

The Sound of Sheer Silence: A Study in the Poetics of Thomas Merton*

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Two summers ago, when I was attending the annual faculty retreat at the university where I teach, I participated in a small study group on solitude. I listened as a colleague read from 1 Kings. Always a rich passage in prophetic history, the words being read from the *New Revised Standard Version* seized me from my half-attention as I heard again of Elijah's epiphanous discovery, after his wilderness experience:

...but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, and after the earthquake, a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire, a sound of sheer silence (1 Kgs 19.12). (emphasis mine)

At that moment, my thoughts congealed around the idea that silence is the language of the seemingly absent God—it is the language which mystics employ to describe the Absence which is Presence—the sound of sheer silence. The next things on my mind were the words of Thomas Merton, which are the touchstone for this study:

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 wide field which nobody owns,
His own pattern, surrounding the Spirit
By which he is himself surrounded:

For the free man's road has neither beginning nor end.¹

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1. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 239-45.

And I sensed the certainty that the language of silence is the speech that frees.

By the time that Thomas Merton's *The Geography of Lograire* was published posthumously in 1969, his poetics demonstrated an evolution that arguably and substantively parallels his journey into mysticism. The central concern of his last years was self-transcendence. In relation to this, his experiential understanding of eastern mysticism was documented in scholarly and personal commentary. Merton, writing out of tensions created in the monastic life, eventually reported that communication is best not as a matter of action but as communion, and without words.

As witness to the intense conflict between Merton's elected silence and his calling to write, words were his enemies as much as they were his allies, circumscribing him with guilt as often as they articulated his relentless social conscience. Conjointly, Merton experienced the mystic's profound knowledge that silence is a language of its own. To engage with Merton's poetry, no less than with his prose, is to follow his acquisition of a language that defines itself in the sound of sheer silence.

Merton's distrust of words is apparent at the outset of *Early Poems* (1940–42). He opens with a sardonic comment on 'The Philosophers' who break his rest by 'bitterly arguing in their frozen graves', 'into the tunnels of his ears'. One can see his contempt for the assault that language makes even when spoken by so-thought wise men. 'The Strife Between the Poet and Ambition' continues this drama depicting the demise of language. The speaker mimics death who taunts would-be poets with these words:

Better sing your snatch of song
 Before that ostrich voice is dumb:
 Better whack your share of gong
 Before the sounding brass is mum...²

Merton regrets that poetry and ambition do not accompany one another, but mockingly concludes that it is probably all for the best.

This collection finds its pithiest statement on words and language in 'Tower of Babel' which is contextualized in Merton's disenchantment with political discourse. The poem's speaker announces that:

2. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 11-12.

History is a dialogue between
forward and backward
going inevitably forward
by the misuse of words.³

His argument is crowned by the conclusion that 'words have no essential meaning', albeit that they 'are the makers of our only reality'. This pronouncement is stunning when seen in a postmodern context. Michael Higgins has insightfully argued in *Heretic Blood* that Merton was an 'extraterritorial' writer in the sense which George Steiner defines: 'unhoused' and 'hesitant at the frontier'.⁴ Merton's foray into 'antipoetry' in his last years potently indicates this. That he explored the ever-shifting possibilities of language also signals his movement beyond conventional boundaries and into other realities.

Such a claim might be more fully explored by looking at some aspects of *The Geography of Lograire* (1968), the 'consummate expression' of Merton's experimentations in the epic/lyric mode.⁵ Michael Higgins characterizes *Lograire* as the reflection of Merton's 'conviction that the tyranny of mind and power in Western culture suppresses the meaning-generating capacity of words and silence, so integral to other cultures'.⁶ He further argues that *Lograire* is 'clearly prophetic and mystical' in its function. Indeed, *Lograire's* irony, satire, and parody aim to debunk words of their impotent powers and to lance the wounds that they and their ideologies perpetrate. In doing so, Merton, as poet, 'constructs a private mythology whereby he [seeks] to heal the breach'⁷ between chaos and order, words and silence. It becomes clear that the language of silence is the repatriating force which charts the 'geography' of this new, unbounded territory, lending visions and potentialities as it declares itself to its attendant explorers. Merton becomes both silencer (as he deconstructs the meaninglessness of words) and speaker (of the new language of silence). In 'Why I Have a Wet Footprint On The Top Of My Mind', (Prologue to 'North' in *The Geography of Lograire*), the protagonist of this drama steps forward with the manifesto of paradox which he has discovered:

3. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 21-22.

4. Michael Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998), p. 9.

5. Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), p. 166.

6. Higgins, *Heretic Blood*, pp. 56-57.

7. Higgins, *Heretic Blood*, p. 133.

To begin a walk
 To make an air
 Of knowing where to go
 To print
 Speechless pavements
 With secrets in my
 Forgotten feet...
 To have passed there
 Walked without a word...
 Geography.
 I am all (here)
 There!⁸

Further explorations into Merton's 'antipoetry' indicate that his title designation, *Lograire*, may have had sources other than the 'real name' of François Villon (François Des Loges), or Merton's 'loge', the forest hermitage in which he lived during the period of these later writings.⁹ Merton's preoccupation with *logos*, the word/s of language, and their potential for the ultimate destruction of meaning and life, is an overarching 'geography' for these writings. His decentering of the 'word' is given further elaboration in 'The Night of Destiny' wherein the speaker declares that '[i]n [his] ending is [his] meaning'—not only are his words 'speechless', his 'end' is his 'meaning'.¹⁰

On the other hand, in his Foreword to the Anvil Press edition of *Early Poems*, Jonathan Green instructively argues that the 'proximity of matter in [Merton's] beginning and last work persists' in the form of 'constants in concerns/images/and metaphors'.¹¹ These constants, with others, form an iconography of silence which leads us through the desert, beyond horizons 'which have no meaning' and 'roads' without explanations. But between the earliest collected poems and *The Geography of Lograire* lies a long journey into silence and solitude—an expedition into the geography of Merton's spirituality and his poetics. In 'Sacred Heart 2 (A Fragment—)', the last of the *Early Poems*, we have the foreshadowing beauty of Merton's spiritual and poetic (un)mappings:

Geography comes to an end,
 Compass has lost all earthly north,
 Horizons have no meaning
 Nor roads an explanation:

8. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 497-98.

9. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 501.

10. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 634.

11. Lexington, KY, 1971.

He continues by addressing the flaming Heart of Christ:

You, You alone are real, and here I've found You.
Here will I love and praise You in a tongueless death...¹²

Words disappear as the dry bones of the poet 'rise and unfold' in the silence of the 'unseen and unimagined wilderness'. The 'flaming Heart' of Christ is the 'special borealis' which illuminates the poet's 'darkness' and arouses him to life.

One understands in such a poem that from his earliest years as a God-seeker, Merton grappled with the language of silence and sound. For those who would seek a systematic, historical evolution in Merton's poetics, the journey will truly provide roads without an explanation. On the other hand, the paradigm in which the 'desert flowers' in 'wordless speech' will over and over lend understanding to Merton's conflictive relationship with speech and silence.

Those who know the story of Merton's entry into the elected silence of the Trappist order at the Abbey of Gethsemani (1941) will have already appreciated the irony in Merton's rather careful distribution of his writings before he left New York by train for Louisville, Kentucky. That he knew the limitations and barrenness of words has already been apparent in the *Early Poems*, written before and around this time. That he was not prepared to discard or destroy all the words that he had written suggests quite another strain of conscience.

When *Thirty Poems* (1944) appeared, Merton's initial ecstasy with silence and monastic life did not much display what soon became a lifelong quarrel. In these poems, published after his first few years at Gethsemani, loveliness and joy attend many of the metaphors which he chooses for silence. 'For My Brother: Reported Missing In Action, 1943' impressively displays Merton's fine and artistic sensitivities. Christ's silent tears... 'shall fall / Like bells upon your alien tomb' he says to his now-dead brother. Here, the silent tears clarion the call of heaven; they call his brother 'back to [his] own land'. Alienation becomes the repatriating homecoming as Merton's 'sweet brother' answers the silent call of Christ's tears.

Later in the collection, 'Evening', a pastoral in the Romantic vein, depicts nature's characters who are given a silent language of their own: 'the moon speaks clearly', 'the wheatfields make their simple music', and 'the trees name the new come planets'—all speak in wordless speech. The silent life has allowed Merton to come alive to other languages which surround him, holy and natural. 'The Trappist Abbey: Matins', one of the Gethsemani poems (which he noted were

12. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 24.

at their 'best' during this period of his writing),¹³ illustrates this claim in a particularly lovely manner: 'the full fields...smell of sunrise / And the valleys sing in their sleep / The pilgrim moon pours / Her waterfalls of silence...'. The silent moonhours of the matins glide down the 'long avenue of trees', speaking their glory and kindling in the young monk's 'soul' their 'clear awakeness'.¹⁴

It soon becomes clear, however, that the monk, infatuated with silent holiness, must move through many and varied agonies and penances attending mature monastic spirituality. Merton's next collection, *A Man in the Divided Sea* (1946) shows an altered perception in the emerging poet/contemplative. The collection included the contents of *Thirty Poems* with an additional 63 poems, a number of which expose the secular/religious dichotomy which Merton was experiencing in the early years of his Catholicism, before and after his entry into the monastic life. Such a poem is 'Some Bloody Mutiny' (which first appeared in 1944). It potently depicts, in both tone and image, an earth 'where pretty children curse the sea.../ Ripping the rind of Eden'; a world 'where there is no Good Friday'. But these catastrophes are not beyond the powers of a heaven 'given [to].../ Battle the ravage of our ordinary marrow / And flower for us / Upon the bone-branch we made dead'.¹⁵ The death march of modern existence is met with the potential of resurrected life. Merton's desire to counter the secular with the sacred is profoundly present in his evolving poetics.

The continuing evolution of Merton's poetics parallels his journey with and through silence, in his life and in his art—his search for 'place' grounded in, but not defined by, the monastery. To follow the journey is both to engage and to penetrate the silence which illuminates it. His writings, as indefinable as the man himself, anchor Merton's poetics in a spirituality whose language is its own silence.

Merton lived his life around the abyss between language and silence which ever threatened to consume him; some of his observers even thought he might self-destruct as both writer and contemplative—a man who insisted on biting the hand that fed him. My contention here is that both Merton's poetic vision and his contemplative vocation were necessary to his survival as a monk. But in the mid-1940s he had not yet begun to accommodate the tension whose forces had the potential to keep him in balance. In 1947, he publicly claimed that

13. Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader* (ed. Thomas P. McDonnell; New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 15.

14. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 41-42.

15. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 68.

when poetry threatens to 'bar the way' to 'true contemplation', the only choice for the poet is the 'ruthless and complete sacrifice of his art'.¹⁶ The self-imposed silencing of his public poetic voice between 1949 and 1957 demonstrates how close he came to perishing as a poet. He explains some of this by the breakdown of his health after he completed his novitiate and the 'nervous exhaustion' which followed his ordination: 'I was almost incapable of writing for at least a year and a half after I became a priest'.¹⁷ One need only read 'The Poet, To His Book', the last entry in the earlier *Figures for an Apocalypse* (1947) to hear the poet's voice in speculation and argumentation about his work:

Now is the day of our farewell in fear, lean pages:
And shall I leave some blessing on the half of me you
have devoured?
Were you, in clean obedience, my Cross,
Sent to exchange my life for Christ's in labor?
How shall the seeds upon those furrowed papers flower?
Or have I only bled to sow you full of stones and thorns,
Feeding my minutes to my own dead will?...
Is that the way you'd make me both-ways' loser,
Paying the prayers and joys you stole of me,
You thirsty traitor, in my Trappist mornings!¹⁸

Overstatement and hyperbolic clichés notwithstanding, the conflict at issue is clear and continuing, albeit mitigated on occasion by Merton's intimations that silence and contemplation will illumine the expedition. That there had been a war of conscience taking place is made clear in 1958, in 'Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal'¹⁹ (a revisiting of his former claim that the poet and the contemplative may not be able to co-exist). The lovely 'Song: Contemplation' is just one such occasion. Here, contemplation is mapped as the 'land alive with miracles', a 'country wild with talent', 'rous[ing] our mind / with songs'. In the wonders of Gethsemani's fields and flowers, the poet has 'suddenly...forgotten [its] geography, / ...And knows no more the low world scoured with traveling'.²⁰

It is less than surprising that Merton eventually legitimizes poetry as the act of pursuing a listening silence. He is the poet that Sartre describes:

16. 'Poetry and The Contemplative Life', *The Commonweal* 46 (4 July 1947), pp. 280-86.

17. Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, p. 15.

18. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 192.

19. *The Commonweal* 69 (24 October 1958), pp. 87-92.

20. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 157.

The [one] who is outside language... Instead of...knowing things by their name, it seems that first he has a silent contact with them, since, by turning toward the other species of thing which for him is the word...he discovers in them a slight luminosity of their own...²¹

That these issues have perpetrated an ongoing and intense vexation for Merton is made abundantly clear in later journals collected in *A Vow of Conversation* in which he wrote that 'all speech is impertinent. It destroys the simplicity of that nothingness before God'.²² Of course, by this point, the debate has become much more all-encompassing—a Zen master's encounters with Being and Nothingness.

But it is as a poet that Merton demonstrates that he becomes an 'incurable ontologist': his art continues to demonstrate his understanding that 'the poet has the ontological ability to see and to experience reality as it has come from God'.²³ As Kilcourse records it, Merton explains his place as a poet by announcing that '[poetry] is a kind of knowledge...that cannot be gained by any other means, for the poet is concerned with the aspects of experience that can never be well-described, but only reproduced or imitated'.²⁴ One need only encounter the singular beauty of Merton's passionate poems of love for M., for example, to understand this claim. 'Louisville Airport (May 5, 1966)', paints the fragile intensity of these 'love-children':

We with the gentle liturgy
Of shy children have permitted God
To make again His first world
Here on the foolish grass...
To make again that love
Which is His alone...
Love walks gently as a deer...
Onto this paradise of grass
Where God began
To make His love in man and woman...
Celebrated by all the poets
Since the first beginning
Of any song.²⁵

21. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism* (trans. Bernard Frechtman; New York: The Citadel Press, 1962), pp. 13-14.

22. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals, 1964-5* (ed. N.B. Stone; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), p. 159.

23. Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953), p. 53.

24. George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p. 43.

25. Thomas Merton, *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985), n.p.

One encounters this significantly in many other works such as the beautiful 'Song' in *The Tears of The Blind Lions* (1949). This volume's epigraph, a quote from Léon Bloy, prepares us for the beauty of its opening poem: 'When those who love God try to talk about Him, their words are blind lions looking for springs in the desert'. This poem may be a 'blind lion' but it comes very close to the springs which it seeks:

When rain, (sings light) rain has devoured my house
And wind wades through my trees,
The cedars fawn upon the storm with their huge paws
Silence is louder than a cyclone...
And there I eat my air alone
With pure and solitary songs...²⁶

The poem takes its speaker outside the confines of language and words as he 'drink[s] rain, drink[s] wind / Distinguish[es] poems / Boiling up out of the old forest'. At home in his own 'geography', this poet 'live[s] on [his] own land, on his own island / And speak[s] to God, [his] God'.

Paul Gehl, in his essay 'An Answering Silence', tells us that 'one of the most common and consistently presented notions in the great religious traditions is the idea that human language is inadequate to describe the unifying being or principle at the summit of most religious hierarchies;...that a certain linguistic disappearing point is assumed in which a quality of standing beyond the ability of human language opens into God'.²⁷ Similarly, for Merton, that point (of silence) is essential to language, not merely as an absence of sounds, but as attendant and assistant to their inabilities.

Foundational to Merton's early thinking about silence was Picard's *The World of Silence*. This is acknowledged in the author's note at the beginning of *Thoughts in Solitude*. As Altany has observed, 'The early Merton believed mystical experience directed him towards silence, but the poetic vision compelled him to speak'.²⁸ Altany refers to Merton's antiphonal psalm, 'A Responsory', as an illustration of this ongoing attempt to balance his silent vocation with his artistic vision and its need to speak: 'Words and silence, standing face to face / Weigh life and death'. In this spiritual exercise, the speakers of the

26. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 196.

27. Paul Gehl, 'An Answering Silence', *Philosophy Today* 30 (Fall 1986), pp. 224-33 (224).

28. Alan Altany, 'Thomas Merton's Poetic Incarnation of Emptiness', *The Merton Annual* 10 (1988), pp. 110-30 (110).

chorus intone that 'the Mystery was in [their] wicked midst' while they 'waited for...their light in winter / Learning discipline'. The soloist counters that it is 'lighted children, friends of silence' who 'sing to us', who are 'the signals of our Christ'.²⁹ In entering the dark emptiness of silence, the poet incarnates, in words, the light of the sacred in the profane. As Altany further explains, 'The [true] self grows in the fertile darkness of the sacred...what seems to all appearances to be purely profane is in reality a womb for the sacred teeming with unlimited life'.³⁰ Later, Merton synthesized this understanding with the study of Heidegger, Sartre, Rahner, and others. The reading journals are chock full of his notations and insights about this complex matter.

Merton lived into the discovery that it was the evocative silences of his monastic contemplation that encompassed his spiritual and mystical union with God and the world. He wrote, in his essay, 'Philosophy of Solitude' that '[the] inner 'I' which is always alone, is always universal; for in this inmost 'I' my own solitude meets the solitude of every other man and the solitude of God... It is only this inmost and solitary 'I' that truly loves with the love and the spirit of Christ'.³¹ For Merton, this was the 'hearing proper', a 'hearkening', a transposition into the spiritual realm, as in the vein of Heidegger.

In tandem with the desert experience of Merton's spiritual journey into this and other knowledge, he writes some of his finest in the tradition of poetry as religious experience. These poems have that quality of experience which is 'reproduced' rather than 'described'. Indeed, such poems can be found throughout Merton's collected works. There is a surprising consistency in their literary qualities—an observation demonstrated by the examination of so-called drafts of his poems in his working notebooks. Later, these drafts appear in publication as almost identical to their originals, even after some attempts at revision. Moreover, some of his acknowledged best poems appear as often in his early work as in the later writings. That his huge canon of poems is inconsistent in its quality does not undermine Merton's vision as a poet.

'Song: If You Seek...' is a pertinent and compelling example. Here, Merton's speaker assumes the pose of Solitude, the consummate spiritual director: the poem is a straightforward claim that Solitude is the

29. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 672.

30. *The Merton Annual* 10 (1997), p. 124.

31. Thomas Merton, 'Philosophy of Solitude', in *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1960), pp. 177-207 (207).

professor of 'heavenly light'. In a counterparted dialogue with the listener, Solitude proclaims his task:

I go before you into emptiness,
 ...Opening the windows...
 Of your innermost apartments.
 ...I am the unexpected flash
 ...The forerunner of the Words of God.
 ...For I, Solitude, am thine own self;
 I, Nothingness, am thy All.
 I, Silence, am thy Amen!

And then exhorts the listener(s) to theirs:

Follow my silence...
 Fear not...
 Follow my ways...
 To golden-haired suns,
 Logos and music, blameless joys,
 Innocent of questions
 And beyond answers...³²

The appeal is gentle, distilled in images of 'strange suns' and a 'pilgrim moon'—light for day and night; 'unexpected flash' and 'blameless joys'—mysterious understanding and innocent ecstasy. This poem, although lacking in the exquisite poignancy which Merton is capable of, and somewhat discursive in its metaphors, nevertheless declares its speaker's vision. We must embrace solitude and silence if we wish to go beyond our questions and answers—an uneasy invitation to contemplation for the one whose thought and purpose is bound in words. And then to go on, reminding ourselves, as Merton did, that 'no writing on solitude can say anything that hasn't already been said by the wind in the pine trees'.³³

This same dialogic approach was earlier taken when Merton wrote 'In Silence'. The poem has a less psalmodic attribute and reveals the conflict one might find in the very embrace previously outlined. The spirit beckons:

Be still
 Listen to the stones of the wall.
 Be silent, they try
 To speak your
 Name....

32. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 340.

33. Thomas Merton, *Loving and Living* (ed. N.B. Stone and Br P. Hart; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), p. 15.

Who are you?
 Who
 Are you?...
 Who (be quiet)
 Are you (as these stones)
 Are quiet?...
 O be still...
 Speaking by the Unknown
 That is in you and in themselves.

The consciousness responds:

I will try, like them
 To be my own silence:
 And this is difficult...
 The stones...burn me...
 How can [I] dare
 To sit with them when
 All their silence
 Is on fire?³⁴

The intensity of the imagery and its disquieting stillness calls the reader to contemplation. As one listens to the silence, one must ponder the imponderables and in so doing, is led away from oneself to the silent sounds of all things that live around one and are not heard in one's own being. Further, one looks away and beyond to discover that the 'world is secretly on fire'. (Here, one cannot help but recall the echoes of Hopkins's 'The World Is Charged With The Grandeur of God'). By the poem's end, one has been silenced into contemplative action by the very listening to 'all things burning'. In such a moment, the icon has broken open—silence has burst into the fire of the Unknown that is in oneself and others—mystical union with God and with the world further fuels the icon's fire.

There are many other poems that serve to demonstrate similar power. Their beauty evolves parallel to their power as icons. 'Song for Nobody' speaks of the 'Nobody' that lives outside itself. Written in the early 1960s, it unfolds Merton's mature relationship with the solitude and silence that nourished him and his poetry. Again, the imagery focuses on the power of light and emptiness as seen in the simplicity of a brown-eyed Susan, plentiful in the knobs of Kentucky that were home to the monastery. The poem's speaker hears the flower singing by itself—for nobody. This flower sings 'without a word; but in its dark eye, 'someone' is awake. There is no light, no gold, no name, no color/And no thought'. 'Someone' sings a 'song to

34. Merton, *Collected Poems*, pp. 280-81.

Nobody'. Here, solitude leads to an abyss which is the opening of the center of one's soul. It is not an absence of people or sound. It is a presence of life and union between 'someone' and 'no one'. The reader is drawn away from the process of hearing and looking, into the reality of listening and seeing. The poem, like an icon, leads us through its images and into the realization that the emptiness is full of music and life. It is a sacred illumination; its sound and light become, then, a spiritual encounter. If we dare to penetrate our own silence and advance fearlessly into the solitude of our own hearts, Merton contended, we will renew the capacity to understand what is beyond words and beyond explanations. He elaborates this in *Thoughts in Solitude*:

We put words between ourselves and things. Even God has become another conceptual unreality in a no-man's land of language that no longer serves as a means of communion with reality. The solitary life, being silent, clears away the smoke-screen of words that man has laid down between his mind and things... The world our words have attempted to classify, to control and even to despise (because they could not contain it) comes close to us, for silence teaches us to know reality by expecting it where words have defiled it.... Words stand between silence and silence: between the silence of things and the silence of the world and the silence of God... and when language recedes His brightness remains on the shores of our own being.³⁵

In such a moment, the poet receives silent secrets from the un/conscious as the false self is abandoned and the true self emerges in union with God. The silence of the icon is shattered by the poet's words which then return us to the silence of God's speech once again. As such, poetry borders on three other modes of statement—light, music, and silence—which Steiner called the 'proof of the transcendent presence in the fabric of the world'.³⁶ And it is there where Merton's best poetry resides, alongside light, music, and silence as we experience it in the 'Song for Nobody'.

In one of his lovelier poems, this iconography is impressively elaborated in the metaphor of the night cactus—a flower that blooms in the desert, only once, and in darkness. 'Night-Flowering Cactus', another from *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, is its own speaker who 'shows [its] true self only in the dark and to/no man' but 'belongs neither to night nor day'. The narrative paints the beauty of the 'deep

35. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1956), p. 86.

36. George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman* (Kingsport, TN: Kingsport Press, 1967), p. 39.

white bell' that opens to the 'timeless moment of void'—a picture of the 'extreme purity of virginal thirst'. In this case, the thirst is for the Eucharistic wine which comes 'sudden[ly], out of the earth's unfathomable joy'. The image of innocent virginity is further enriched when it is described as a 'white cavern without explanation'. And the drama is completed as the flower divulges its secrets: 'when I open once for all my impeccable bell / No one questions my silence'. The power of the icon in this gorgeous poem resonates not only as the virginity is completed by the echo of the 'all-knowing night bird which flies out' of the cavern, but also in the 'wrought passion' which bursts from the flower's blossoming with a union of mysteries reserved for sexual and spiritual encounter of orgasmic resonance. Merton concludes the poem with this profound question which is related to the reader's experience of both the natural and spiritual realms:

Have you seen it? Then though my mirth has
 quickly ended
 You live forever in its echo:
 You will never be the same again.³⁷

Iconoclasm radiates from our experience of this poem. In its moment of (de)flowering, the cactus has bloomed for us as we have visited its dark obedience and entered into its 'excellent deep pleasure' beyond which is the silent life of God.

In this lyric psalm, poet and poem are outside language, as Sartre describes it. The speaker waxes prophetic, making visible the Invisible God.³⁸ Merton as poet-prophet evokes words from the silence of the contemplative experience; such evocations then prompt the return to silence. Herein resides Merton's reproduction of the mystical experience which directed him towards silence, and the poetic vision which compelled him to speak. In such poetry, he allows us into the sacred places where speech and silence dance as partners who know the iconography of their journey well, leading us into the nexus of holy mysteries. In Merton's own words, he tells us that 'words are in [the] feet as [we] walk without them' on 'speechless pavements... printed with secrets'; that true communication is beyond words at the same time as it is reflected by them.

37. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 351.

38. Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 22.