

# Merton's Poetry: Early Recognition

by **Monica Weis, SSJ**

Recently, while on Retreat, I picked an old book off the library shelf. It turned out to be *Literature: The Channel of Culture*, edited by Francis X. Connolly of Fordham University, published by Harcourt Brace and Co., copyright 1948. Waves of nostalgia swept over me as I paged through the table of contents. The text seemed vaguely familiar. Had I perhaps used it during my own school days in the 50's and 60's?

The book was divided into two sections: the *Function of Literature* (Newman's essays on the idea of the university, various commentary on how the university is a custodian of Western culture, and how literature is a channel of that culture) and the *Forms of Literature* (prose, fiction, drama, poetry). All the expected "regulars" were there: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Swift, Johnson, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Carlyle, Tennyson, Arnold, Browning, James, Conrad. What surprised me as I paged through the text were the "modern" poets: four British writers — Gerard Manley Hopkins, Francis Thompson, G. K. Chesterton, and T. S. Eliot — and four American poets: Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Thomas Merton. THOMAS MERTON? In a 1948 anthology?

Nothing would do but to sleuth out what was going on here. By reading the Preface, I discovered that the editor, Francis X. Connolly, had definite lofty aims in mind for both the plan of his text and for the college students who would use it. His literary position — reflected in both his commentary and his choices of exemplary texts — falls into what some literary historians have termed the "cultural heritage model" of education (to be distinguished from the earlier British "skills model" and the subsequent "personal growth" model of literary training). This cultural heritage model has its American roots in the curriculum chosen by Harvard University for its intellectually elite male students, and a second flowering during the 1940's with the Great Books movement spearheaded by Robert Hutchins of the University of Chicago. Passing on the great ideas of Western culture, Hutchins argued, would keep us in touch with the glories of the past and help us to remain "civilized."

Connolly's stated aim, however, goes further than the mere transmission of Western culture because he professes to offer texts and an approach which integrates "literature and life and education," that is, the other arts and sciences (xv)<sup>1</sup>. In this, Connolly is clearly in the vanguard of mid-century educators on two counts: the *power* of literature and the *place* of literature. By seeking to integrate literature and life, Connolly resists the incipient clamor of what in the 1950's became known as the New Criticism — an approach to literature that claims that all meaning resides in the text alone — an approach receiving little

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adherence today. Instead, Connolly's position more closely resembles the theoretical stance of his contemporary, Louise Rosenblatt who, in her 1938 seminal text *Literature as Exploration*, advocated a transactional theory of literature — that is, a process of creating meaning by a “collision” of a student with a text. Meaning, Rosenblatt argued, resides not solely in the text but in the engagement of a reader (who has particular and unique life experiences) with the “stuff” of the text. This interactive or transactional process of creating meaning gives to literature a unique *power*.

Connolly is perceptive also about the *place* of literature in the curriculum. By rejecting “literature as an isolated branch of study” (xv), Connolly attests to the validity and complementarity of different approaches to knowing — a philosophy of education which gave birth in the 1980's to the Writing Across the Curriculum movement, popular in many, if not most, colleges and universities today, and which undergirds the more recent dialogue promoted by the late Ernest Boyer on the “New American College.”

Underlying Connolly's intent in compiling this anthology is an obvious didactic impulse, namely, to protect the faith of our young people. It is important to note that although this editor is working during a time when Pius X's condemnation of modernism still cast a lingering shadow on Catholic intellectual enterprise, Connolly managed to move out from under this shadow. In the Preface he says to the reader that “the generous representation of contemporary writers is not merely a concession to the appetite of younger readers and the demands of instructors, but rather a recognition of the fact that the great literature of our own times is, in so far as it is truly literature, perfectly acceptable to a Catholic intelligence, conscience, and taste. It is believed,” writes Connolly, “that this positive approach will also be welcomed by teachers of a somewhat distracted generation which deserves, not lectures on what not to read, but the assurance that the truth neither fears nor offends” (xvi). In this, Connolly is adhering to Catholic intellectual tradition developed and supported by such writers as Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, Hillaire Belloc, and G. K. Chesterton.

One should note, too, that Connolly supports the pre-Vatican II position of viewing Catholicism as the repository of all truth. In the Preface, he announces that the “first two divisions of Part One [of his anthology] *answer many ultimate questions* on the purpose of life and education” (italics mine). A post Vatican II editor would be more inclined to say that the selected texts *raise questions* *or offer possible answers* to the ultimate questions that have perennially perplexed humankind.

This didactic impulse is illustrated further in the introduction to the poetry section entitled, “The Contemplation of Experience,” which includes selections by Richard Crashaw, but not John Donne; Wordsworth and Keats, but not Blake or Coleridge; Browning, but not Hardy. Connolly explains his choice of these eight modern poets (Hopkins, Thompson, Chesterton, Eliot, Whitman, Dickinson, Robinson, and Merton) by stating that while not representative of the age, they represent the two revolutions occurring in the mid-twentieth century: One against various aspects of the old order, the other against the “destructive anarchy of the present disorder” (564). Connolly offers these eight poets for study because, in his opinion, they “express a special vision of reality” — a vision that recognizes the shallowness of contemporary culture, the value of personal sanctity, and the wisdom of surrendering oneself to the redeeming grace of God. The special inclusion of the less well-known poet Thomas Merton, explains Connolly, is appropriate because he is a “modernist in his manner of expression,” familiar with the “latest technical experiments of Hopkins, Eliot, and other modern writers,” yet he is “spiritually in the tradition of great contemplative poetry” (564). Thus, Merton is an apt conclusion to this last section of the anthology: “Poetry: The Contemplation of Experience.”

The five examples of Thomas Merton's poetry — “The Biography,” “St. John Baptist,” “Clairvaux,” “Ode to the Present Century” and “An Argument — Of the Passion of Christ” — are taken from *A Man in the Divided Sea*, published in 1946, two years before the advent of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. According to Connolly's headnote, these selections represent Merton's “religious poems, both metaphysical and devotional” and his “impressionistic lyrics” (702)<sup>2</sup>. “The Biography,” “St. John Baptist,” “Clairvaux,” and “An Argument — Of the Passion of Christ” belong to the former;

“Ode to the Present Century,” the latter. Connolly completes his headnote by acknowledging Merton’s debt to Hopkins and Eliot, and then praises three poems (“St. John Baptist,” “Clairvaux,” and “The Biography”) as “worthy of being ranked among the best poetry of recent years (702). As I reread these poems, “The Biography” and “An Argument” seem to be companion pieces, rich with allusions to Francis Thompson’s “The Hound of Heaven,” also included in this anthology. “The Biography” is a confession of personal sinfulness, “the record of the days and nights, / When I have murdered Him in every square and street” (lines 11-12); “Argument” catalogues a lifetime of fleeing “to the edges of the gulf” to “hide from Calvary’s iron light” (lines 26 and 28).

The poem “St. John Baptist” is both a tribute and a prayer for protection to the “first Cistercian and the greatest Trappist” (line 102), whereas “Clairvaux” is perhaps most clearly a linguistic exercise in imitation of one of Merton’s favorite poets, Gerard Manley Hopkins, whom he had hoped would be the subject of his doctoral dissertation. Merton’s liberal use of sprung rhythm and compound words in this apostrophe to a place — “heaven-harbor,” “wood-cradle valley,” “grace-blood,” “home-call” — recall Hopkins’ techniques as do his obvious allusions to Hopkins’ poems “The Leaden Echo” and “The Golden Echo.” Merton writes:

Oh peel your quiet unpretension and succession, time your seasons  
 No-hurrying us to our sweet, certain, everlasting home;  
 And pour the news of these our slow progressions into the deep,  
 Down-falling with little echo into (peace) our garth-well,  
 Paying your bells like Christ our price, oh, yes, like Peace-blood’s  
 Ransom into our hearts: (lines 81-86)

“Ode to the Present Century,” on the other hand, most strongly resembles T. S. Eliot’s famous Wasteland, but with a note of hope or at least a prayer for change. Merton’s description of contemporary society includes a plea to overcome our “frozen understanding” and “the whited nerve of [our] rapacity” with “Mercy’s Sovereign” (lines 12, 23, 28). If we forsake our “deserts of centrifugal desire,” Merton concludes, we can be hidden from the “noon-day devil” (that is, accidia or sloth) and safe where “clean rock-water dropwise spends, and dies in rings” (lines 30, 32, 33).<sup>3</sup>

While these poem selections serve Connolly’s purpose for a tidy text that supports his thesis about the value of a Catholic vision of reality and the reciprocal influence of literature and life, the question remained for me: how did Francis X. Connolly, so early on, know enough about Thomas Merton to include him in his 1948 anthology? A little more sleuthing in a research library satisfied my curiosity.

Educated at Fordham University (A.B. 1930; M.A. 1933; Ph.D. 1937), Professor Connolly taught at his alma mater until he died of a stroke in November 1965 at age 56. He was a member of the editorial board of the Catholic Book Club, a word authority on the National Broadcasting Co. television program, “Word for Word,” a biographer and literary critic of John Henry Newman, and the author of several grammar texts. Many of us may remember using the *Harbrace College Handbook* whose 1951, 1956, and 1962 editions were written by John C. Hodges *in consultation with Francis X. Connolly*. But it is probably Connolly’s involvement in poetry that is most pertinent here.

As one of the founders of the Catholic Poetry Society of America, and associate editor of its magazine, *Spirit*, Connolly was a compiler of several poetry anthologies, and a prolific author of critical essays on poetry and book reviews of new collections of poetry by emerging writers. In this role, he would have ample occasion to become acquainted with Thomas Merton the poet. As early as May 1941, Merton had a poem published in *Spirit*, and he continued, during the 1940’s and 50’s, to publish in this journal as well as in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *Experimental Review*, *Partisan Review*, and *Horizon*.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Merton’s first three volumes of poetry, *Thirty Poems*, *A Man in the Divided Sea*, and *Figures for an Apocalypse*, were reviewed in *Spirit* magazine shortly after their publication.<sup>5</sup> In his November 1946 review of *A Man in the Divided Sea*, Connolly updates readers on Merton’s entrance into the Trappists by describing it “not [as] a

flight from life but a perfectly natural step forward.” Having devoted his scholarly life to the study of poetry, Connolly saw a certain fitness in this progression from the “contemplation of things in the order of poetry to the contemplation of God” (150). Indeed, it was Connolly who later advised Merton to include in the final pages of *The Seven Storey Mountain* his commentary on the contemplative life, previously published in *Commonweal* and with which Connolly would surely have been familiar. While there seem to be no letters extant between these two men, Connolly was clearly interested in Thomas Merton and committed to furthering his reputation as a poet.<sup>6</sup>

Whether or not Francis X. Connolly was successful in reaching his articulated aim to help students integrate literature, life, and education through his anthology, *Literature: The Channel of Culture*, I cannot say. To be sure, the texts he chose are challenging reading. Only if students were bringing to their reading a reflective mind willing to grapple with complex ideas, could there be some long-term benefit from their study. I am willing to say, however, that Connolly’s choice to include Thomas Merton among his eight British and American poets was a providential one, for Connolly sensed the quality of writing that Merton was capable of and introduced a whole generation of students to Thomas Merton, the monk and the writer, as his reputation was being established.

It is a serendipitous coincidence that Connolly’s text was published in 1948, the same year as *The Seven Storey Mountain* which catapulted Merton into literary fame. It is my hope, as it probably was Connolly’s that these undergraduates of the late 40’s and 50’s continued reading Merton and grappling with his challenging spiritual and social ideas. In his review of *A Man in the Divided Sea*, Connolly speaks of Merton’s talent with strong praise: “An intrinsically valuable contribution to the body of creative literature, [Merton’s poetry] demands the response of our admiration, our homage, and our gratitude.” (153) Certainly, for his own prophetic judgment in making Merton’s poetry more widely known, we owe Francis X. Connolly similar admiration, homage, and gratitude.

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#### Notes

1. Francis X. Connolly, (ed.), *Literature: The Channel of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1948). All page numbers not otherwise identified are from this text.
2. Much of this headnote is taken *verbatim* from Connolly’s review of Merton’s *A Man in the Divided Sea* published in *Spirit* 13 (November 1946), pp. 150-53.
3. For a more extensive explication of these individual poems, see Connolly’s review in *Spirit* noted above.
4. Thomas Merton, “A Meditation on Christ’s Passion,” *Spirit* 8 (May 1941).
5. *Thirty Poems* was reviewed by Paul Morton in the March 1945 issue of *Spirit*, pp. 24-26; *A Man in the Divided Sea* reviewed by Francis X. Connolly in the November 1946 issue, pp. 150-153; *Figures for an Apocalypse* reviewed by George A. McCauliff in the July 1948 issue, pp. 88-90.
6. In the March 1949 issue of *Thought*, Connolly — borrowing Merton’s description of himself in *The Seven Storey Mountain* — wrote an editorial entitled “The Complete 20th Century Man,” in which he likens *SSM* to a Catholic version of *The Education of Henry Adams*. Like Adams, writes Connolly, Merton was engaged in a “search for truth” in various schools of differing educational philosophy. I think it is noteworthy that in this editorial Connolly presents the author of *SSM* as a “prize-winning poet” with three volumes of poetry already to his credit.