

Found Poetry in Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*

By **Mary Aitken**

Three years ago Thomas Merton completely changed my life. But I think that is another story. Or perhaps there can be variations of the same story. At any rate, this particular story is about how I found poetry in Merton's first long prose work, *The Seven Storey Mountain*.¹ I usually read prose and poetry by going through the text, pondering ideas, information, perhaps even making notes. In all those prose and poetry readings, I never "found" one single poem, nor read any found poetry. When I began to read *The Seven Storey Mountain*, I had an unusual experience. I became convinced that there were poems in the prose. I heard Thomas Merton's voice, a voice of truth and honesty, a poetic voice playing inside my mind long after I had finished reading in the text. And it was that poetic voice that sent me on a pilgrimage, a literary pilgrimage, a quest, a spiritual journey. I felt impelled to find that voice, those poems. As I followed Thomas Merton's story through the text locating and writing down "poems" as I found them, I discovered that each single poem became a duet: my voice and Merton's voice – my found poems and his prose. His voice, powerful and passionate, helped me to create a textual dimension I had never known. By that time I wondered if the word "found" in the sense of personal discovery was the real meaning for me of the found poetry. In the end, as I re-read and polished the poems, I found I had assembled a version of Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* that paradoxically was uniquely mine, yet wholly his.

Initially, I found eighteen poems. On this my fourth reading, I have found even more. I include only eleven here. The themes I heard while reading spoke to me of Merton's passionate and vigorous responses to what he saw, what he heard, what he read, what he experienced. In some instances, the poems are an actual brief paragraph of prose. In others, the theme extends over as many as fifty pages and involves considerably more "poetic licence." I begin with Merton's description of the church at St. Antonin and end with the publication of his *Thirty Poems*. The titles are sometimes Merton's, sometimes mine. I have tried to be faithful to the text and to Merton's voice as I heard it. Inevitably, however, the poems I found pale beside the real vitality of the speaker, Thomas Merton.

Merton remarks on the placement of the church at the center of St. Antonin, a village where he and his father lived in 1925. Many years later, he placed the church at the center of his own life.

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Mary Aitken

The Church

Church fits into the landscape
and becomes the keystone of its
intelligibility.

Its presence imparts a special
form to all the eye beholds:
hills, forest, fields, the white of
Rocher d'Anglars,
the red bastion of Roc Rouge,
the winding river, the green valley of the Bonnette
even the white stucco
villas of the modern
Bourgeois. [37]

Even in childhood, Merton longed for silence, was drawn to loneliness. Merton's love of color and landscape glimpsed in this and the previous poem perhaps come in part from studying the illustrations in the 3-volume set, *Le Pays de France*, which was sent to him and his brother John Paul by his grandfather, Pop. Silence and solitude were key issues in Merton's struggle even after entering Gethsemani.

Grande Chartreuse

A high mountain loaded with firs
soaring up to
rocky summits.
My heart filled with longing
to breathe air of that lonely valley
listen to its
silence. [43]

As joyously as he burst from school when his father physically helped him to escape, many years later Merton would even more joyously embrace entering the walls of Gethsemani. Brother Matthew would lock the gate behind him, and Merton would find himself "enclosed in the four wall of my new freedom" (372).

Leaving school

The light sings on the brick walls of the prison house
as the gate bursts open.
Sprung by some invisible and beneficent power,
I escape the Lycée. [60]

The death of his father left Merton "sad and depressed" (85). This state of mind caused Merton to struggle yet again with one of the most difficult conflicts he faced on his journey: his endless battle with his will, his own "stupid will" (85).

The Harrowing of Hell

Souls are like athletes that need opponents
worthy of them,
if they are to be tried and extended
and pushed (to the full use of their power)

and rewarded according to their
 capacity.
 In the end in the sinister secrecy
 of the big crematory:
 out of our sight
 the body was burned
 and we went away.
 My dry soul found no room for any God.
 In that empty temple I began to
 devote myself
 to the worship of
 my will. [83, 85]

An image of his dead father faced Merton with an image of the corruption of his own soul, a soul that “desired escape and liberation and freedom” (111). Again the theme of will and his subservience to it – the self-confessed most grievous fault of Merton’s secular self.

An Image

I begin to pray
 out of the very roots of my life
 and of my being,
 praying to a God I have never known.
 Reach down towards me out of your darkness and
 help me
 free my will from slavery. [111]

Merton loved jazz. In these little clubs, he and his friends often did not even drink. “We just sat there, that was all” (157). The line is so simple, so stripped of angst and artifice: just a spontaneous and joyful reaction to experience. That’s all: that’s everything.

Clubs

Tiny noisy expensive nightclubs
 where we would sit
 while the whole place rocked with jazz
 that throbbed through the whole sea of bodies
 binding them in a kind of fluid medium
 a strange animal travesty of
 mysteries, the rhythm throbbing in
 the marrow of your bones.
 We just sat there, that was all. [157]

“The essential thing was to begin the climb” up the mountain (221). Although still fettered by his “sins and attachments” (205), Merton began work on his thesis, “Nature and Art in William Blake,” who “was glorifying . . . the transfiguration of man’s natural love . . . in the refining fires of mystical experience” (203). It was only the beginnings however, as Merton still chastised himself for being deluded by “the clear notions we get out of books” (205). I numbered the stanzas to remind myself of the seven stages of his baptism that I perceived Merton went through on this part of his journey.

Beginnings

(i)

The intellect constantly blinded and
 perverted by passion
 presents us evidence fraught with
 interest, propaganda:
 we may thus contradict
 our good intentions.
 Grace, grace, docility to grace
 is the answer. [205-206]

(ii)

A strong sweet gentle urge:
 go to Mass.
 New and strange
 suave and simple
 not exulting, trampling
 but serene, purposeful. [206]

(iii)

The church gay, clean
 big plain windows
 white columns well-lit
 simple sanctuary.
 So many ordinary people
 conscious more of God
 than of one another,
 there to pray. [207, 208]

(iv)

Jesus Christ, good, great healer, saint.
 Jesus Christ was God.
 Not given grace in the ancient
 mosaics of churches of Rome,
 but now, beaten by misery
 by secret interior fear, I believed
 my ploughed soul was better ground
 for the reception of good seed. [209, 210]

(v)

I, a blind, deaf dumb pagan
 weak and dirty
 What was on my soul?
 What was I in His sight?
 Not used to the clean savor of
 actual grace
 all I know is

I walked
 in a new world. [210-11]
 (vi)
 A moment of crisis
 A moment of searching
 A moment of joy
 I adjust the weak eyes of my spirit.
 My whole life on the edge
 of an abyss
 an abyss of love of peace.
 The abyss was God. [255]
 (vii)
 If it is Your will
 make me a priest. [255]

Merton found an article on the Trappists in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*: his description is itself already a found poem. What he saw in these pages “pierced me to the heart like a knife” (316). His response to that prose description is lyrical and poetic: found poetry in the heart of an encyclopedia.

The Trappists

The Trappists tasted the joy of silence and solitude
 free from the burden of flesh’s tyranny
 their clear vision raised to heaven
 into the deeps of heaven’s infinite light.

They were poor, had nothing
 were free, possessed everything
 worked with their hands
 reaping small harvests.
 They were the least and the last of men
 seeking Christ, rejected of men.

They had concealed themselves
 in the secret of His Face,
 the richest men in the world.
 As grace emptied their hearts of desire
 the Spirit of God entered and
 filled the place that had been
 made for God.

The Poor Brothers tasted the secret glory,
 the hidden manna, the sweet
 exultancy of the fear of God.
 All day long God spoke to them,
 the clean voice of God,
 sending truth within them
 as simply as water wells up in a spring.

And grace made everything they did
 an act of love,
 the economy of utter perfection
 that escapes notice entirely.

Day after day
 the love that was in them
 became songs as austere as
 granite
 as sweet as wine
 their prayers flared up in a
 hymn, the color of flame
 these monasteries, these choirs,
 those cells, those men
 shattered my heart. [316-18]

Merton went to Gethsemani for Holy Week in 1941 and finally found a place where he could be at last embraced by silence. When he returned to Louisville, Merton felt like a man "that had come down from the rare atmosphere of a very high mountain" (332).

Gethsemani Abbey

I felt the deep, deep silence
 of the night, and of peace and of
 holiness unfold me like love,
 like safety. [321]

The beginning of a life of dedication for Merton, although he was still unsure that he would be accepted even as a novice. From his own point of view, the decision was made.

Journey to Gethsemani

The only thing that mattered
 was the fact of sacrifice
 the essential dedication of one's
 self, one's will
 the rest was only accidental.
 The only complete union possible
 between ourselves and Him
 is in the order of intention:
 a union of wills and intellects
 in love, charity.
 In the end, we will find
 Him in ourselves, in our
 purified nature, the mirror
 of the tremendous Goodness, His
 Endless love. [370, 372]

Advent, a period "more powerful, in the spiritual order, because the world around is dead" surrounds Merton with the beauty of a new life and a new world and the beginning of a new liturgical

year. "You could hardly find a better time to become a monk" (379).

Advent

The cold stones of the Abbey church
ring with a chant that glows with a
living flame
deep beyond ordinary
draws you within
lulled in peace and recollection
where you find God.
The measured tone made the singers
flower before God in beauty
and in fire,
flower along the stones
and vanish in the darkness of the vaulted ceiling. [379-80]

While a novice in Gethsemani, Merton began writing his poetry during the time he was supposed to study Scripture and the Psalms. He was corrected in this by the Master of Novices, and found his study "even better than writing poems" (390).

The Interval after Office
After prayer, your mind is
saturated in peace and the
richness of liturgy.
Dawn breaks outside the cold windows
whole blocks of imagery
crystallize out.
The lines almost write
themselves. [389-90]

Merton had lost his brother, John Paul in the war seven months earlier, and although his poems are published and Merton, the poet was acknowledged, he viewed his early work as "the work of a stranger, a dead poet, someone who had been forgotten" (409).

Thirty Poems

I went out under the grey sky
under the cedars at the
edge of the cemetery.
I stood in the wind that
threatened snow.
I held the printed poems in my hand. [410]

Most of the remaining pages of the text have such lyricism, faith and love that I feel I can end my journey here. In the closing words of the story, Merton hears God speak to him, and say that Merton's choice of solitude, the solitude "you have so long desired . . . will bear immense fruit in the souls of men you will never see on earth" (422). Perhaps found poetry is just one small fruit borne from the ear of a reader and inspired by the passion of such an author, Thomas Merton.