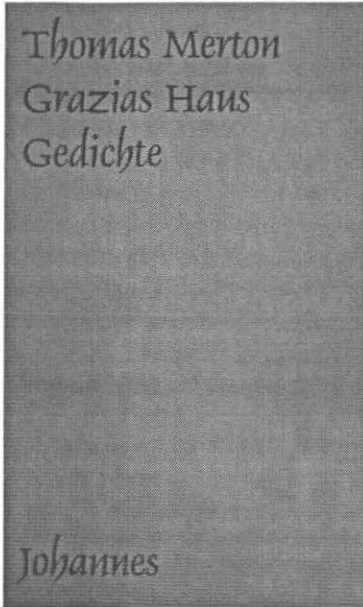


Postface to *Grazias Haus: Gedichte*

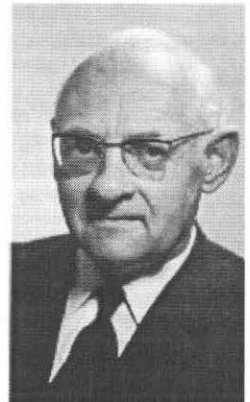
By Hans Urs von Balthasar



Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) is one of the most significant Catholic theologians of the twentieth century;¹ best known for his multi-volume works *Herrlichkeit* (*The Glory of the Lord*)² and *Theodramatik* (*Theo-Drama*),³ he was named a cardinal by Pope John Paul II but died two days before receiving the red hat. Thomas Merton was reading von Balthasar at least as early as 1957, when he quotes from *Présence et Pensée*, von Balthasar's work on St. Gregory of Nyssa,⁴ in his journal.⁵ He relies extensively on von Balthasar's *Kosmische Liturgie* (in French translation: *Liturgie Cosmique*)⁶ for his discussion of St. Maximus the Confessor and *theoria physike* (natural contemplation) in his *Lectures on Mystical Theology* of 1961.⁷

At the urging of their mutual friend Dom Jean Leclercq,⁸ Merton wrote to von Balthasar on July 3, 1964 (SC 218-19), initiating an exchange of letters and writings that would continue over the following months and years (see SC 226-27 [8/7/64]; 241 [9/27/64]; 287-88 [7/17/65]; 312 [9/12/66]). In a journal entry for June 24, 1966, after noting von Balthasar's "complaint" in a recent letter "of being theologically isolated from the people in fashion ([Karl] Rahner, [Hans] Küng, etc.)," Merton comments, "Realized to what extent my own theology goes along with that of Balthasar, and I should read him more deeply."⁹ He had begun reading the first volume of *Herrlichkeit*, which von Balthasar had sent, in German (SC 241 [9/27/64 letter to von Balthasar]), but eventually switched to the French translation, although he found it inadequate (LL 91 [6/29/66]; SC 312 [9/12/66]). In an October 29, 1964 letter to Father Columba Halsey (SC 248), Merton expresses his agreement with Dom Leclercq's opinion that "Balthasar approaches most closely a really monastic theology" (SP 119 [10/10/64 letter to Merton]), and mentions that he is currently reading von Balthasar's *Word and Revelation*, "which is excellent." In a March 25, 1967 letter to Mario Falsina, Merton includes von Balthasar among modern theological writers who have most influenced him.¹⁰

Accompanying his first letter to von Balthasar, Merton sent a copy of his latest volume of poetry, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (SC 219),¹¹ and in his response von Balthasar expressed an interest in having some of Merton's poems published in German translation (see SC 227). This project eventually bore fruit in a volume of 38 Merton poems selected by von Balthasar and translated into German entitled *Grazias Haus: Gedichte* (*Grace's House: Poems*),¹² for which von Balthasar also wrote a brief essay following the



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translations. Merton expresses his gratitude to von Balthasar in his September 12, 1966 letter, and in a November 18, 1966 letter to Dom Leclercq he writes, "I am also very grateful to Père [Hans Urs] von Balthasar for his generous Introduction, or rather Postface, to the little selection of my poems. The selection was good, the translations seem to me to be very well done, and I am happy with the whole book. With you and him behind me I can feel a little more confidence – not that I have yet made myself notable for a lack of it" (*SP* 143).

This "Postface" now appears for the first time in English, translated by Dewey Weiss Kramer and Victor A. Kramer, who note: "The aesthetic outlined in *Herrlichkeit* is an exposition about the shining forth of the 'Glory of the Lord' in Western literature, a theme which, in fact, became increasingly important for Merton as his own poems progressed towards more concern with the immediacy of God's presence in the smallest, frequently unnoticed aspects of the Creator's gifts which were to be observed poetically. This introductory essay by Balthasar about Merton's poetry clarifies the intuition which both shared about the effectiveness of strong poetical forms concerning the Divine in the sweep of literary history from the Old Testament to Merton's grand yet also humble observations of the most unnoticed of God's creations." All the notes to the essay are from the author, with English titles added in brackets. The four unsourced quotations from the poems are from "Figures for an Apocalypse," Part I, ll. 30-33, "O Sweet Irrational Worship, ll. 27, 30, and "A Messenger from the Horizon," ll. 41-42 and 30-33, respectively. Also included as an appendix is a translation of the Table of Contents of the collection. Von Balthasar's "Postface" is included here with the permission of the volume's publisher, Johannes Verlag.

1. For an overview of von Balthasar's work, see *The von Balthasar Reader*, ed. Medard Kehl and Werner Löser (New York: Crossroad, 1982), which includes a thorough introduction to his life and thought and extensive selections.
2. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, 7 vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983-91).
3. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodrama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, 5 vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988-1998).
4. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Présence et Pensée: Essai sur la Philosophie Religieuse de Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1942); ET: *Presence and Thought: Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995).
5. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 84.
6. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Liturgie Cosmique: Maxime le Confesseur* (Paris: Aubier, 1947); ET: *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe according to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).
7. See "Contemplation and the Cosmos: Chapter VIII of Thomas Merton's Lecture Notes on Theology and Mysticism," in Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *Merton & Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003) 431-45; in an August 7, 1964 letter to von Balthasar, Merton wrote, "I failed to mention to you that the book of yours which says the most to me has always been the one on St. Maximus" (Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990] 227; subsequent references will be cited as "SC" parenthetically in the text).
8. See Brother Patrick Hart, ed., *Survival or Prophecy? The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002) 116; subsequent references will be cited as "SP" parenthetically in the text.
9. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 343; subsequent references will be cited as "LL" parenthetically in the text.
10. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 349.
11. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963).
12. Thomas Merton, *Grazias Haus: Gedichte*, trans. Marta Gisi and Lili Sertorius (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1966).

The Prophets and Prayers of the Old Testament employed poetical forms: one undifferentiated Divine and poetic inspiration provided both their content and determined their form. A similar process exists both in Paul and in the Gospel of John, but also continuously in the development of Christian tradition as is proven by St. Francis, Dante and John of the Cross.

It was providential that Owen Merton, the gifted artist, had a special love for William Blake and then sought to open up the beauty of this poet to his ten-year-old son, Thomas.¹ Thomas understood very quickly that the curious heterodoxy of Blake, the solitary wanderer, was actually the outrage of a saint against the hypocrisy, skepticism, materialism, and the false piety and Christian formalism of his century, and that he was fighting with his whole ardent love for the peace of the true God. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton wrote: "The Providence of God was eventually to use Blake to awaken something of faith and love in my own soul."² Much later while at the University Merton was once again overcome by William Blake's "tremendously genuine and spiritual fire." It mattered little to him that the great Romantic poets outdid him in their poetic art; Blake remained "the greater poet, because his was the deeper and more solid inspiration."³

Under the spell of the "holiness of William Blake" Merton seeks to emulate that holiness while writing his Master's Thesis on "Nature and Art in William Blake." As he commented, from his very childhood on he had understood that artistic experience in its highest form constituted "a natural analogue of mystical experience."⁴ Encouraged by his perhaps overly cautious reading of Gilson and Maritain (*Art and Scholasticism*), he realized during a visit to Rome that the art of the Byzantine mosaics and of the whole early Christian world – with its seamless unity of the religious and aesthetic realms – had imprinted upon his soul an image of Christ which would stay with him his whole life long.⁵ Through the silent preaching of that art, he learned for the first time in his life to truly pray.⁶ The site of the dark, somber old Church of Tre Fontane even awakened in him – he who was still far from conversion – the realization: "I should like to become a Trappist."⁷

Meanwhile, as a student, Merton's circuitous journey leads him through diverse low points and dark entanglements, into decadent and fashionable addictions; yet other poets appear to take him by the hand: Dante and Hopkins whose illuminations and conversions he ponders, and who lead him slowly amid many painful failures closer to his goal. Aldous Huxley's surprising turn toward the Eastern Mystics has a similar powerful effect upon him. He begins to read mystical texts in translation, discovers much that is already his – hatred of war, conscientious objection, admiration for Gandhi, contemplation. Missing, however, is the profundity and vitality of Christian love. When later as monk he pursues and interprets the paths of the great Western mystics, especially the Desert Fathers and the Doctor of the Church, John of the Cross (*The Ascent to Truth*, 1951),⁸ he is always concerned to show that the social dimension, the mystery of the Communion of Saints and Christ's expiatory death are essential elements of the truly Christian mystical way (*No Man Is an Island* 1955;⁹ *Seeds of Contemplation* 1951 [sic]¹⁰). Further, Merton will continue to be devoted to the daily community-building discipline of the Divine Office, and he experiences ever more consciously and consistently the continuity between poetry, inspiration, prayer; between poetic and biblical symbolism and typology (cf. his explication of the Psalms and his understanding of Scripture in general in his *Bread in the Wilderness* 1953).¹¹ As difficult as the religious decisions might prove for Merton's life – conversion, vocation to the monastic life – one can still not fail to perceive the underlying continuity which literature gives to his life, inseparable as it is from the very beginning (in Blake) from prophecy and from the mandate to proclaim love, to make apparent the world's transparency toward God, indeed toward the living God of the Bible.

It is in fact their transparency which strikes the reader of this small collection of poems presented here in German. What appears on the surface as nature reveals the light of grace shining forth sedately and without break and without excess, and without resorting to a different language such as allegory. "Grace's House" is a perfect example. Who is Grace? A young loved one, or Divine Grace, the Sister-Bride-Wisdom of Solomon? Neither interpretation excludes the other. Rather, they come together in a child's land of paradisiacal purity, before and after the fall, and also behind and beneath, secluded and sheltered. The children's poems "Evening" and "The Winter's Night" belong to the same sphere where the forces of nature flow equally seamlessly into the angelic and the theophanous realms. Paul's "knowledge of God from nature" in Romans (1:18-21) becomes for the praying, loving Christian, without mediation, a remembering becoming-aware of the Biblical Good News ("The Messenger"). On the other hand, meditation on the most profound Christian mysteries, such as the expiatory death of Christ in abandonment, can be translated into a vision of landscape ("Ash Wednesday"). Often it is not clear whether Merton's vision ascends from the natural to the supernatural or descends from the supernatural to the natural, and one realizes that such a distinction in poetry of this sort is completely unimportant ("Night-Flowering Cactus"). The whole miracle of the life of nature striving always more and more insistently toward unequivocal expression is ultimately grounded in the world's incarnation of the eternal life of the Trinity ("The Sowing of Meanings").

Merton's pagan Greek poems, wittily seasoned with a few Mexican idioms and idiosyncrasies, or his intense writing about Lorca, show the extent to which he celebrates the vital reality of nature. Nature is not sublimated; rather the Divine incarnates itself into nature, the consequence of genuine monastic contemplation. The word is merged with the image so intensely that it hovers on the edge of silence and becomes the presence of mystery in the womb of the world.

The eye that will not coin Thy Incarnation
 Figured in every field and flowering tree

This eye speaks its thanks to God by simply seeing. The Christian can hear silence as the precursor of the word ("Song: If you seek . . ."); can hear in the stillness of winter the sleep, the nascent life forming itself ("Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing"); the Christian wants to become "earth" in order to transform his "nameless weeds" into boundless adoration.

Because Merton's world has no blocking walls, we are allowed to peer through the stained-glass panels of his poems into the cloister of the Trappist Monastery of Gethsemani itself, into the cells, into the garden, the monastery woods, into the Church and refectory; and we are allowed to share in the difficult and yet joyous life of sacrifice and prayer whose external separation from the world is the prerequisite for an unequalled interior closeness to the world. From this inner space of the poetry there shines a light – much stronger than in other works of Merton – which is more cheerful, even playful precisely because the earthly imperfections do not disappear but instead take on a transparency that lets one see through them to the Divine; and also because according to Christ's command anyone in the monastery must possess the mind of a child who finds many things delightful which for adults are boring, colorless and ponderous. Contemplation is, to be sure, only possible for the one who surrenders himself. That one experiences the "wise guy" Crusoe's realm of the world discovering itself ("Crusoe"). He can feel how the small cell opens up and becomes the place for all the secrets of the oceans ("Song"). That one understands how the departed, interred brothers are one with God but also with the whole of nature in which God will one day be all in all ("The Trappist Cemetery – Gethsemani").

But Merton didn't become a dreamer in the process of writing such poetry. From his monastery he engaged himself again and again, courageously and directly, in the great questions of contemporary humanity. He wrote frequently about the Second Vatican Council, about the diaspora situation of the Church, about ecumenism, but also about the problems of politics, pacifism, and most intensely about the racial conflict in the United States (in *Seeds of Destruction*, 1964).¹² His correspondence with persons of all continents and of diverse worldviews shows how he understood and exercised his office as watchman for his era. Thus, we are not surprised by "Figures for an Apocalypse" which concludes our small volume. Once again with recourse to Biblical revelation Merton expands our horizon. The separation from everything mortal and transitory, the unerring recognition of evil in general and of the chaos of this era in particular, cannot be excluded from a Christian worldview. After all, both the Hebrew and Christian Biblical revelations reach their poetic high points in apocalypse. And yet it is precisely the apocalyptic message which proceeds from word to image; once more the image becomes the guardian of the wordless, while the image itself de-images itself into an unmediated presence of the unspeakable visage:

When a message has no clothes on
How can it be spoken?

Thus, with Merton all things hold together in one great creatively suspended balance of Image-Making and Image-Unmaking, of speaking and remaining silent, and everything leads back into the almost un-interpretable Christ-Mystery of the Triduum Mortis:

O blessed,
Invulnerable cry,
O unplanned Saturday,
O lucky Father!

1. Thomas Merton, *Der Berg der Sieben Stufen* (Selbsbiographie bis zur Konversion und zum Ordenseintritt), Benziger 1950, 94 [*The Seven Storey Mountain* (Autobiography from Conversion to Monastic Entrance) (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 85; subsequent pagination refers first to the German edition, then in brackets to the English original].
2. 97 [SSM 88].
3. 199 [SSM 190].
4. 211 [SSM 202].
5. 118-119 [SSM 108].
6. 121 [SSM 112-13].
7. 123 [SSM 114].
8. *Der Aufstieg zur Wahrheit*, Benziger, 1955 [Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951)].
9. *Keiner ist eine Insel*, Benziger, 1956 [Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955)].
10. *Verheissungen der Stille* (Räber, Luzern, 1952) [Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949)].
11. *Brot in der Wüste*, Benziger, 1955 [Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953)].
12. Thomas Merton, *Die schwarze Revolution. Um die Brüderlichkeit der Menschen*, Herderbücherei 196 (1965) [Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964); note: the German volume, translated from French, overlaps but does not coincide with *Seeds of Destruction*; for a description of the contents, see "Révolution Noire, La" in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 390].

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