A NOTE ON THE CONTEMPLATIVE VISION OF THOMAS MERTON'S POETRY

by Bonnie Bowman Thurston, Ph.D.

This "Note" on Merton's poetry was written by Bonnie Bowman Thurston in May 1981. Mrs. Thurston did her thesis, Flowers of contemplation: the later poetry of Thomas Merton, *at the University of Virginia where she received her doctorate in 1979. She has since written papers, articles, and reviews on Merton, primarily dealing with him as a poet. She currently resides in Bethany, West Virginia.*

Merton intially recieved attention in literary circles for his work as a poet. The first theses, in fact, written on him dealt with his poetry. A "Brief Bibliography" of books, theses, and essays on his poetry, compliled by Dr. Robert E. Daggy from materials in the Thomas Merton Studies Center, follows the "Note" by Mrs. Thurston.

"Contemplative poetry" is often used synonymously with "metaphysical poetry." These 17th centry poets popularized by Grierson's 1921 anthology share several characteristics, chief among them use of the conceit. At the end of the 16th century the word "metaphysical" was used as a synonym for "thought;" in literary criticism it now refers to showing resemblances between apparently unlike things in poetry which is intellectual, analytical, and psychological. The searching style of the metaphysicals is coupled with compression of language and delight in paradox, irony, and dexterious analogy.

Such highly cognate or intellectual poetry runs contrary to the definition of "contemplative" which suggests less the operation of thinking than that of seeing. "Contemplation" has a latin root: *com* meaning "with" and *templum* meaning "temple." It originally meant to mark out a temple, or to survey, hence *contemplor*, "to mark out an enclosure" and, later, to look at attentively or to regard.

"Contemplative poetry," then, reflects not so much a set of literary and intellectual techniques as a way of looking at the world. Louis Martz suggests the importance of looking in *The Poetry of Meditation*, but when scholars speak of "metaphysical poetry" they are discussing literary conventions. Contemplative poetry, however, reflects an attitude toward life which makes the poetry more visual and descriptive than metaphysical poetry and quieter in tone.

What is the nature of Merton's contemplative vision? In "Notes on Sacred and Profane Art" (1956) he describes it as an inward vision which goes "beyond things, beyond their surface and outward appearance, and recognize(s) in them a reflection of a reality which is perceived spiritually in the artist's own soul." Merton's contemplative vision complements Roualt's definition of art: "the accordance of the sensible world with a certain interior light." Contemplative poets have "symbolic eyes;" they attempt to use language to suggest experiences beyond rational discourse. In theological terms, the contemplative poet gives expression to the transcendant reality of God as it is apprehended in the created world; they use what is seen to describe what is unseen.

Returning briefly to literary history, poets like Donne, Herbert, and Vaughn must not be excluded from the ranks of Merton's literary ancestors. (Indeed, there is scholarly documentation of their infulence.[1])But the family circle must be enlarged to include other religious poets like John of the Cross, Blake, Hopkins, Eliot, and Auden, and secular contemplatives like Whitman, Gary Snyder, Kenneth Patchen, and Wallace Stevens.

While contemplative poetry does exhibit characteristic literary techniques (the foremost of which are paradox and negation), they do not define such poetry. Definitive aspects are more evident in the thematic content of the poems. In Merton's contemplative poetry of the late 1950's and 1960's, the importance of silence, of the Oneness of life, and the abruptness of Divine intervention in human affairs are stressed. However, the most interesting aspect of Merton's contemplative poetry is the diminishing role of the speaker. From early poems like "The Reader" which points to the voice of the poet, Merton moves to poems in which the speaker is absent or even non-human as in "Night Flowering Cactus." Because the characteristic feature of contemplative poetry is seeing, the perceiver becomes less important than the act of perception itself. As a result, the distinction between subject and object tends to break down. In philosophical terms, the poetry is anti-Cartesian. (See *Zen and the Birds of Appetite.*)

Meister Eckhart wrote "the eye wherein I see God is the same eye wherein God sees me." Merton has a similar observation. He writes in "Is the World a Problem?" (1966):

> The world as pure object is something that isnot there . . . We and our world inter-penetrate. It is a living and self-creating mystery of which I am myself a part, to which I am myself my own unique door.

"Song for Nobody" demonstrates the collapse of subject/object categories which characterizes Merton's contemplative vision. The first two stanzas are parallel in structure; in the first the singer is a pklant, in the second, a spirit.

> A yellow flower
> (Light and spirit)
> Sings by itself
> For nobody.
>
> A golden spirit
> (Light and emptiness)
> Sings without a word
> By itself.[2]

A Song for Nobody

By Thomas Merton

A YELLOW flower
(Light and spirit)
Sings by itself
For nobody.

A golden spirit
(Light and emptiness)
Sings without a word
By itself.

Let no one touch this gentle sun
In whose dark eye
Some One is awake.

(No light, no gold, no name, no color
And no thought:
O, wide awake!)

A golden heaven
Sings by itself
A song to nobody.

The equation of corporeal and incorporeal begins the disolution of subject/object dualism. Singing, a traditional metaphor for prayer and praise, is done for the sake of the act itself rather than for "someone." The suggestion of infused contemplation is strong in the empty or egoless plant/spirit and the wordless song.

> Let no one touch this gentle sun
> In whose dark eye
> Someone is awake.

(No light, no gold, no name, no color
And no thought:
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A golden heaven
Sings by itself
A song to nobody.

The head of the black-eyed susan, the "gentle sun" with a "dark eye," is not to be disturbed. To touch is both to objectify the flower and to disturb its tranquility and purity of Being. That "Someone is awake" in its eye suggests Eckhart's equation of Divine and human looking and harkens back to Donne's "Good Morrow," "My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears;" and "The Extasie," "Our eye-beams twisted , and did thread/Our eyes, upon one double string."

By the fourth stanza the plant has become pure consciousness. Not "of" some quality— nameless, and without thought or intellection—the plant is conscious, "A golden heaven" which "Sings by itself." Most awake because least self-conscious, the flower is perfection ("heaven"), complete in itself. It requires no one to see and objectify it; its song requires no hearer to "be."

The plant's existence is prior to its perception by the speaker of the poem. In fact, the speaker in "Song for Nobody" is so much in the background that a "voice" is hardly noticeable. The absence of a distinct persona mirrors the statement of the poem; the unselfconscious are complete in themselves. The poem describes but does not seek to obtain or possess the flower. In its mystical implications, even the pose of a subject looking at an object is underplayed in the poem.)

This is the root of Merton's contemplative vision: in giving up the awareness of and focus on self in the pure act of perception, one is liberated from time and space and allowed a "clean" reference point for each experience of the world. With Chang-Tzu whose work he translated, Merton recognized that "great knowledge sees all in one." Or, as he wrote in "Stranger," "Look, the vast Light stands still/Our cleanest Light is One!"

NOTES

[1]A.M. Allchin, "The Cloud of Witnesses: A Common Theme in Henry Vaughn and Thomas Meron," *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2; Sr. Bridget-Marie, "Merton and the Metaphysicals," *Delta Epsilon Sigma Bulletin*, Vol. 16, No. 4; Sr. Rosemarie Julie, "Influences Shaping the Poetic Imagery of Merton," *Renascence*, Vol. 9, No. 4.

[2]Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 337.