

THOMAS MERTON:

Poet of the Sacred

by **Alan Altany**

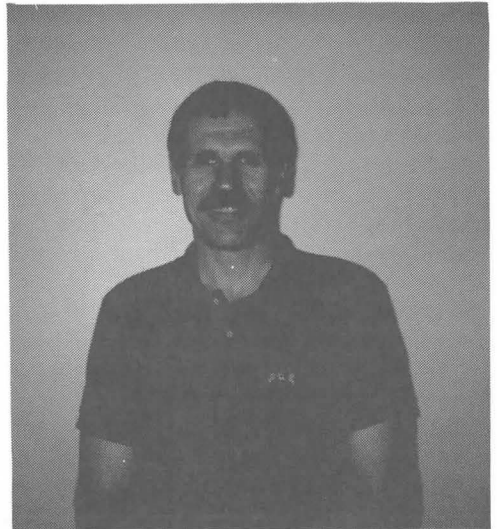
The poetry of Thomas Merton, more than any other aspect of his work, shows the path his idea of the sacred traveled as he went from monastically oriented, metaphysical lyrics to a mystical, almost surreal, poetry of directness that has been called “anti-poetry.” Never considered a major poet, Merton’s poetry nonetheless discloses a unique voice. No other monk of the twentieth century has become so well known as a poet even though it was not until the late 1960s and the 1970s that his stature as a poet began to increase among critics.

In time Merton became more than an obscure monk writing obscure lives of Cistercian saints and poetry that was heavily indebted to traditional Christian imagery. He became a poet of “Everyman” where his own experience and consciousness merged with that of others. He became more concerned about being a poet who wrote good poetry based upon his experience of being human and a Christian than about writing “religious poetry” with a narrow set of themes and feelings. In the end his poetry emerged from a paradoxical detachment from and embrace of the world in which Merton had what Robert Frost referred to (about himself) as “a lover’s quarrel with the world.” Though we may live in a “botched civilization” (Ezra Pound), Merton’s poetry became more and more sharply compassionate and inclusive. What Edwin Muir said in “The Poet” could apply to Merton:

What I shall never know
I must make known.
Where traveler never went
Is my domain.

As a poet of the sacred, Merton said that “you

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make life absurd by holding it at arm's length."¹

Merton wrestled with his writing during his first decade in the monastery. At one time he could say: "I decided to stop trying to be a poet anymore . . . I realized that I had never really been a good poet anyway."² A short time later he admits:

I believe it has now become impossible for me to stop writing altogether. Perhaps I shall continue writing on my deathbed and even take some asbestos paper with me in order to go on writing in purgatory . . . And yet it seems to me that writing, far from being an obstacle to spiritual perfection in my own life, has become one of the conditions on which my perfection will depend. If I am to be a saint — and there is nothing else that I can think of desiring to be — it seems that I must get there by writing books in a Trappist monastery. (SJ, p. 233)

Here was a poet who thought he could give up writing poetry, but who wrote almost obsessively his entire life. The reason for the conflict was in the tension Merton found between aesthetics and contemplation, between poetry and mystical experience. It was a tension he never fully resolved. Merton's approach was to understand poetry as a form of contemplation. More vital for him than just aesthetic autonomy was an experienced connection between his art and his contact with the sacred.

By personality Merton was gregarious, humorous, engaging, even charming and earthy. By the time he wrote *The Geography of Lograire*, his last major poetic work, Merton was approaching the vision of the poet as a kind of seer who is in touch with the world of dreams, myth, earthly rhythms of time and change, prayer, and enchantment. Merton's attitude towards the body and the unconscious and primal forces is a complex one. Before his conversion he had fathered a child in Europe and, in his final years while living as a hermit, he fell in love with a nurse whom he met at a hospital in Louisville. On the other hand, he chose an ascetic religious order as his "home." What the transformation of the sacred in his understanding meant was an evolving evaluation of the human being as an individual and as a social creature. The poet writes from the physical and spiritual geography of the self, what Gerard Manley Hopkins called "my sweating self." As a young poet in the monastery Merton was more of a monk speaking in metaphysical and theological lyrics to others who shared the same beliefs than a man speaking to humans in general. But Merton's changing voice began to address the modern need to find the sacred in the heart of the world.

In his role as poet Merton was a priest of words who found language the raw material of "poems which will express man's inexpressible intuitions of hidden reality of created things." These words "become sacred signs. They will acquire the power to set apart certain elements of creation and make them holy."³ Merton saw the artist and poet as a matrix for lost or ignored wisdom and intuition which the modern world had great need of knowing. Thus, rather than playing the role of "artist" that the society dictates, the real artist must freely reject cultural, even religious, values which are contrary to his or her experience of life and the liturgy of existence. Merton says that "today the artist, whether he likes it or not, has inherited the combined functions of hermit, pilgrim, prophet, priest, shaman, sorcerer, soothsayer, alchemist, and bonze" (LE, p. 379). All of life has become the topic for modern poetry and the poet for Merton is the preserver of tradition while being the visionary of transformed life. It is a crucial role since he

1. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*; ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 231. Hereafter referred to in the text as LE.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953), p. 127. Hereafter referred to in the text as SJ.

3. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961), p. 49.

thought his culture and modern society as a whole were “built on death: the convergence of affluence and death wish, the root of our tragedy” (*LE*, p. 384). He said that the poet needed to depend upon “an ingrained innocence . . . [and] fidelity to *life* rather than to artificial systems” (*LE*, pp. 371-372). The poet therefore becomes a mystic of love:

We [poets] are not persuaders. We are the children of the Unknown. We are the ministers of silence that is needed to cure all victims of absurdity who lie dying of a contrived joy. Let us then recognize ourselves for who we are: dervishes made with secret therapeutic love which cannot be bought or sold, and which the politician fears more than violent revolution, for violence changes nothing. But love changes everything We are stronger than the bomb. (*LE*, p. 374)

Merton is a poet of a lost paradise that each person can recapture inwardly. He sees it as returning to a life each of us was intended to live. Octavio Paz in *Siren and Seashell* (p. 168) uses words that could well be Merton’s own: “Poetry is revelation of the innocence that breathes in every man and woman, innocence we may all recapture the moment love illumines our eyes and returns us to our astonishment and fecundity.”

As a kind of poetic shaman, Merton could explore the geography of the sacred with the imagery, symbols and metaphors of the Christian tradition. In this regard he differed from many modern poets who felt outside that tradition and often tried to create their own mythology or push their own experiences to sometimes eccentric, even disastrous limits. How very different it was for Dante who lived and wrote, as Wallace Stevens said, “at the center of a diamond” — a culture with common symbols and faith. Merton had incorporated Dante’s world into his own and then went beyond it into the pluralistic world of his own times, becoming exposed to other symbol systems and living traditions. It became his way of fulfilling the poet’s work of touching reality with bare hands and heart. For Merton that means restoring the sense and experience of the sacred in the center of one’s self. Coleridge had ideally defined the poet as one “who brings the whole soul of man into activity” and Merton’s later poetry reflects the attempt to do this by uniting his experience and life with those of other peoples in the past and present. The Flemish mystic, Bl. John Ruysbroeck, described it as living in an “unwalled world.” Merton’s journey meant the crossing of thresholds and the tearing down of walls he had earlier assumed were necessary.

Merton certainly did not agree with Matthew Arnold’s nineteenth century view that art in effect assume the place in society that religion had traditionally held. Nor did he agree with a prevalent twentieth century view that saw personal liberation through art alone. Merton thought the poet must be able to live in the heart of his or her own age with what John Keats described as having a “negative capability” where the poet’s love and necessary innocence would not be destroyed by the doubt and confusion in the culture. Poetry could never replace religion for Merton, but it could explore the depths of religious experience.

The geography of Merton the poet was the pain and possibilities of human life. Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed that “the experience of each age requires a new confession and the world seems always waiting for its poet.” Merton’s anti-poetry was an attempt to find ways to confess and speak about the sacred in a time when the old symbols had lost their power. His poetry, in spite of its weaknesses, was a reach into the pains of the modern world while always maintaining that the mystery of it all had meaning beyond the pain. Basically this poet of the sacred was a poet of compassion. He can be likened as a poet to the icon painters who were usually monks. They did not paint for personal reward, but saw their art as prayer and as one with contemplative life. They believed the icons were windows onto heaven. Merton’s poetry began as that kind of window, but changed into a window onto the world in which the sacred, though often hidden, was present.

Merton said that “the superior work of art proceeds from a hidden and spiritual principle . . . in fasting, detachment, forgetfulness of results, and abandonment of all hope of profit.”⁴ His poetry emerges from the silence of his mystical experience and it is the mystical experience which explains the transformation of the sacred in his poetry.

The closing stanzas of “Elias — Variations on a Theme” by Merton can be seen as autobiographical. Merton as pilgrim, poet, mystic and paradigm reflects the experience of the sacred in the modern world with all its diverse geographies and symbols:

The free man is not alone as busy men are
 But as birds are. The free man sings
 Alone as universes do. Built
 Upon his own inscrutable pattern
 Clear, unmistakable, not invented by himself alone
 Or for himself, but for the universe also.

Nor does he make it his business to be recognized
 Or care to have himself found out
 As if some special subterfuge were needed
 To get himself known for who he is.

The free man does not float
 On the tides of his own expedition
 Nor is he sent on ventures as busy men are,
 Bound to an inexorable result:
 But like the birds or lilies
 He seeks first the Kingdom, without care.
 Nor need the free man remember
 Any street or city, or keep campaigns
 In his head, or countries for that matter
 Or any other economy.

Under the blunt pine
 Elias becomes his own geography
 (Supposing geography to be necessary at all),
 Elias becomes his own wild bird, with God in the center,
 His own pattern, surrounding the Spirit
 By which he is himself surrounded:

For the free man’s road has neither beginning nor end.⁵

In the condition of “negative capability” the poet of the sacred demands nothing and experiences everything. Merton’s poetry helps restore to poetry its truth-telling and prophetic role by disclosing the social dimensions of religious experience and the sacred. The mystical and the worldly unite in Merton’s idea of the sacred.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 31.

5. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 244-245.