

MERTON AND THE REAL POETS:

Paradise Re-Bugged

by **Michael W. Higgins**

In a letter to his friend W. H. "Ping" Ferry, dated 14 September 1967, Merton observes, vis-a-vis the copy of the David Jones *Agenda* "Ping" has sent him: "As I told you, I did not know him at all. This has me felled. It is just what I have looked for so long: better than Bunting. With Jones, Bunting and Zukofsky we have the real poets and I wonder where they have been hidden."¹ Characteristically, Merton responds to his friend's generous gift with his usual mixture of intense interest, wonder, and hyperbole. How seriously do we take him?

The beginning of Merton's interest in Louis Zukofsky appears to be dated 20 July 1966; and his interest in Basil Bunting is first recorded in the *Restricted Journals* shortly after that. Michael Mott notes: "Merton first mentions Basil Bunting: RJ, Oct. 16, 1966. The previous day he had found Bunting's work at the University of Louisville Library, 'very fine, tough, Northumbrian, Newcastle stuff of the Kingdom of Caedmon'."² His interest in Jones was dependent only in part on Ferry, for he had in the person of A. M. Allchin not only a keen admirer of Jones's fully Catholic genius, but the individual who would introduce him to many fine Welsh poets, including the estimable Ronald Stuart Thomas. Merton writes to Allchin on 16 June 1967: "R. S. Thomas is for me a marvelous discovery. A poet like Muir,

1. Thomas Merton, *Letters from Tom: A Selection of Letters from Father Thomas Merton, Monk of Gethsemani, to W. H. Ferry, 1961-1968*; ed. by W. H. Ferry (Scarsdale, New York: Fort Hill Press, 1984), p. 61. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Ferry*.

2. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 640.

* This paper was delivered on 26 May 1989 in the session, "Merton and Poetry," at the First General Meeting of *The International Thomas Merton Society* in Louisville, Kentucky.

perhaps better than Muir, with such a powerful spirit and experience, so well conveyed. I must try to write something on him: is there anything about his life, or who he is?"³

And so we have it — new models, new voices. It would be futile, however, to argue that the evolution of Merton's poetics was profoundly affected by his discovery of Jones and Thomas, but it is important to note the points of convergence, the shared sensibility, the common vision. With Zukofsky there is a healthy interchange of ideas, and a correspondence that underlines a mutual aesthetics. Bunting, like Edwin Muir, reminds Merton of the centrality of the particular, of the concrete, of the individual in the mass age. What he writes of Muir in his essay, "The True Legendary Sound: The Poetry and Criticism of Edwin Muir," is as true of Bunting as it is of himself:

The power of the poet's imaginative vision (in which of course the reader can participate) is that it directs our eye to beings in such a way as to "feel the full weight and uniqueness of their lives." Here as a matter of fact the poet has a prerogative which the speculative and abstract metaphysician might be tempted to deny him out of envy: the power to see being in the concrete and not by pure abstraction; to see it in its individual actualization — and even to express it as its concreteness. Both the vision and the expression of the individual evade technical and discursive ontology.⁴

Their common dread of theorizing — of the powers of abstraction and generalizing — which prevents the imagination from seeing being both "in the concrete" and in its "individual actualization" is a dread, an abhorrence, rooted in Blake, Merton's *magister spiritus*.

For the purpose of this article, however, I would like to concentrate mainly on Zukofsky and his cosmology, with some attention to the significance of Jones and Thomas for the theme of unity and sapiential vision. Zukofsky's cosmology is paradisaical, Franciscan, and Blakean. His poetry, as a consequence, is celebrative, vital, and wholistic. In his review-article on Zukofsky's *All: The Collected Short Poems, 1956-1964* (first published in *The Critic* under the title "Paradise Bugged" in February-March 1967, and subsequently re-titled "Louis Zukofsky — The Paradise Ear"), Merton argues that "all really valid poetry . . . is a kind of recovery of paradise," that the paradise poet effects a renewal of vision through a new poetics, a new art, a new form. "Here the world gets another chance."

3. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*; ed. by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 28.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*; ed. by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 34. Hereafter referred to in the text as *LE*.

And the world needs another chance. In various of his critical essays and prose poems Merton sounded the alarm bell, the *tuba mirum*, announcing Death's ruthless hegemony. Only the poets can successfully resist the blandishments, the allure, of Death's clever minions — technology, advertising, corporate and political power. The poets must obey life

and the Spirit of Life that calls us to be poets In the Republic of Plato there was already no place for poets and musicians, still less for dervishes and monks. As for the technological Platos who think they now run the world we live in, they imagine they can tempt us with banalities and abstractions. But we can elude them merely by stepping into the Heraklitean river which is never crossed twice.

When the poet puts his foot in that ever-moving river, poetry itself is born out of the flashing water. In that unique instant, the truth is manifest to all who are able to receive it Come, dervishes: here is the water of life. Dance in it.⁵

These passages were addressed to a gathering of Latin American poets in Mexico City in 1964, and they underscore the importance Merton attached to Latin American verse, in sharp contrast with the deadly, self-preoccupied, and sterile poetry emanating from the United States. In "Prologo," a prose poem dedicated to Ludovico Silva, Merton sarcastically reminds us that "we must continue to taste the lamentable experience of those in whom death has failed, O twenty poets, O ten poets, O five poets, O Ludovico Silva and Ernesto Cardenal."⁶

The poet is the celebrant of life in the theater of death. The poet must disclose the holy at the heart of the mundane.

In the Kingdom of Death the poet is condemned to sing that in the midst of death he, the unsuccessful, remains in the midst of life. All the others are embalmed in the vast whispering perfumed cybernetic silence of the millenium of death. (CP, p. 743)

And for Merton it is the Portuguese and Spanish-speaking poets of Latin America to whom one turns to hear the sounds of life, the promise of Eden; to these poets and a few others scattered throughout the Kingdom of Death, principal among whom is Louis Zukofsky.

In a letter to Zukofsky dated 11 March 1967, Merton speaks of the poet's "A" 7 as a Easter fugue, "with the kind of secularity that is in Bach," and goes on to speak of the resurrection reality that authentic art is all about: "the victory over death." "This is the real witness to the world and

5. Thomas Merton, "Message to Poets," in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 160-161.

6. Thomas Merton, "Prologo," in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 744. Hereafter referred to in the text as CP.

you are the one who is saying it most clearly; which is probably one reason why as yet too few have heard it."⁷

Zukofsky's poetry is a sustained revelry in the particular, a celebration as Zukofsky would have it of "Shakespeare's clear physical eye against the erring brain," and a forceful repudiation of the tyranny of abstraction:

Out of deep need
 Four trombones and the organ in the nave
 A torch surged-
 Timed the theme Bach's name,
 Dark, larch and ridge, night:
 From my body to other bodies
 Angels and bastards interchangeably
 Who had better sing and tell stories
 Before all will be abstracted.⁸

Zukofsky's cosmology of love rejects nothing as alien. As Merton notes in his review-article on Zukofsky:

Franciscan, he knows that only when you accept the whole thing will evil be reduced to the last place in it . . . Zukofsky's poems are about this wholeness, therefore they spring from a ground of immense silence and love which extends beyond them infinitely in all directions. (*LE*, p. 131)

The particular; the child; the angel; paradise; Blake — this is Zukofsky's cosmology and it is that of Merton's *Cables to the Ace*.

Cables to the Ace underscores Merton's cosmic eschatology. The cables are "cosmic cables without interception" sent to those who can see, for "It is written: 'To see the world in a grain of sand'" (Cable 4). Only those truly liberated from a "narrowing of vision, a foreclosure of experience" can understand the necessity for a "new form of theological understanding." Like Blake, Merton worked for the dethronement of Urizen or Nobodaddy, the permanent casting out of the devils of a secular logic, law, and generalization from the spiritual and unimaginative life, the creative revitalizing of the tension of separation (the latter being the legacy of the Fall), and the redeeming of the Contraries or "the marriage of heaven and hell." Of the Contraries Merton observes, in his "Blake and the New Theology":

True holiness and redemption, for Blake, lie in the energy that springs from the reunion of Contraries. But the Negation [Urizen, the "Abstract objecting power that Negatives everything" (*Jerusalem*)] stands between the Contraries and prevents their "marriage." Holding heaven and hell apart, Urizen infects them both with his own sickness and nothingness. True holiness, faith, vision, Christianity, must therefore subvert his power

7. Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky. Hereafter referred to in the text as *TMSC*.

8. Louis Zukofsky, "A" 1 - 12 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1967), p. 132.

to Negate and "redeem the contraries" in mercy, pity, peace. The work of this reversal is the ephiphany of God in Man. (LE), pp. 7)

But this reversal of the power of Urizen, of a fallen history, though it be seen in the epiphany of the Incarnate Word, must not be seen as occurring outside human history and consequently succumbing again to the abstract reasoning of Urizen. The radical reversal of fallen history requires not only the acceptance of the Fall as an ontological fact but an acceptance of the world as the geography of redemption:

A reading of Blake's Prophetic Books will show clearly enough how radical is the reversal The reversal comes from within history accepted, in its often shattering reality, as the focus of salvation and epiphany. It is not that the world of Auschwitz, Vietnam and the Bomb has to be cursed and repudiated . . . [rather] that very world has to be accepted as the terrain of the triumph of love⁹

For the world to be seen as "the terrain of the triumph of love" there must be something other than the apocalyptic fire that razes. There must be the fire that cleanses, transmutes, and restores: "Learn to love the fire. The alchemical fire of transmutation The apocalyptic fire: 'Meditate on the make-believe world as burning to ashes, and become *being above human*'."¹⁰ In Cable 82, a powerfully Blakean poem, Merton has St. Theresa of the Heart victimized by the servants of Urizen who seek to constrain pure vision within the walls of reason:

And the prelates, mayors, and confessors wanted the doors
closed.
The tongue of her heart, they said, must proffer insults to
the vision
So they built four walls of cold rain around the vision.

Theresa alone, however, "pierced by a thousand needles of fire," transforms herself into a dove that flies "into the fiery center of the vision" while the "prelates, mayors, and confessors" wrap their minds "in the folds of the black storm." Determined to resist the declaimers of passion, affection, and imagination, Theresa, mystic and visionary, knows true vision in the burning of the world, an apocalypse of love. She sees with the eye of love, the Spiritual Eye or Divine Vision, and all is burnt up in a glance. As Blake says in his conclusion to "A Vision of the Last Judgement":

Error is Created. Truth is Eternal. Error, or Creation, will be Burned up, & then, & not till Then, Truth or Eternity will appear. It is Burnt up the

9. Thomas Merton, "The Death of God and the End of History," in *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 258.

10. Norman O. Brown, *Love's Body* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), pp. 178-179.

Moment Men cease to behold it. I assert for My Self that I do not behold the outward Creation & that to me it is hindrance & not Action; it is as the Dirt upon my feet, No part of Me. "What," it will be Question'd, "When the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?" O no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty." I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight. I look thro' it & not with it.¹¹

Although one looks *through* the corporeal eye and observes the ruin and misery of matter one does not see with this eye but with the eye of Imagination. In an instant, Error (Auschwitz, Vietnam, etc.) is burnt up for there is only Truth, the "terrain of the triumph of love."

It is similarly not with the corporeal but with the spiritual eye that one sees angels. For Blake, who had commerce with them often and not only as a child, angels are holier than men and devils "because they do not Expect Holiness from one another, but from God only." For Merton, angels are "heavenly departures" who accompany him "through the shivering scrap-towns" (Cable 77). For Blake they are the host of systematic religion but for Merton, "an entire sensate parcel / Of registered earth" (77), they are "nine fond harmonies" that "never leave me alone":

For Merton the angels are the "farmers of the mind." He says "they walk with me" and although he denies "word magic . . . an impurity of language," the angels are

The midnight express
Bringing Plato, Prophets, Milton, Blake,
The nine daughters of memory. (Cable 83)

They are the *Sanctus* sound, the solemn music of creativity, "the abyss of brass, the sapphire orchestra," that accompanies the emerging image into consciousness:

Bear the hot
Well-fired shot
Roaring out
Of the cool-dark (83)

Angels for Blake and Merton are part of their vision and not only a sacramental metaphor. They exist because they are seen by intuition. It is the language of Zen that they speak and not that of the *Cogito*.¹²

And it is with the spiritual eye that one will see paradise in the very midst of the "burning garden;" one will discover Christ coursing "through the ruins," "speaking to the sacred trees," and know

The Lord of History
Weeps into the fire (Cable 80)

11. William Blake, *Complete Writings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 617.

12. See Michael W. Higgins, "A Study of the Influence of William Blake on Thomas Merton," *American Benedictine Review* 25: 3 (1974), p. 382.

The poet will recover paradise because he loves, because his heart is "pierced by a thousand needles of fire." In Cable 74 Merton the poet/lover rejects the allure of an unsuitable romanticism:

O God do I have to be Wordsworth
Striding on the Blue Fells
With a lake for sale and Lucy
Locked in the hole of my camera?

and declares that

I am sustained
By ravens only and by the fancies
Of female benefactors

Although the poet is nurtured "by the fancies / Of female benefactors," these benefactors are in fact emanations from the one female, Sophia / Virgin / Urthona, the love of whom is paradise. To see paradise, to know wisdom, one must love and wait for the *point vierge*, "that moment of awe and inexpressible innocence." The "unspeakable secret," this "ace of freedoms," is the poet's discovery, the full perfection of which means death. In a powerfully Jungian and prophetic conclusion to Cable 74 Merton speaks of the mandala, the ancient symbol of integration and fulfillment, in connection with the "distant country" of his approaching death:

Better to study the germinating waters of my wood
And know this fever: or die in a distant country
Having become a pure cone
Or turn to my eastern abstinence
With that old inscrutable love cry
And describe a perfect circle

Before the poet's annihilation by Wisdom, an experience which he describes as "a perfect circle," "having become a pure cone," he assists in the recovery of paradise through his poetry — the language of his vision, the sacrament of his "discovery" — freeing Imagination from the shackles of Urizenic perception. Authentic paradisaic poetry explores new possibilities through a daring revitalization of idea, word, and sound and, in his anti-poetic epics, Merton attempts to give "the world another chance." In doing this, *Cables to the Ace* qualifies by Merton's own definition as truly "valid poetry." In his Louis Zukofsky piece, Merton justifies his own Blakean purpose as a poet:

... (poetry that is fully alive, and asserts its reality by its power to generate imaginative life) is a kind of recovery of paradise. Not that the poet comes up with a report that he, an unusual man, has found his own way back into Eden; but the living line and the generative association, the new sound, the music, the structure, are somehow grounded in a renewal of vision and hearing so that he who reads and understands recognizes that here is

a new start, a new creation. Here the world gets another chance. Here man, here the reader gets another chance. Here man, here the reader discovers himself getting another start in life, in hope, in imagination, and why? Hard to say, but probably because the language itself is getting another chance, through the innocence, the tenacity, the good faith, the honest senses of the workman poet. (*LE*, p. 128)

Merton's "own way back into Eden" is like Blake's, through the imagination, the spiritual eye, perpetually recovering in verse the *point vierge* — the paradisaical moment. Zukofsky, the paradise poet, attends to reality. "Here is an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open. The sword is taken away, but we do not know it "Wisdom," cries the dawn deacon, but we do not attend."¹³

Zukofsky does attend, to the particular, the minute, the forgotten, the commonplace.

Each poem is very much the same question, but brand new. Because here is a poet who has the patience and the good sense to listen. And look around at the Brooklyn he loves. And write a perfect poem about a dog looking out of a brownstone window. (*LE*, p. 133)

Merton was impressed not only by the purity and craftsmanship of Zukofsky's art, but by its comprehensiveness, its epic integrity. In a letter to Zukofsky, written on 5 April 1967, Merton comments on the Blake-like quality of "A" 10, and observes further that: "It is true, we none of us interpret our dream: but you do it in 'A.' It is a long, careful, valid, patient, humble, penetrating interpretation of your dream. It helps me to interpret my own" (*TMSC*).

And Merton was in the process of interpreting his own, as the subsequent correspondence between the two clearly indicates. In a letter to Zukofsky dated 30 August 1967, Merton inquires: "Where did you get the Melanesian stuff?" (*TMSC*). He then proceeds to speak about his own interest in the Cargo Cults and the work of Claude Levi-Strauss. Zukofsky responds on 2 September 1967 that indeed the Melanesian stuff is from Malinowski and that perhaps he should read Levi-Strauss, but then concludes with the irreverent twist: "But maybe better to leave it to chance — as it's not *larnin* one wants however one respects it" (*TMSC*). Zukofsky wears his erudition lightly.

He also warns the younger poet apropos the South Canto or the Cain poem which Merton had sent him: "[I]f you're experimenting, as I'm sure you are, pay no attention to me and find your own answer" (2 January 1968,

13. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1968), p. 132. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CGB*.

TMSC). Merton accepts the advice, but only in part. He knows that the task he has set himself is fraught with risk, he knows that "the Cain poem . . . does indeed need some more work. Part of a big long mixed up thing that will come together in time, I hope. I need to soak in 'A' again and deepen my understanding of how to get at such a venture" (2 February 1968, TMSC).

That venture of which he speaks is *The Geography of Lograire*, which is about unity, final integration, "ingathering." It is about a spiritual locus, a spiritual rootedness. It is about a geography of the imagination, a geography of the spirit, and a geography of place. In his "The Prologue: The Endless Inscription," Merton "identifies the source of his imaginative gift: his Welsh heritage and its Celtic love for the mythical and the visionary."¹⁴

Merton had written before the composition of *The Geography of Lograire* of his unique bonding to Wales in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*: "It is the Welsh in me that counts: that is what does the strange things, and writes the books, and drives me into the woods" (CGB, p. 200). A. M. Allchin remarks: "Must one not, despite Merton's reported disclaimer, see some reminiscence of the Welsh name for England, *Lloegr* (in medieval French and English *Logres*) in the title of the poem?"¹⁵ This might suggest then that the "geography of England" might be a more accurate reading of the title than "geography of Wales." It is Wales, however, that is central to the poet's memory. It is Wales that awakens the poet to his roots. It is Wales that is the lever, the intersection where the opposites conjoin in harmony:

Plain plan is Anglia so must angel father mother
Wales Battle grand opposites in my blood fight hills
Plains marshes mountains and fight
Two seas in my self Irish and German
Celt blood washes in twin seagreen people

And another child of Wales
Is born of sea's Celts. (Prologue, p. 5)

But what did Wales mean to Merton?

Merton was accomplishing two things: a recognition of another perennial source of his inspiration, the Welsh visionary tradition that he held in common with Henry Vaughan and Dylan Thomas, and a reaffirmation of the importance of the *cantus firmus*, the steady base or principle in one's life, revealed in the creative remaking by the imagination of the culture

14. See Michael W. Higgins, "The Silent One and the Poetics of Unity: Thomas Merton's Last Poem," *Gamut Three* (1983), p. 35. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Higgins*.

15. A. M. Allchin, "'The Cloud of Witnesses': A Common Theme in Henry Vaughan and Thomas Merton," *Cistercian Studies* 2 (1976), p. 128.

that nourishes one "The geography of Lograire" is "the geography of Wales," if we mean by Wales that *cantus firmus* without which the imagination and the spirit wander directionless. In the kingdom of Wales Merton will unite all men in himself because he will have relived the history of his family: "Wales all my Wales a ship of green fires / A wall wails wide beside some sex / Gold stone home on Brecon hill or Tenby harbor / Where was Grandmother with Welsh Birds / My family ancestor the Lieutenant in the hated navy / From the square deck cursed / Pale eyed Albion without stop" (Prologue, p. 7).

In the poet's particular history can be found the general history of humanity; in the poet's personal vision can be discovered the universal mythdream. The poet knows, however, that "in holy green Wales there is never staying" and he must move on to other lands. (Higgins, pp. 35-36)

And Merton does "move on to other lands" surveying the legacy of Cain.

From Wales to the world, from the particular to the universal — this is the movement of *The Geography of Lograire*. It isn't only Wales that captures the Trappist's attention. The steady and illuminating correspondence between Allchin and Merton results, as has already been indicated, in the discovery of R. S. Thomas and in a growing fascination with kindred spirit David Jones. There is great affection for Jones on Allchin's part and he writes to Merton with such an infectious zeal that Merton, none too resistant to any kind of zeal, could hardly avoid response.

Although Allchin comes to Jones rather late, 1967 to be precise, his enthusiasm grows quickly. Not only is he resolved to acquaint Merton with the full range of Jones's artistic and poetic genius, he takes a personal and solicitous interest in the aging artist's well-being. In his last letter on the matter he remarks:

We must talk about D. Jones. I think something from you (are there any copies of Cassiodorus still?), could be very important to the old man, who is genuinely grieved and puzzled by everything that goes on, (rather in a Maritain way, but without Maritain's capacity for articulating it).

(26 March 1968, TMSC)

Merton is right when he recognizes the singularity of Jones's genius, the peculiar isolation of a writer at variance with contemporary ideologies and fashions. Having read the complex epic, *The Anathemata*, Merton, in the very midst of working on his own "summa of offbeat anthropology," writes to "Ping" Ferry:

I have gone right into *The Anathemata* and it is a fine poem: curious from the Catholic viewpoint right at this time!! I hope at least one or two Catholics read it one of these days and keep their sense of continuity with the past. He says everything. And has the sap and solidity of Romanesque sculpture, too. (Ferry, p. 63)

For there to be unity, there must be continuity; for there to be personal integration, there must be cultural integration. In describing *The*

Anthemata as a work of universal anamnesis, a work of uniting the disparate, as he does in his article "A Discovery of David Jones," Allchin could just as appropriately be describing the structure, intention, and poetic modalities of *The Geography of Lograire*.

At first there may be only a few things which come sharply into focus. Much is unclear; there is so much detail; it is difficult to place oneself in such a rich and complex universe. The texture of the writing has as many dimensions as the reality it describes. Again, the secret is to take time. No one could hope to read these poems and understand them all at once. We have to learn not only to see what they say, but how they say it . . . For David Jones is one who is determined to gather up the fragments so that nothing be lost, as he himself writes in one place: "Gathering all things in, twining each trussed stem to the swaying trellis of the dance, the dance about the sawn lode-stake on the hill where the hidden stillness is at the core of the struggle . . ." ¹⁶

Jones and Merton were engaged in a common task: reparation of our disordered vision and the healing integration of memory, holiness and communion. Their epics — complex, recondite, allusive — are sacramental, symbolic, designed

to express and to encourage man's acceptance of his own center, his own ontological roots in a mystery of being that transcends his individual ego. But when man is reduced to his empirical self and confined within its limits, he is, so to speak, excluded from himself, cut off from his own roots, condemned to spiritual death by thirst and starvation in a wilderness of externals.¹⁷

For it is not only Jones who is at variance with his time.

The Welsh parson-poet, R. S. Thomas, was another of Merton's latter day finds. Allchin was singly responsible. As was so often the case, Merton's appetite for the new discovery was insatiable. Merton wanted more of Thomas's books and all the information about the poet he could get his hands on. Allchin obliged as best he could with various of his own impressions about the solitary, profoundly pastoral, and frequently melancholy Anglican priest-poet.

Allchin urged Merton to write to Thomas as he had urged him to write to Jones, but to no avail. Allchin informed Merton of Thomas's contempt for the twentieth century and for England [he is, in fact, a Welsh nationalist]:

The only time I met him and we had a long talk, he certainly made me feel that I should be leaving the promised land and descending onto some

16. A. M. Allchin, *The World is a Wedding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 160.

17. Thomas Merton, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" in *Love and Living*; ed. by Naomi Burton Stone & Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), p. 65.

pretty Sodomish kind of plain on my 150 mile drive back to Oxford But he's a very nice man; gloomy, with a great craggy face, and all the sensitive perception that you can see. One of the things that struck me was the extraordinary seriousness and workmanlike way in which he regards his own parish work. (20 July 1967, *TMSC*)

What I think Merton discovered in the poetry of R. S. Thomas was a voice not unlike his own: sapiential, pastoral, anti-technology. Merton saw in the lacerating disclosures of Thomas's despair, in the fierce dialectic between faith and doubt, in the doomed struggle to preserve a culture's memory in the face of brutal modernization, a struggle strangely reminiscent of those cultures laid to waste by the sword and the cross of the *conquistadores* — "archaic wisdom" sundered.

I think it was the "sapiential vision" he found in the pastoral lyrics of the Welshman with a taste for Kierkegaard that most struck Merton. I am speculating only, of course. But there are enough striking resonances, convergences, commonalities between the two poets to suggest that had Merton lived longer, had he written on Thomas as he proposed, indeed, had they corresponded as Allchin urged, they would have discovered how much they are alike. But it was not to be.

What do I mean by their sapiential vision?

The wisdom that is sapiential is childlike; it is penetrative, immediate and unaffected. The child knows not only through the intellect but primarily through the imagination with the empathy and freedom it grants. *Sapientia* is the way of the poet, the child, the innocent dreamer, and Christ: it is the mode of knowing for the religious pastoralist, the Zen master, the visionary and the mystic. When the poet knows in the highest way and loves in the deepest way the poet has tasted the innocence of *Wisdom*.¹⁸

It is this sapiential vision and his Zukofskian cosmology that provide the stuff of Merton's new poetics, but only insofar as they are integrated into that mature synthesis that constitutes Merton's "Prophetic Books," his antipoetic epics, his Blakean mythdream, the map of paradise regained.

18. See Michael W. Higgins, "The Laboratory of the Spirit: Pastoral Vision in the Age of Technology," *Cistercian Studies* 16: 2 (1981), p. 122.