support to the non-violent initiatives of various peace movements, identifies

69. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, quoted in Woodcock, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet*, p. 172.

70. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation,* quoted in Merton, *Thomas Merton Reader*, p. 324.

71. Quoted in Mott, *Seven Mountains*, p. 397.

himself with the world's 'marginal men' (the Vietnamese, Black and Native Americans, writers from behind the iron curtain and from the Third World), speaks out against the enlightened twentieth-century barbarian[72] as well as the barbarism of 'Christian' colonizers who failed to encounter Christ in the racial and cultural 'other'. The non-believer, the uneasy Christian and Christians 'turned inside out' (e.g. Rimbaud) have his respect. Meanwhile Merton the poet and spiritual writer evolves towards his other *emploi*, that of an impassioned critic of culture, the privileged format being now that of the book review. With his whole life Merton proves that 'the mystic is far more existential than the philosopher'.[73]

His newly awakened interests, expanded pattern of reading and intense correspondence with people from various walks of life could not have left Merton's poetry uninfluenced. After the relative poetic silence of the 1950s, the 1960s were a time of harvesting: *The Original Child Bomb* (1962), *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963), *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965), *Cables to the Ace or Familiar Liturgies of Misunderstanding* (1968). *Sensation Time at the Home* was ready for publication at the time of Merton's premature death in Bangkok in 1968, *The Geography of Lograire* would be brought out the following year, several new poems written during the trip to Asia were to be discovered in Merton's *Asian Notes*. These writings display some daring formal experimentation, the signature achievement being the anti-poem, and an expansive range of thematic concerns corresponding to the author's expansive, searching mind. In the words of George Woodcock, 'his solitude became the grain of sand in which he saw the world'.[74]

Searching for a new way of seeing, the contemplative poet realizes that Absolute Seeing—in contemplation as well as in poetry—requires the relinquishment of any 'way'. The lesson of Elias becomes confirmed by the teaching of Zen masters and Chinese Taoism. Actually, it was Chuang Tzu, the Chinese poet and philosopher of the third century BC who helped Merton articulate this wisdom in the aphoristic form of *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, a book that was soon to range among his favorites. 'The man of Tao', says Chuang Tzu in Merton's translation, 'Remains unknown / Perfect virtue / Produces nothing. / "No-Self" / Is "True-Self." / And the greatest man is everybody.'[75] True to his intuitions the poet progressively withdraws from his verses, avoids self-

72. 'Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuarda', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 372.
73. Merton, *New Man*, p. 18.
74. Woodcock, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet*, p. 21.
75. 'The Man of Tao', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 913.

reflexivity, hides behind anti-poems, 'found' poems, that is, snippets of information which upon rearrangement can pass for poetry, and Poundian personae, the ultimate embodiment of which being translated poetry. The division line between poetry and prose progressively dissolves. *Emblems of a Season of Fury* shows a transition from older to newer poetics, being a combination of both, while the posthumous *Sensation Time at the Home* demonstrates a return, after the ascendancy of the anti-poem, to a more traditional line of poetic inquiry, which was obviously never completely abandoned. *Emblems* continues the critique of modern culture, but inscribes it within a sapiential context. Two aphorisms unlock the collection laying before the reader the titular emblems: the voice of Shakespeare conjures up an emblem of war; the feminine voice of Raissa Maritain offers an emblem of mercy and forgiveness. A masculine world is redeemed by the feminine principle.

It is not difficult to understand the fascination Raissa Maritain's poetry held for Merton in the decade of his intense search for wisdom beyond definitive answers, a decade that saw the publication of his *Hagia Sophia*. There is an innocence in her poetry, a vision of a transfigured reality accessible only to the pure of heart. There are strangely poetic landscapes, simple, almost naive, like Chagal's paintings; the fluid reality of a dream-world peopled with anguished exiles seeking 'refuge pure' 'chained utterly Mary to your joy',[76] saint-prisoners of their innocence,[77] strangers 'who here below have it so bad', who 'have no place left on earth / Not a stone to rest on / Hence they must lodge at last in heaven'.[78] In her own way she glimpses something of God's own 'suchness' in the midst of ordinary reality, she sees angels walking right in the middle of crowds spreading 'grace and joy'.[79] What might pass for magical realism is in fact a vision of a transfigured world, of the new creation based on *ordo caritatis*; she catches glimpses of the restoration of all things in Christ, the apocalyptic marriage of God and his creation; recovery of paradise; 'paradise bugged'.[80] In her voice, merciful and feminine, Merton must have heard the voice of wisdom, Hagia Sophia, the feminine child. In her meek strangers he will have recognized 'a homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identification, without even a number, a frail expendable

76. 'Mosaic: St Praxed's', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 965.
77. 'The Prisoner', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 967.
78. 'Chagal', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 964.
79. 'The Restoration of the Pictures', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 969.
80. Title of Merton's review of Louis Zukofsky's poetry (*Critic* 25 [1967], pp. 69-71).

exile' who at the close of Merton's own sophianic poem entrusts his vulnerable life to sleep.[81]

Though the entire body of Merton's poetry has an experiential sapiential content, not before *The Strange Islands* had wisdom been foregrounded *as wisdom*, without metaphoric visualization, and set against knowledge in a 'definition' poem that can almost be located at an intersection between Western and Oriental thought. The poem in question draws a distinction between 'the insupportable knowledge of nothing', corresponding to the *scientia* of the classic and biblical tradition, and the titular wisdom, or *sapientia*, seen as a gift, freely given only 'when it is no longer seen or thought of', and which alone makes 'understanding bearable'.[82]

The creative *rapprochement* with the sophianic tradition of the Eastern Church helped Merton identify wisdom with the feminine principle active in the world. Merton follows the thought of the fourteenth-century St Gregory of Palamas who worked out the theory of the Divine Essence and Divine Energies as God's two 'ways of existence' (*modi essendi*). While God's Essence is absolutely transcendent and incommunicable, his uncreated Energies are diffused and active in the world allowing creation to know God and participate in his life; due to the mutual dynamic communication (synergy) between human will and the Divine Energies (God's grace) the whole of creation is constantly undergoing a process of divinization. Without engaging in a detailed sophiological discussion, we can see a direct link between these active, divinizing energies and Merton's Hagia Sophia, 'the feminine child…playing in the world' whose 'delights are to be with the children of men' (cf. Prov. 8.31). The Mother of all, *Natura naturans*, she becomes manifest in the person of Mary, the Virgin Mother of God. Nature in her, says Merton, became pure Mother, the Divine Nature, God as Gift.[83] 'Hagia Sophia' is the summit of Merton's lifelong Mariological intuitions. His first published volumes of poetry, *Thirty Poems* and *A Man in the Divided Sea*, were both dedicated to Virgin Mary, *Poetarum Reginae*. The origin of this Mariological orientation has to be sought in a trip to Cuba that Merton undertook in the spring of 1940. It was there that the Catholic convert dedicated to her his dual vocation of priest and poet; it was there that he wrote what he terms

81. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 371.
82. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 279.
83. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 363-71.

his 'first real poem', 'Song of Our Lady of Cobre', that 'pointed a way to many other poems'[84] and that still belongs to his best poetry.

Cuban, heart-felt Catholicism spoke to him deeply. In the vibrant communal culture of Cuba, in the innocence of the ritual-based existence, Merton saw a vitality which was lacking in the spiritual wasteland of the war-torn, anxiety-ridden modern world. An entry from his *Secular Journal* suggests a tie between this vitality and the cult of the Virgin, while its opposite, the western cult of sterility, seems to follow as a corollary on Her rejection by the Protestant cultures:

> Our modern rat-race civilization, having lost at the same time, its respect for virginity and for fruitfulness, has replaced the virtue of chastity with a kind of hypochondriac reverence for perfect, sterile cleanliness.[85]

In Catholic Cuba it was the Virgin, rather than the impersonal Dynamo, that embodied the force. The Cuban experience was to be recovered on ever new planes of awareness, confirmed by the entire body of Merton's writing and living. In his numerous Mariological poems that followed, the Virgin would be typically presented as a stainless window—archetype of ontological purity—giving back an unflawed reflection of the Creator. The greatest mystic, she is also the Queen of the Apocalypse. The collection of 1963 clearly sets the Virgin's 'divine fecundity' and 'hidden wholeness'[86] against the perfect and sterile void of a divided, masculine, spiritually impoverished modern world in which femininity has been relegated to a marginal position. The modern public servants' obsession with cleanliness in aseptically carrying out genocide,[87] modern Magog's infernal ambition to build 'clean' bombs without fallout[88] or the official concern with pouring 'disinfectant' on stigmatized, 'unclean' members of society—rather than ointment on their wounds,[89] all this seems to imply a longing for sterilization of the collective memory from the sense of guilt and responsibility. In a world that has sentenced humor to death,[90] officialese and newspeak—as well as nukespeak—form the human consciousness,

84. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1948), p. 283.

85. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Cudahy, 1959), p. 88.

86. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 363.

87. 'Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 345-49.

88. 'A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 372-91.

89. 'There Has to Be a Jail for Ladies', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 332-34.

90. 'Elegy for James Thurber', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 316.

and these have few words of felt compassion.[91] A child's painted house[92] or the desert of the two Macarii[93] are only a few rare oases of love and tenderness in the world of Ixions[94] and round oxen.[95] Only the Macarii, the child or the poet-worshipper have retained an ingrained innocence and compassion for victims of the systemic utopias, because they are all outsiders in the inhuman masculine technocracy. In this world 'we do not hear the uncomplaining pardon… We do not see the Child who is prisoner in all the people.' But the meek and helpless of the world will be awakened by Sophia, 'the gentle one…not to conquest and dark pleasure but to the impeccable pure simplicity of One consciousness in all and through all: one Wisdom, one Child, one Sister'.[96]

Jungian phenomenology of the religious consciousness converges with the sophiology of the Eastern Church[97] in perceiving the Virgin giving birth to a male Child (Ap. 12.5) as prophetic of the twilight of patriarchy. *Filius Sapientiae*, the Man-Child, represents the archetype of eschatological manhood, the other of the 'dark' Promethean masculinity. Man as actor and creator of history, master of time and space, recedes into the background in the figure of the silent St Joseph. Divinizing man, Sophia, *Théotokos*, anthropomorphosizes God. Moreover, Jung intuits the sophianic underpinnings of the book of Job in a way that not only establishes a vital link between Merton's agonized Job-like questions and the revelation of his 'Hagia Sophia', but even suggests that Merton's sophianic intuitions must have crystalized in the crucible of the preceding *agonia*. Jung sees the revelation of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, as central to Job's drama. She is absent from the drama's first act, which leads to the formation of a patriarchal society of 'a heart of stone' (Job 41.16)—hardened, masculine in its essence. But Job's insistence in defending his innocence induces Jhwh to lift a veil of his mystery, to make known his other face, that of merciful Wisdom. If Merton could write, 'the Sun burns in the sky like the Face

91. 'A Picture of Lee Ying', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 322-24.

92. 'Grace's House', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 330-31.

93. 'Macarius and the Pony', 'Macarius the Younger', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 319-24.

94. 'Gloss on the Sin of Ixion', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 313-15.

95. 'Song: In the Shows of the Round Ox', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 311-13.

96. 'Hagia Sophia', in Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 365-66.

97. The analysis that follows is based on Paul Evdokimov's interpretation of Jung's 'Antwort Auf Job', in Paul Evdokimov, *Kobieta i zbawienie świata* (Poznan: W drodze, 1991), pp. 213-27.

of God, but we do not know his countenance as terrible. His light is diffused in the air and the light of God is diffused by Hagia Sophia',[98] it is because the masculine God Who would normally provoke fear and trembling had been 'humanized' by Sophia, the Divine Eros. Her intervention in the story of Job has intensified God's desire for Incarnation. There the Virgin has already spoken her *fiat*. While the book of Job gives us an anamnesis of the sophianic values forgotten in a masculinized society, it is the Assumption dogma that is interpreted by Jung as the fullest revelation of Sophia. The Virgin crowned in heaven is the Woman of the Apocalypse 'clothed in the sun' in whom the telluric element of femininity, the archetypal harlot of Babylon, has been transfigured, due to the Woman's transference to the uranic sphere. The Virgin, representing the ideal of ontological purity, is to rectify the deviations of the ontological structure of humankind. In the eschatological figures of the Virgin and the Child femininity and masculinity, estranged by the Fall (the ontological schism), are on the threshold of reintegration. The Woman—*Pneumatophora* or Spirit-Bearer—enters the desert of dehumanization to spiritualize it and make it bloom again. Sophia, the Wisdom of God, eternal virginity, is revealed as the integrative, unifying principle.

Merton's urban wastelands belong to the masculine, Promethean civilization which is deprived of the feminine-spiritual element, and in which, consequently, God cannot even be born. This is the world of 'a heart of stone' commanded by 'daddies of fear'[99] and 'shamans without belief'.[100] His cities represent the New Jerusalem's 'other'—the harlot of the Apocalypse—in their metaphysical nakedness and void. Hagia Sophia, waking the sleeping monk with her sweet and merciful voice, comes to awaken all humankind from the dream of separateness, to collect all fragments of Adam back into the unity and love of the Heavenly City. Not accidentally, it was in the 'feminine' East rather than the 'masculine' West that the disciple of Wisdom was 'jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things'[101] in an epiphany of compassion as ultimate reality.

Repetition with a Difference: In my Ending is my Meaning

If the 1950s had brought more discipline into Merton's poetry, in the

98. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 366.
99. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 338.
100. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 374.
101. Quoted in Woodcock, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet*, p. 172.

1960s the poet was searching for ways of tapping the deeper, subconscious layers of his personality by freeing his poetry from form and linear logic. Writing poems that are 'Poems' becomes 'a relatively unprofitable and secondary concern compared with the duty of first writing nonsense. 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',[102] he would advise young poets in 1968. *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire* constitute Merton's most impressive ventures into nonlogical forms of expression and surrealist landscapes; they remain his monumental achievements in alternative kinds of poetic coherence, associational rather than linear, exploring idiomatic and elliptical relations between parts. Other attempts at shaking off the confines of conceptual thought included a series of Zen calligraphies published in 1964 and concrete poems, several of which appeared in *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967) edited by Emmett Williams. The new exploratory poetics might seem to be a resumption of the old, pre-Gethsemani concerns; however, it was precisely Merton's sapiential experience that made this resumption possible on a new level. Adopting Pseudo-Dionysius's evocative image, we might say that the contemplative wisdom of Merton moves 'in *motus orbicularis*',[103] or we might resort to the classical concept of the hermeneutic circle to illustrate the same idea.

Having achieved a considerable degree of inner freedom, the author of 'Elias' sets out on 'the free man's road' that 'has neither beginning nor end'.[104] As a free man he is now anxious to hide his religious—and poetic—party card in order to become 'all things to all men', and ready to be 'guided not just by will and reason, but by "*spontaneous* behavior subject to *dynamic insight*"',[105] that is, by the free, unaccountable for inspiration of the Spirit. His mystical search for reality that transcends (liturgical) form parallels his poetic quest for a new form, or non-form, to express what cannot be inscribed within communicable linguistic formats and to question the habitual notions of reality.

For several years Merton had been concerned with the necessity of creating anti-art as a challenge to the dominant art-cult that reduces

102. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 381.

103. Merton uses this term in reference to Suzuki in his pamphlet honoring the Zen master, 'D.T. Suzuki: The Man and his Work', *The Eastern Buddhist* NS 2.1 (1967), p. 8.

104. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 245.

105. Thomas Merton, 'Final Integration: Toward a Monastic Therapy' (1968), quoted in Raymond Bailey, *Thomas Merton on Mysticism* (New York: Image Books, 1987), p. 228 (emphasis added).

artistic production to mere self-expression and self-advertisement. Such 'art' loses contact with external reality, which used to be its very raison d'etre, and in consequence we have style without contact, style without communication, which, nevertheless, passes for communication with others.[106] Voicing his exasperation with 'poetry' that only seems to be poetry, the future author of *Cables* feels that all this pretence must be attacked with an antipoem defined as 'a positive communication of resistance against the fake rituals of habitual communication'.[107] Already in 1964, denouncing manipulatory 'word-magic' that appeals 'mindlessly to the vulnerable will' Merton urged poets: 'Let us deride and parody this magic with other variants of the unintelligible'.[108]

Merton's conversion to antipoetry was not uninfluenced by his enthusiasm for Latin American literature. As far back as the mid-1950s, he had been introduced to the poetry of Nicanor Parra, whose 1954 collection *Poems and Antipoems* created a considerable stir in the international poetic milieu (Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, Levertov, Merwin, Miller Williams enlisted as Parra's enthusiastic American translators). In the poem entitled 'Nineteen-Thirty' Parra lays out his poetic credo saying

> I offer nothing special. I formulate no hypothesis.
> I am only a camera swinging over the desert
> I am a flying carpet
> A recorder of dates and scattered facts.[109]

Confining himself to telling what he sees and letting it happen[110] are his strategies of choice. On the American ground this program strikes a responsive cord in the Whitmanesque tradition and one may only wonder to what extend it was the American bard that more or less directly inspired Parra's antipoetry. Be that as it may, it is certain that even without reading and translating the Chilean fellow-traveler Merton would have written antipoetry anyway. His first extended attempt in this field was *Original Child Bomb* (1962), a 41-point prose meditation on the construction and explosion of the first atomic bomb. Merton's role as author was limited to, mostly, 'telling what he sees' in a flat, factual style, and the inhumanity of science without conscience was

106. Thomas Merton, *Slub konwersacji* [*A Vow of Conversation*] (trans. Aleksander Gomola; Poznan: Zysk i S-ka, 1997), p. 27.

107. Merton, *Slub konwersacji*, p. 27.

108. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 373.

109. Nicanor Parra, 'Nineteen-Thirty' (trans. Miller Williams), in Emir Rodriguez Monegal (ed.), *The Borzoi Anthology of Latin American Literature*, II (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), pp. 702-703.

110. Parra in *The Borzoi Anthology*, pp. 703-704.

allowed to speak for itself. As he was soon to discover 'one no longer has to parody; it is enough to quote—and feed back quotations into the mass consumption of pseudo-culture',[111] though only a few years earlier he had still striven to dismiss such a conclusion: 'has the parody now become completely real? I have not yet reached the point where my despair would believe this.'[112]

The extent of our dependence on set formulas and routine ways of thinking is best illustrated by the appeal of advertising slogans. They have become an indispensable part of our lives precisely because they promise to reduce the complex and burdensome process of decision making to a number of easy-to-follow rules guaranteeing instantaneous success. Thomas Merton's humorous poem, 'Proverbs', is a practical guide, a 35-point prospectus culled from commercials and snatches of conversation which is to teach how to make a career and apparently covers the widest spectrum of career possibilities, though, being dedicated to Robert Lax, it seems to address this writer in particular. The general rule 'one thing you can do be a manufacturer make appliances' is carefully analyzed in view of its diverse 'applications' and followed by a warning: 'Do not expect to get by without Mr. and Mrs. Consumer'.[113] Should the goods one manufactures turn out to be fiction, one can always become manu-fictioner or 'mounte-fictioner'—if rule 19 ('Surpass all others in price and profit'[114]) is 'applied'.

Cables to the Ace, a long poem composed of 88 prose and verse sections, a Prologue, and an Epilogue, is Merton's fullest immersion in the superabundant nonsense of modern anti-culture, in the self-destructive center-less world. Never renouncing his belief in the redeeming function of poetry, Merton nevertheless saw clearly that the sapiential perspective was anachronistic to the new, alienated consciousness which, by its very alienation from Being and from itself, was unable to attain to an integral vision of 'what is'. In such circumstances, the task of the poet was to plunge into the midst of the incomprehensibility, incommunication and madness of modern culture in search of the vital symbols he could not fail sensing 'submerged under a tidal wave of trademarks, political party buttons, advertising and propaganda slogans'.[115]

111. Merton, *Asian Journal*, quoted in Woodcock, *Thomas Mertom: Monk and Poet*, p. 173.

112. Thomas Merton, *Restricted Journal*, quoted in Mott, *Seven Mountains*, p. 460.

113. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 803.

114. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 804.

115. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 333.

The poem is defined as 'Lament of Ortega' thus validating the declaration once made in the columns of *Atlantic Monthly*: 'What Rousseau's *Contract social* was for the eighteenth century and Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* for the nineteenth, Señor Ortega's *Revolt of the Masses* should be for the twentieth century'.[116] In Merton's poem Ortega's prophetic vision reaches a climax: the masses have usurped the role of the elite, Caliban has gained power; in the resulting mass culture the sense of reciprocity and responsibility has disappeared, the highest life goal being the pursuit of individual happiness as interpreted by the advertising industry. No wonder there are apparently no longer any messages to decode (#1), ancient wisdom has been forgotten (#2), competing philosophies that once could glimpse 'the world in a grain of sand' have become reduced to mere 'sand in the eye',[117] verbal communication has failed disastrously so that 'some of the better informed have declared war on language'.[118] The author of *Cables* once diagnosed an age in which cosmic symbolism is forgotten as an age of mass psychosis;[119] now he depicts the surreal landscape of the western world that for centuries has been practicing 'metaphysic of universal suspicion'[120] effectively degrading the symbol to a mere sign until it is no longer able to evoke the mystery that transcends it; the perceptual world ceases to be the world of ontological mediation, which results in a vision of one-dimensional reality peopled by one-dimensional men and women. Is such a world redeemable? In such a world is the quest for the self, the classic subject of epic poetry, still possible?

As it turns out, even such a baffling, experimental long poem as *Cables* explores the master-theme of all Merton's poetry and life, that of the self, while the Blakean allusion 'we assist once again at the marriage of heaven and hell'[121] suggests an affirmative answer to the former question. However, before this redemptive integration of opposites can take place, a complete panorama of both heavenly and infernal possibilities of the modern world has to be explored. Laboriously 'decoding the looks of opposites',[122] the poem brings us, through a series of half-shattered images of surreal realities encoded in an equally

116. Quoted in Stanisław Cichowicz, 'Wracajac do Ortegi' [Returning to Ortega], foreword to Jose Ortega y Gasset, *Po co wracamy do filozofii*? [Why Return to Philosophy?] (Warsaw: Spacja, 1992), p. 5.

117. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 397.

118. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 397.

119. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 333.

120. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 400.

121. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 396.

122. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 397.

fractured language, to the pivotal # 35, written entirely in French. One commentator interprets 'the French cable…embedded near the center of the volume' as 'emblematic of Merton's French-ness…embedded at the center of his being'.[123] Be that as it may, this item definitely refers to the depths of the writer's / speaker's self. His descent to 'the abyss' initiates the integration of his dark consciousness with its diurnal counterpart, a classic process of individuation. While 'Hell summons the neuter verb', the saving message, antidote to the fiendish neuter, comes from the mothers:

> They mold little birds. They have understood the wisdom of the egg. They offer you patience of ecstasy. They smile at you immediately at the moment of your choice. Do not choose the neuter. The sold forehead cannot look at you O flowers! You clues of pleasure![124]

It is the organization man who chooses the non-identity of 'the neuter'. He is 'without imperative urges',[125] a 'top pliable male'[126] 'with wires in the pleasure center',[127] and living in 'the social cages of joy'.[128] Even the choices he makes are the fake, predetermined choices of the mass society which only mock the dramatic options of existential freedom. The mothers' warning encourages the seeker to separate himself from an assumed identity and fabricated paradises to search for his true self and discover, along with it, the 'clues' of real pleasure. Again, it is the feminine wisdom that is seen performing the integrative function and opening the sapiential perspective. The speaker's rebellion—'go look for your Apocalypse in the unexplored subways'[129]—is a refusal to wallow in self-destructive despair and dig up his inner hell. Having mined the biblical diamond within his inmost depths, he would rather dig the sky 'like a mine'.[130]

> I sit in my green field like a quiet diamond… And all the letters add up to this: music is a joy invented by silence. Daisies. A geography of little unknown girls present in the grass.[131]

123. Robert Daggy, 'Afterword to the French Poems', in Thomas Merton, 'Four Poems in French' (Lexington, KY: The Anvil Press, 1996), pp. 46-63.
124. Merton, *Collected Poems*, translated from French by William Davis, p. 824.
125. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 407.
126. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 406.
127. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 408.
128. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 395.
129. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 825.
130. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 452.
131. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 825.

Merton's conviction that 'the spiritual anguish of man has no cure but mysticism'[132] has been recovered once again in poetic vision. It is in solitary contemplation that 'all the letters add up' and the depth dimension opens up. The contemplative regains the sense of natural unity with the whole world and with his own deepest self. Daisies, 'the clues of pleasure', are the same 'girls' that are seen with Plato who 'listens to them' and 'encourages them'[133]; they are simultaneously 'messages to decode'[134] and messengers-mediators, carriers of the symbolic function *par excellence.* They initiate the persona's ascent from 'the valley of tears'[135] through 'cloud and testament' to 'the summit' from which he sees 'nothing', while 'the little silent girls enter the shadow by the door of the chosen'.[136] Natural contemplation once again opens the way to the highest contemplation, that of God in himself, the 'dark' cognition of the unrepresentable Nothing Who is All, while the awakened individuated consciousness becomes a symbol of the marriage of heaven and hell, the integration of opposites into a harmonious, though tensional, whole. 'All the letters add up' and the analogue for this integration of dispersed sense is to be found in the realm of music rather than in logical, dialectic language. The impaired logic of 'familiar liturgies of misunderstanding' with all its confusion becomes progressively more and more interspersed with the discrete silence of the poetic word and the wisdom of mystics; the excess of rapidly clashing images counterbalanced by contemplative peace, while Christ, 'the Lord of History', 'seeking the lost disciple',[137] reinvests the visible world with its wonted transparency for the sacred.

In Merton's poem, language, seen as symptom of the profound crisis of modern culture ('familiar liturgies of misunderstanding'), manifests its latent potential for healing this crisis; in the evocative phrase of Bernardo Beltrán Llavador, it 're-members' the 'dismembered society'.[138] A survey of an impressive range of unintelligible newspeaks, electronic languages or deceitful sophisms leads to the dramatic declaration of # 53:

132. Merton, *New Man*, p. 70.
133. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 824.
134. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 296.
135. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 824.
136. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 825.
137. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 449.
138. Fernando Bertrán Llavador, 'Brother Silence, Sister Word: Merton's Conversion and Conversation in Solitude' (1996). This article is available online at: http://www. ucl.uk/~ucypmp/fernando.htm (8 March 2000), para. 9.

I think poetry must
I think it must
Stay open all night
In beautiful cellars.[139]

Poetry, like wine, gives flavor to life and new life to words. Its intoxication is in fact detoxification, a flight from the objectified physical world, in which being has been reduced to a mere copula connecting subject with predicate, to the *meta*-physical domain, 'the wet estranged country' known to 'Plato, Prophets, Milton, Blake, / The nine daughters of memory'.[140] It is poetic and mystical contemplation that overcomes what has been dubbed the great Western schism against the traditional vocation of human knowing.[141] By 'attaining directly to the world of pure being, in which symbols and forms have their transcendent justification',[142] art and mysticism make sense of the 'sandstorms' of formal logic. In *Cables* poetry demonstrates its potential for making the world new and innocent again through the recovered innocence of the poet's vision.

But new poetry, like new wine, cannot be poured into old formats. The new poetics of *Cables to the Ace* requires a radical restructuring of reading strategies, which the anti-prologue makes quite plain. Merton discovered that 'edifying cables'—which was the collection's initial title—'can be made musical if played and sung by full-armed societies doomed to an electric war'.[143] It was music that provided him with the model 'form' capable of incorporating words as well as moods and silences (#3). Music became the paradigm of a successful 'marriage' of opposites, a contrapuntal, tensional conjunction of harmonious sounds and overt dissonance; of measure and proportion on one hand, and an ecstatic 'flight' on the other. At around the same time Merton was writing enthusiastically about the extraordinary music of Zukofsky's poetry and encouraging poets to listen with 'the paradise ear'. Like Zukofsky or Joyce before him, the author of *Cables* had frequently demonstrated his 'childlike curiosity about words, their resonances… and the music which is beyond the words'.[144] Play-acting with words, their harmonies and associations, connotations and permutational

139. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 431.

140. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 451-52.

141. Gilbert Durand, *Wyobraznia symboliczna* [Symbolic Imagination] (Warsaw: PWN, 1986), p. 35.

142. Thomas Merton, 'Art and Worship', quoted in Raymond Bailey, *Thomas Merton on Mysticism* (New York: Image Books, 1987), p. 58.

143. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 396.

144. Merton, *Literary Essays*, pp. 128-29.

order, recycling quotations and outlandish magazine advertisements, playing 'lightly / and seriously at once'.[145] Merton both parodies and revitalizes 'the code' he 'worries about'.[146] To listen with a paradise ear one must first break free from language as 'a medium in which we are totally immersed'[147] and give it another chance. The author of *Babel* and *The New Man* returns again to the ontology of language. He once claimed that 'words can still travel, and take us with them'[148] on condition that they extract essences from the realities they name, but in the twentieth century, more than anytime before, the task of giving names corresponding to essential realities seems to belong to the marginal person who refuses to 'travel alone'[149] and thus to project his solipsistic consciousness onto his 'art'. It is the avoidance of self-consciousness that makes true art possible, that makes truth attainable— 'The perfect act is empty. Who can see it? He who forgets form.'[150] In spite of its idiosyncrasies, the labyrinthian *Cables* 'fits well into the Merton canon',[151] and the *Gelassenheit* section in particular.

Yet, there was a lingering sense that not all 'cables' had been decoded, that something was still left unsaid, 'but what it is', writes Merton in his journal, 'I don't know, and maybe I have to say it by not saying. Wordplay won't do it, or *will* do it = Geography of Lograire.'[152] So far the what-is-hidden-in-our-depths (*Cables*) was chiefly limited to the personal and collective depths of one culture which was Merton's most immediate context: the white culture of the European-American West. However, the poet's immersion in books on Latin America and Asia expanded his private geography, while his rapidly awakened concern for Native Americans as well as the steady support for American blacks at the peak of their struggle for equality and self-definition inevitably led to an increased awareness of shared cross-cultural archetypes and the recognition of a deep core of common humanity regardless of the cultural or racial distance. The poet's world was both private *and* public, simultaneously his own *and* everybody else's by virtue of 'common participation'.[153] It was the area of common myths,

145. From a poem by Robert Lax, quoted in Llavador, 'Brother Silence, Sister Word', para. 10.

146. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 407.

147. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 397.

148. Merton, *New Man*, p. 55.

149. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 397.

150. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 427.

151. Woodcock, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet*, p.176.

152. Thomas Merton, *Restricted Journal*, quoted in Mott, *Seven Mountains*, p. 500.

153. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 457.

rituals and archetypal images that had to be given closer scrutiny, the understanding of the cultural and racial other emerged as a vital moment in the movement toward self-understanding. That might have been the missing link in his 'continuing autobiography', just as he felt that the writing of *Geography* might finally liberate him from introversion and diaries. 'Maybe that is my one remaining task',[154] the author prophetically speculates within a year of his untimely death. There is some kind of poetic justice in the fact that Merton should have left as his poetic testament 'a purely tentative first draft of a work in progress', 'only a beginning of patterns'—which he nevertheless recognized as part of his 'repeated projects'—'the first opening up of a dream'.[155] It is a fitting coda for one who distrusted closed systems and final answers.

Geography, as the author states, is yet another attempt to 'build or to dream the world in which he [the poet] lives'.[156] One of the basic tasks of a human being is that of constructing a viable world, one's own geography, by mapping and orientating one's immediate surroundings around a focal point which becomes 'home' in its double literal-metaphorical meaning, for we live in ideas just as much as we do in actual buildings. The once ritual function of separating the sacred and the profane that used to re-enact the original creative act is still enacted metaphorically by contemporary men and women whenever they attempt to relate to the world at large; to impose some order on the all-too-frequently incomprehensible welter of facts and thus separate reality (*sacrum*) from illusion (*profanum*); to render reality more understandable, therefore more 'livable'. The poet in particular is a compulsive builder of livable worlds and the materials he uses are at the same time unique and representative, his own and everybody's, so that the world he builds is spacious enough to give shelter to multitudes. We know that while working on his ambitious project Merton was reading Gaston Bachelard's *La poetique de l'espace* and rethinking the 'liturgical mandala' of *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, the sixth century Irish monk's journey to the Western 'Land of Promise of the Saints'. The resulting volume is a mystical *navigatio*, a deep meditation on life based on a mandala awareness of space[157] with its four cantos referring to the four cardinal points of the compass, and the whole permeated by the poet's subjectivity—after all it is he who dreamed it.

154. Merton, *Restricted Journal*, quoted in Mott, *Seven Mountains*, p. 500.
155. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 457.
156. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 457.
157. Merton, *Slub konwersacji*, p. 91.

Merton had long been attentive to the deeper significance of myths and dreams for, as he wrote in 1963, they reveal in symbols 'the truths that are struggling for acceptance and for expression in our hearts'.[158] He read Faulkner and Camus in terms of modern myths of the destiny of man, listened to the prophetic 'different drummer' of black American voices, studied the ancient Mayan prophecies, examined a panorama of various messianic cult movements. All those readings seemed to point to a sense of *kairos*, the end of the old world order and the beginning of a new creation. 'At present', he warned, 'there are scores if not hundreds of Nat Turners', and urged white America to take their messages seriously and try to understand 'these prophets, these preachers of the apocalypse'.[159] *The Geography of Lograire* is a response to this call, an attempt to decode the prophecies of a variety of 'primitive Ezechiels' from present and past times, to spell out a deeper significance of our dreams and nightmares.

Originally Merton planned to write a cycle of poems based on the New Guinea and Melanesia Cargo cults which he had been studying with great interest, but soon began noticing analogous patterns at work in other post-colonial countries and in time discovered how deeply cargo mentality was embedded in the modern consciousness. In a letter to his literary agent Merton defines Cargo movements as 'means by which primitive and underprivileged people believe they can obtain manufactured goods by an appeal to supernatural powers (ancestors, spirits, etc)', adding that these people expect an immediate reward (cargo) for their complete rejection / destruction of the old culture and an adoption of new values.[160] This definition is broad enough to include Cargo cults proper along with the Ghost Dance movement, Black Power or, with necessary qualifications, Marxism and some varieties of Catholic renewal, to give just a few examples. One cannot help thinking that in the 'North' canto Merton puts the Mafia and organized crime on the same list ('Queen's Tunnel', #19, 'Sendings'), while suggesting that the consumer culture catering to our 'Mafia Id' is in fact a veiled form of the same thing. However, his interest in Cargo goes beyond comparative anthropology. All the analogous movements spell out a sense of injustice and inequality. Cargo is needed not for its material value, but to establish the status of the underprivileged people as equal to that of the dominant group and give them a respectable identity.

158. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 173.
159. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 157.
160. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 604.

This discovery coincided with Merton's search for the compassionate self, the goal of the contemplative life, a self that is able to understand the other because it exists in *temps vierge* hastily defined in Merton's notes as 'one's *own* time. (Not dominated by one's ego and its demands.) Hence open to others—*compassionate* time (rooted in the sense of common illusion and in criticism of it).'[161] In Faulkner's Dilsey he finds a model of the compassionate self able to correlate all the times in which the other characters live and transcend them in her Christian, organic experience of time.[162] *Geography* owes as much to the technique of *The Sound and the Fury* as it does to David Jones, the Pound of *The Cantos* or the Blake of *The Prophetic Books*; in a way it *is* Merton's *The Sound and the Fury*, with the past immediately accessible, 'at this precise moment of history',[163] and the sense that although everything is coextensive, as in Benjy's section, it is also correlated, its fragmentation transcended by the dreaming consciousness of the compassionate self, the involved observer. But Merton is more than an observer, he is an observer-participant revisiting the scenes of his own dreams and nightmares: New York, London, Cambridge, France, Scotland ('North'), re-examining his American South experiences as well as his reading experiences, seeing himself as inscribed in the history of all those places and, conversely, all those places as making up his own history. In 'Prologue: The Endless Inscription' Merton uses his Welsh and Anglo-American ancestry to inscribe himself within the pattern of marginalization and oppression.

The poet defines his long epic as a meditation on life and death carried out now in the subjective now in 'more universal and primitive myth-dream terms'.[164] Each canto enacts in its own particular way the 'common participation of the living and the dead in the work of constructing a world and a viable culture'[165]; each unfolds the same 'design of ire'[166] in its manifold variations on the Cain and Abel story and the story's reverberations down the ages, both in its biblical connotations ('Lamb Son's Blood' becomes 'Jim Son Crow') as well as its less apparent actualizations (mainstream religion versus messianic cults or the metropolis versus outlying territories of the Malinowski

161. Merton, *Asian Notes*, quoted in Mott, *Seven Mountains*, p. 550.

162. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 503.

163. Title of a poem that belongs to the 'West' Canto of *Geography*; Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 583-86.

164. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 458.

165. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 458.

166. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 461.

section). The struggle of life and death as the volume's organizing pattern is itself based on a still more basic mythical framework:

> Under shadow there wait snake
> There coil ire design father of Africa pattern.[167]

The Fall is the 'father' of all these 'designs of ire', and even the speaker's personal fall takes place under its auspices: 'The hot garden is my hideaway from the whisperer', says he in 'Queen's Tunnel'.[168]

The 'Queen's Tunnel' section is the most subjective, therefore most hermetic, meditation on Eros and Thanatos carried out in the surrealist mode. The entire cityscape is presided over by the ubiquitous all-seeing 'top funnel house' that Merton defines as 'a sort of Hieronymus Bosch building which smokes and looks and is symbolic of death as a presence structured into society itself as guilt, police and undertakers'.[169] This is where 'I sat down and wept by Sandy river'.[170] The New York Borough of Queens where the young Thomas Merton spent his youth must have given him a foretaste of the patterns explored decades later in his 'imperfect masterpiece'.[171] Revisiting it mentally he reports 'Mafia geography. Sicily in Queens.'[172] With its growing immigrant population the city was a miniature of the world's conflicts: ethnic, religious, economic, but above all it provided the future writer with a paradigm of the patriarchal culture's intolerance towards the other and a transposition onto the American soil of the same colonial conflicts which culminated in the emergence of Cargo cults. The whole item ends with an updated New Testament scene which does not seem to hold out much hope for the oppressed, either.

> So Christ went down to stay with them Niggers and took his place with them at table. He said to them, 'It is very simple much simpler than you imagine.' They replied, 'You have become a white man and it is not so simple at all.'[173]

The blacks are cast in the role of the biblical publicans and sinners to whom Christ has been sent, but unlike their New Testament counterparts they see the good news beyond their reach, on the other side of

167. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 462.
168. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 501-502.
169. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 458.
170. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 515.
171. Woodcock, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet*, p. 181.
172. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 499.
173. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 516.

the color-line. Thus even the universal message of the Gospel has become inscribed in the system of domination, and this scene sets the pattern for other sections, other cantos.

The Geography of Lograire ostensibly lacks the affirmative ending of *Cables to the Ace*, yet the affirmation of this volume is both more nuanced and more universal. Though 'Geography is in trouble all over Lograire'[174] and no place is untouched by violence, corruption or death, 'there is a grain of sand in Lambeth which Satan cannot find… There is a seed of light in us that cannot be bought by Grove Press.'[175] The monumental epic poem 'fits well into the Merton canon'[176] in its recognition of the *point vierge* in every human being, a point of absolute incorruptible purity. It will not be wide of the mark to see this inner innocence as a pledge of the eschatological victory, a seed of the Kingdom that matures in hiding (though Merton never explicitly uses this image, and remains faithful to his tactic of 'urbane structuralism'). Even though the child 'must die into manhood'[177] and authentic spirituality often degenerates into a systemic religion or becomes 'a white man's show',[178] the message of hope can be heard in the most unlikely places. It was only all-too-logical that it should be heard in the voice of 'heretics', cult prophets, marginal and oppressed people rather than the 'sweetly reasonable piety that disturbed no one'[179] of established churches. The pleas of the 'abominable' seventeenth-century Ranters must have sounded familiar to the admirer of Blake and the fourteenth-century mystic Lady Julian of Norwich, though not to their self-righteous persecutors:

> Then God does not hate? Not even sin?
> So heaven and hell are in Deptford, Woolwich,
> Battersea and Lambeth ?
>
> Burn him through the tongue![180]

These are some of the 'truths struggling for expression' that the poet decoded—or encoded—in *The Geography of Lograire*. And he managed to keep his promise made at the close of *Cables to the Ace* to 'walk away from this poem / hiding the ace of freedom'.[181] Was that his final

174. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 516.
175. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 517.
176. Woodcock, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet*, p. 176.
177. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 518.
178. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 593.
179. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 477.
180. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 524.
181. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 454.

liberation from the self? The author's role in the poem has been minimized, limited to editing quotations from various books (including notebooks) and newspapers, and arranging his material into a 'survey map'.[182]

At the beginning of his spiritual journey Merton wrote: 'geography has lost all earthly north'. Little did he suspect that the loss of the cardinal point of the compass, the renouncement of the world that seemed to be the highest gain, was in fact a prelude to a greater task—that of an eventual rebuilding of his geography, a reorientation, not rejection, of his map. That celebrated loss was an unsuspected gain in the sense that without it the restructuring could not have taken place, the world could not have been reclaimed on a new plane. Paradoxically again, having given everything up for the love of God, he was entrusted with the task of inscribing his compassionate self into a geography beyond fixed horizons or assumed explanations, in a humble, hidden way of a 'marginal' person. By disappearing in this expanded geography Merton both bequeaths himself to the world he loves[183] and becomes a terminal for the thoughts and voices of others; renouncing the ambition to explain, he merely 'hazard[s] a few conjectures that are subjective, provisional, mere intuitions…to be completed by the thinking of others'.[184]

182. Woodcock, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet*, p. 177.

183. The prototypical modern epic, Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*, ends with the persona saying, 'I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love'. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, I (ed. Ronald Gottesman *et al.*; New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), p. 1922.

184. Merton, *Faith and Violence* quoted in Bailey, *Thomas Merton on Mysticism*, p. 210.