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George Kilcourse
Bellarmine College

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"The Paradise Ear": Thomas Merton, Poet

George Kilcourse

T. S. Eliot in 1949 judged Thomas Merton’s early poetry as “hit or miss,” intimating that the monk wrote too much and revised too little. Robert Lowell had remarked four years earlier, “the poet would appear to be more phenomenal than the poetry.” Meanwhile, a phalanx of Catholic reviewers (at times uncritically but enthusiastically) were celebrating with bravado Merton’s arrival on the decade’s literary scene as a sectarian laureate. Twenty years later the reviews remained mixed, but the poet and the poetry had experienced a sea change. By his own word, Merton’s poetics had ventured into a new idiom and form: “he has changed his address, and his poetics are on vacation.”

This anti-poetry of Merton’s mature voice has attracted only the more adventurous of critics, and, within the corridors of the literary establishment, the poet Merton remains virtually unknown. Early reviewers accurately measured his shortcomings; some critics actually planted suspicions about the very genre of religious poetry. By contrast, however, the poet and the poetry of the 1960s evidence a maturity and expansive achievement to which scholars have reacted variously with: “not the kind of poem one would have expected from Thomas Merton”; “later, great poems”; and, “an important modern poet.”

Merton’s celebrity as a spiritual writer and social critic has garnered for him a classic status in American letters. What vexes a student of Merton’s early work is the fact that the poetry remains a terra incognita for the wide Merton readership and for scholars. One recalls his biographer Michael Mott’s surmise, “It is possible that Thomas Merton has suffered more from selective editing than from censorship.” Editorial neglect of the extensive corpus of Merton’s poetry reflects just such “selective editing.” It has become customary for Merton scholars to volunteer an obligatory, formal apology for not including his poems in their research. The niceties of those polite gestures behind them, scholars waive responsibility for the 1,030-page canon of Merton’s poetry. (Some compound
the fault by avoiding critical appreciation of the companion volume, *The Literary Essays.*

One defense marshalled by some who endorse a truncated Merton bibliography centers on a paradoxical insistence that Merton's prose often evidences the best of the poet's craft. The penchant for apt imagery and imaginative metaphor emerges throughout Merton's essays and books. Indeed, a prose-poetry emerges in his journals and the most memorable occasional prose pieces, such as "The Fire Watch" (*The Sign of Jonas*, 1953) and "Rain and the Rhinoceros" (*Raids on the Unspeakable*, 1966). Merton, however, was capable of writing turgid prose, too. A sober, critical analysis of his essays and book-length studies betrays the fact that Merton often failed as a discursive writer.

An assessment of Merton the poet not only must address the craft of his collected poetry but also his reflections on the task encompassed by the enterprise of the poet. While the poetry ultimately must be judged on its intrinsic literary merits, Merton's development as poet remains tethered to his own critical appreciation of what literary art intends and achieves.

Thomas Merton's first published book review, written while a graduate student in the English Department at Columbia University, locates the poet's mind on this latter question. Under the influence of Mark Van Doren, Merton would find new confidence and a rigorous intellectual foundation for his literary interests: T. S. Eliot, Donne and the Metaphysicals, and Shakespeare, among others. It comes as no surprise that his inaugural review (1938) addressed John Crowe Ransom's *The World's Body*, the charter of a generation of literary insurgents, the New Critics. Their reaction to Romantic theories of poetry and the exposure of fallacies (affective and otherwise) re-oriented Merton to "a definition of poetry in terms of cognition." "It is", he wrote, "a kind of knowledge, and a 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 and imitated." 8

The poet's unique ability to recreate experience and to interpret the meaning of past and present experience remain paramount in Merton's poetics. His own best poetry mirrors this deep existential dynamic. *The Secular Journal* (1959) and *The Sign of Jonas* (1953) reveal Merton's repugnance for the Romantic poets, with their sprawling emotions and sentimentality. Among them, nevertheless,
he gravitated to "one poet who was a poet indeed, and a Romantic poet, but vastly different from those contemporaries, with whom he had little to do"—William Blake, the subject of Merton's master's study at Columbia. Blake's metaphors came to Merton's consciousness because of the interest in Blake of Merton's own artist-father, New Zealand-born Owen Merton. Although initiated into a knowledge of Blake at the age of ten, Thomas Merton still commented years later that he found Blake "extraordinarily difficult and obscure."

In The Seven Storey Mountain Merton comments on his father's approach to art:

I had learned from my own father that it was almost blasphemy to regard the function of art as merely to reproduce some kind of a sensible pleasure or, at best, to stir up the emotions to a transitory thrill. I had always understood that art was contemplation, and that it involved the action of the highest faculties of man.  

And in a rare surviving letter of Owen Merton, the landscape painter reflects on his own understanding of art, an understanding that his son inherited and transformed into his own poetic idiom. Indeed, Owen Merton's finer watercolors, often of sea scenes, present an ordered, recreative vision bathed in light. He writes:

... I find artists in all ranks of life and in all callings, and I believe myself that order and sincerity are closely allied, and are both at the basis of the artist's constitution. Sincerity gives one a clear vision, and one carries that out in work only by means of order . . . .

We shall never be satisfied with anything less than Christ, however, and I think the reason is that, as Van Gogh says, he was the greatest artist we have ever had, for he dealt with men, not with colors or brushes, and almost created men. If our pictures do not in some measure create the men who look at them or perhaps better recreate them, those pictures are not much good!  

This trust in the cognitive dimension of art is at the center of Merton's conversion in Rome, in 1933. He visited the ancient churches and encountered the great mosaics of Christ. He reported
that "these mosaics told me more than I had ever known of the doctrine of a God of infinite power, wisdom and love." He continues:

They [these doctrines] were implicit in every line of the pictures I contemplated with such admiration and love, surely I grasped them implicitly—I had to, in so far as the mind of the artist reached my own mind, and spoke to it in his conception and his thought. And so I could not help but catch something of the ancient craftsman’s love of Christ, the Redeemer and Judge of the World.¹¹

By the time Merton began serious plans to write a doctoral dissertation, it was the Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins who attracted his attention. Both as poet and religious personality, Hopkins awakened Merton’s interests. Merton’s verse has occasionally been compared (flatteringly) with Hopkins’s. ("It was elaborate and tricky and in places it was a little lush and overdone . . . Yet it was original and had a lot of vitality and music and depth.")¹² However, as a craftsman and innovator in rhythms, Merton never rivalled the English Jesuit. (A regrettable parallel is that, imitating Hopkins, he burned poetry when he converted.) What magnifies in retrospect is Merton’s attraction not only to a poet experimenting with structure and form, but also committed to the mimetic theory¹³ which, happily, Merton never abdicated.

An essay launched under a title as general as this one, and over a poetry canon so diverse and lengthy, must approach the topic analytically in order to interpret it understandably. Three focal concerns in particular invite examination in assessing Thomas Merton as a poet, and these are: (I) the struggle to integrate the poet’s voice with a contemplative monastic vocation; (II) continuities and discontinuities in Merton’s poetry; and (III) the evolution of a mature poetics in Merton’s later critical writing and theory. This agenda will necessarily restrain the explication of particular poems; but, in the end, I hope better to serve readers with the hermeneutics for continuing expository work with Merton’s poetry.
Deep in his early monastic journal, *The Sign of Jonas*, Thomas Merton quipped, "Perhaps I shall continue writing on my deathbed, and even take some asbestos paper with me in order to go on writing in purgatory." The need to write seemed congenital with Merton. John Howard Griffin caricatured it by remarking in Merton the journalist's documentary habit—he could not even "scratch his nose" without writing it down!

In the same monastic journal Merton recollects beginning to read the Book of Job, and he laments: "I know that all of my own poems about the world's suffering have been inadequate: . . . they have only camouflaged the problem." He proceeds then to vacillate between extremes first of discontinuing all writing and, then, writing into eternity, the purgatory scenario. If Merton had declared his monastic flight from the world an escape from the "shadow" of the writer, he nonetheless developed a welterweight's reflexes for shadow-boxing! Michael Mott alertly has noted the frontispiece photograph of Merton, back turned toward the viewer/reader, which graces *The Sign of Jonas*. Its haunting pose symbolizes Merton's ordeal, "travelling toward my destination in the belly of a paradox." He had vowed silence as a Cistercian monk; yet he had found fame as a writer, indeed a popular one, who afforded a very public eavesdropping on his search for self. The first decade of Merton's life at Gethsemani seemed torturous to his readers. Could the "duck in a chicken coop" really give anything in the world to be a chicken instead of a duck? Despite protests and declarations that he wanted to divest himself of the writer's weeds and don only the monk's habit, the outcome remained uncertain. There was, in fact, little drama, though much tease. One senses through all the self-consciousness about his literary success that Merton's great fault in the 1940s was cultivating a literary persona.

A chronology of the poetry proves revealing:

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<th>Year</th>
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<td>1944</td>
<td>Thirty Poems</td>
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<td>1946</td>
<td>A Man in the Divided Sea</td>
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<td>1947</td>
<td>Figures for an Apocalypse</td>
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<td>1949</td>
<td>The Tears of the Blind Lion</td>
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<td>1957</td>
<td>The Strange Islands</td>
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<td>1959</td>
<td>Selected Poems</td>
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What even a cursory glance at this record displays is the virtual absence of Merton's poetry in the 1950s. In effect, the apparent literary sacrifice of his poetry would appease conscience and “free” Merton for more spiritual prose projects, e.g., studies like The New Man (1961, nearly a decade in the making), The Living Bread (1956), Bread in the Wilderness (1953), and The Ascent to Truth (1951). Responsibilities within the monastery consumed more of Merton's attention and energy, as Master of the Students (1951-55) and Master of Novices (1955-65). The one compensation, Merton boasted, of “being a writer” would be, “it brought me solitude.”

The stress of Merton's wrestling under the dual pressures of life as a poet-contemplative emerges in a pair of curious essays in Commonweal: “Poetry and the Contemplative Life” (1947) and “Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal” (1958). The former exhibits a disconcerting ambivalence. At points Merton speaks patronizingly of the poet, noting that no worthy Christian poetry has been written by anyone “not in some degree a contemplative.” But, finally, poetry becomes only a propadeutic to the “higher” mystical experience of true contemplation; in fact, it can become a “fatal handicap,” a distraction of sharing the contemplative experience and being left with nothing—the “experience of the artist.” By 1958, however, Merton had reversed himself, complaining that he could not merely bury his artistic talent and settle for the career of “professional saint.” A decidedly sacramental consciousness re-orient the second essay where he emphasizes the “goodness of creation.” Merton concludes by overruling the ruthless and complete “sacrifice” of his poetry. “Indeed, experience teaches us,” he writes, “that the most perfect choice is the choice of what God has willed for us, even though it may be, in itself, less perfect, and indeed less ‘spiritual.’”

This heralded a declaration of the poet's independence. The acceptance of artistic identity proved to be in concert with Merton's reworking of coordinates for his monastic identity. Just as he had invented a false dichotomy of poet vs. contemplative.
his early romanticized monastic life relied on a false dichotomy of "the world" vs. the monastery. It is more than coincidental that the poet found his voice at the same time the monk rediscovered "the world."

Biographers of Merton have traced influences and contacts that ushered him into the more open and venturesome decade of the 1960s. In 1957 his reading turned to South and Central America, the political poetry of Pablo Neruda and discussion with Ernesto Cardenal, who briefly studied as a novice with Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani. The Kentucky monastery's future was linked with rumored new foundations in Ecuador. Merton was awakened to social issues through the first syllables of poets in the vanguard of a movement that would be dubbed "Liberation Theology." In an important volume, translations of the desert fathers entitled The Wisdom of the Desert, Merton retrieved the fourth century roots of monastic identity. Theirs was no simplistic *fuga mundi*, no negative, individualistic, anti-social flight from a condemned world. He poignantly re-locates the monastic charism:

... they had come into the desert to be themselves, their ordinary selves, and to forget a world that divided them from themselves. There can be no other valid reason for leaving the world. And thus to leave the world is, in fact, to help save it in saving oneself. This is the final point, and it is an important one. The Coptic hermits, who left the world as though escaping from a wreck, did not merely intend to save themselves... Once they got a foothold on solid ground, things were different. Then they had not only the power but even the obligation to pull the whole world to safety after them.

While acknowledging that "we cannot do exactly what they did," Merton seeks to "be as ruthless in our determination to cast off all spiritual chains... to find our true selves" and develop our "inalienable spiritual liberty" to build the Kingdom of God on earth. He ends by voicing the need to "strike out fearlessly into the unknown."20

The same broadening context led Merton to venture a correspondence with Boris Pasternak, whose writing and faith intrigued him and led to a cogent three-part essay in *Disputed Questions* (1960). He ventured through Pasternak's unorthodox...
Christian expressions to a deeper spiritual ground. The "Preface" to this collection focused on the spirituality of the person. Solitude, said Merton, was "a conditione sine qua non for a valid encounter with other persons, for communion in love." The new monastic trajectory was set in motion:

I cannot be content with the idea that a contemplative monk is one who takes flight from the wicked world and turns his back on it completely in order to lose himself in antiquarian ritualism, or worse still, to delve introspectively into his own psyche.

Indeed, Merton here confesses to "only recently com[ing] back into contact with the America I used to know . . . ."21 Now, he seeks contact with other solitudes in the world.

From the vantage point of the mid-sixties, Merton seized the occasion of a new introduction to the Japanese edition of The Seven Storey Mountain to reinterpret his monastic identity. He began, typically, with the autobiographical question: "If the story remains what it is, has the author changed?" The decision to depart from the modern secular society, he declares, has been repeated and often reaffirmed until it is "irreversible." Then he inserts a Mertonian nuance, distancing himself from "the somewhat negative tone of so many parts of this book."

Since that time I have learned, I believe, to look back into that world with greater compassion, seeing those in it not as alien to myself, not as peculiar and deluded strangers, but as identified with myself. In breaking from "their world," I have strangely not broken from them. In freeing myself from their delusions and preoccupations, I have identified myself, nonetheless, with their struggles and their blind, desperate hope of happiness. But precisely because I am identified with them, I must refuse all the more definitively to make their delusions my own.22

Intimations of a new appropriation of his monastic identity weave in and out of the journal of this era, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander. They achieve a systematic form and suggest a program for monastic renewal at a later moment. Merton by 1968 had come full circle as his posthumously published collection of

105 KILCOURSE
essays on contemporary monasticism, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, heralds: "This is the real problem of monastic renewal: not a surrender to the ‘secular city’ but a recovery of the deep desire of God that draws a man to seek a totally new way of being in the world."23 It summons an anti-monastic response when he challenges monks to realize they are called to a "totally different mode of existence, outside of secular categories, and outside of the religious establishment."24 This renewed monastic impulse enjoys creativity and an "element of exploration," he urges. Indeed, the monk’s habitat proved nothing less than a "marginal existence." And from the environs of his hermitage Merton, through his poetry, invited other solitudes "to get rid of the impersonation."25

II

We have already staked off boundaries to segregate the early and later poetry of Merton by remarking the scarcity of poems in the 1950s. One can effortlessly trace discontinuities of style and poetic maturity between the Merton of the 1940s and the Merton of the 1960s. Most evident are his dependence in the early poems on similes and an elegant, florid diction. The writing labors as self-consciously poetic, even imitative of Donne, Eliot, and others whose metaphysical conceits Merton envied. Here is an example, from an early verse entitled "Poem" (*Thirty Poems, CP, 6*):

Light plays like a radio in the iron tree;  
Green farms fear the night behind me  
Where lightenings race across the western world.

Life, like a woman in the moving wheat,  
Runs from the staring sky  
That bends upon the earth like a reflector.

Or, another selection, from "The Greek Women" (*A Man in the Divided Sea, CP, 6*):

The ladies in red capes and gold bracelets  
Walk like reeds and talk like rivers,
And sigh, like Vichy water, in the doorways;

And, opening their eyes wide as horizons,
Seem to await the navy home from Troy.

Rather than personify, Merton’s images and symbols collapse into abstractions in the early poems. He frequents the theme of the world’s wickedness, pyrotechnic images contrasting starkly with the halcyon monastic refuge. Urbanscapes grate and force violent images of decay and moral torpor. “In the Ruins of New York” (Figures for an Apocalypse, CP, 143) portrays such a simplistic contrast in this passage:

Oh how quiet it is after the black night
When flames out of the clouds burned down
your cariated teeth,
And when those lightenings,
Lancing the black boils of Harlem and the Bronx,
Spilled the remaining prisoners,
(The tens and twenties of the living)
Into the trees of Jersey,
To the green farms, to find their liberty.

Antitheses remain taut in the imagery: black-white, darkness-light, prisoner-freedom, urban-pastoral, earth-sky; Merton sometimes successfully cultivates the tension of these and other pairings as in the haunting “black girls”–“white girls” imagery from “Song for Our Lady of Cobre,” written spontaneously during his Cuban trip; or the moving starkness of tense images of transformation in the poem, less self-conscious and spontaneous, occasioned by his brother’s death in World War II, “For My Brother, Reported Missing in Action, 1943” (Thirty Poems, CP, 35):

Sweet brother, if I do not sleep
My eyes are flowers for your tomb;
And if I cannot eat my bread,
My fasts shall live like willows where you died.
If in the heat I find no water for my thirst,
My thirst shall turn to springs for you, poor traveller.

Here Merton trusts the direct metaphor. And a natural rhythm
reinforces the poet’s hope, through the density of an apocalyptic evil: “In the wreckage of your April Christ lies slain.” Once again, Merton’s poetic gifts thrived under the pressure of autobiography and the poet’s interpretive rendering of experience.

Themes of alienation, exile, solitude, freedom, and the identity/illusion quandary characterize Merton’s poetry of the 1940s. There is no decided breakthrough or seasoning of the young poet—though his obvious gift with metaphor and imagery and diction auditions, as Eliot well dubbed it, “hit or miss.” At his worst, the early poet Merton writes sentimental, romantic poems, stylistically clumsy and burdened with an ideology of monasticism that spurns the world and hurls invectives in his wake.

Anthony Padovano’s careful and literate interpretation of Merton, *The Human Journey*, incorporates analyses of the poetry to an extent unrivalled by the studies of any other scholar. Padovano outlines a key critical insight into Merton:

His prose never registered the changes [in his life] as radically as did his poetry. His poetry was often the barometer of his soul. In the younger days, it was lyrical and free; in the middle years, passionate and angry; at the end, cosmic and visionary.

The sole volume of verse in the 1950s, *The Strange Islands* (1957), found a lengthy morality play, “The Tower of Babel,” crowding its pages. However, indications of a leaner, more pruned and direct style, concrete images, and even new irony are evident in Merton’s imagination. “Landscape,” “In Silence,” “Stranger,” and “Elegy for the Monastery Barn” stand welcome if awkwardly beside the stale Merton style of the 1940s. By the time of *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963), the discontinuity in style and theme proved irreversible for Merton. There radiates a Zen-like concreteness and sense of paradox in the poem, “Song for Nobody” (CP, 337), that remains vintage 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
Someone 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.

George Woodcock’s earlier study, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet*, has employed a useful distinction in dividing Merton’s poems into “choir” and “desert” poetry. In the main, this division serves to characterize the poetry of the two periods we are considering. It also reflects the two discontinuous monastic stances Merton adopted. What Woodcock’s dichotomy suggests, however, is a lack of continuity throughout Merton’s poetry that overlooks a deeper coherence. I do not wish to overstate this argument, nor do I intend to neglect it. Several illustrations will suffice.

In both his prose and poetry Merton clusters a complex of images symbolizing true contemplation. In the 1949 classic volume, *Seeds of Contemplation*, he quickly volunteers, “hell is perpetual alienation from the true self.” Spiritual awakening and maturity involves the loss of a false self, the ego or empirical self, the illusion, the mask, or superficial consciousness. In turn, the true self or authentic identity of the person breathes freely after the spiritual ordeal, or ongoing process, has been engaged. In the concluding pages of the 1961 revision of that same volume, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton offers an antidote to the narcotic of life without contemplative depth. He calls it the innocence of “paradise consciousness”:

When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment when they are really children; when we know
love in our own hearts; or when, like the Japanese poet Basho, we hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash—at such times the awakening, the turning inside out of all values, the “newness,” the emptiness and the purity of vision that make themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance.29

Three poems spanning the canon of Merton’s poetry evidence his use of the child’s innocence to symbolize this awakening and spiritual integrity. The first, “Aubade: Lake Erie” (*Thirty Poems*, *CP*, 35), reminisces autobiographically about the vineyards on Lake Erie, “an artificial France”:

Awake, in the frames of the windows, innocent children
Loving the blue, sprayed leaves of childish life,
Applaud the bearded corn, the bleeding grape . . . .

Their dawn rising, “when their shining voices, clean as summer, / Play, like church bells over the field,” summons the “hitchhiking” hoboes who fail to heed or see the morning sun as “our marvelous cousin.” These aliens, homeless vagabonds, “groped in the green wheat, / Toward the wood winds of the western freight.” Unlike the children, they fail to celebrate or even to imagine the eucharistic images Merton discreetly weaves through the imagery.

Merton’s identification of the child’s imaginative life as more real than adult exile appears again in “Dirge for a Town in France” (*A Man in the Divided Sea*, *CP*, 84). Here he constructs a stronger metaphor for childhood, the carousel:

O, it is not those first, faint stars
Whose fair light, falling, whispers in the river;
And it is not the dusty wind,
Waving the waterskirts of the shy-talking fountain,

That wakes the wooden horses’ orchestra,
The fifing goldfinch, and the phony flutes,
And the steam robins and electric nightingales
That blurred the ding of cymbals,
That other time when childhood turned and turned
As grave as sculpture in a zodiac.
The image of "wakeful" childhood innocence, the imaginative response as a more real response than the adult capitulation, finds a successful, stark contrast.

But the men die, down in the shadowy doors,
The way their thoughts die in their eyes,
To see those sad and funny children
Run down the colonnade of trees
Where the carnival doesn't exist:

Those children, who are lost too soon,
With fading laughter, on the road along the river:
Gone, like the slowing cavalcade, the homeward horses.

Interestingly, the poet identifies the women (mothers) of the town, perched on the "one-time finery of iron, suburban balconies," akin to the child's innocent response to reality and the sacramental flowers: "The roses and mimosas in the windows / Adore the night they breathe, not understanding."

In "Grace's House" (Emblems of a Season of Fury, CP, 330) Merton achieves his most symbolic treatment of the consciousness of paradise. The poem was occasioned by a child's (a real Grace) sending him a drawing of her home. It is archetypal:

On the summit: it stands on a fair summit
Prepared by winds; and solid smoke
Rolls from the chimney like a snow cloud.
Grace's house is secure.
No blade of grass is not counted,
No blade of grass forgotten on this hill.
Twelve flowers make a token garden.
There is no path to the summit—
No path drawn
To Grace's house.

There is now a Zen-like wakefulness in the child's vantage at the window:

All the curtains are arranged
Not for hiding but for seeing out.
In one window someone looks out and winks.
Two gnarled short
Fortified trees have knotholes
From which to look out.
From behind a corner of Grace’s house
Another creature peeks out.

And the poem ends reiterating that, “Alas, there is no road to Grace’s house.”

Other examples, often with the vantage from a window, of this unself-conscious spiritual wakefulness imaged through the child—but distorted by the adult—can be found in poems such as “The Winter’s Night” (Thirty Poems, CP, 38), “Birdcage Walk” (The Strange Islands, CP, 275), and “Macarius and the Pony” (Emblems of a Season of Fury, CP, 317).

Before turning to a necessarily cursory glance at Merton’s antipoetry of 1967 and 1968, I call attention to an observation made by John Eudes Bamberger, a Cistercian abbot in New York state and a Gethsemani companion and former student of Merton. It pertains directly to the explication of these poems.

I think that for Thomas Merton the experience of being forgiven by God was one of his deepest experiences. It wouldn’t appear normally because usually he gave the impression of being a rather carefree, happy-go-lucky, freewheeling type of person. But, when you knew him well, there always was this awareness that he had been very bad off at one time... It is a fact that quite early he was all but homeless for all practical purposes and that prior to entering the monastery he felt he had lost what was best in his life, his human innocence... And somehow he was able, because of the experience of God, to believe that God had recreated his innocence.30

Elsewhere I have proposed that Merton’s final, sustained poems, Cables to the Ace and The Geography of Lograire, demonstrate the mature range of his imagination by irony and the forms of antipoetry.31 These mosaics, as he called both collections, were invented to achieve the marginal monk’s task of saving the post-Christian world from its spiritual inertia. Their satire and parody achieve the “wakefulness” of Merton’s earlier poems, although now the poet shakes us from the nightmare of our contemporary...
world’s depersonalizing anesthesia.

Again and again the poetic process summons an authentic communication with the deepest self and other solitudes. “Decode your own scrambled message,” Merton prescribes in “Miami You Are About to be Surprised” (Geography of Lograire, CP, 473). In a universal structure of south, north, east, and west cantos, Merton moves from autobiographical self-interpretation through the irony of Cargo cults and Ghost Dances of Third World cultures desperate for myth and ritual, to interpret meaning out of their disintegrating cultures. Unfinished and rough as Merton’s transformation of diverse sources proves to be, the real geography he explores is the inner self and the seduction of the false, superficial, illusory self. It marks the apex of his poetic power to recreate our innocence, interpersonally and as a global culture.

While Merton referred to The Geography of Lograire as “my summa of offbeat anthropology,”32 his Cables to the Ace collection achieves a significant effect in its own right as spiritual wakefulness and innocence. It is only the marginal monk who can recognize communication gone amok in the advertising age’s images—images that neutralize and seduce us. Thus, Merton’s parody of the Marlboro pages of a magazine provides a devastating invitation to look again:

I will get up and go to Marble country
Where deadly smokes grow out of moderate heat
And all the cowboys look for fortunate slogans
Among horses asses. (CP, 449)

But hope strides through the closing ruins of the poem (n. 80). Here is one of the several prayers and epiphanies that punctuate the poem (cf. nn. 7, 45) which Merton ironically subtitles, “Familiar Liturgies of Misunderstanding.”

Slowly, slowly
Comes Christ through the garden
Speaking to the sacred trees
Their branches bear his light
Without harm (CP, 449).

The abusers of language, from Caliban, the cursing anti-hero borrowed from Shakespeare, to the newscaster whose cadenced
babble Merton brilliantly parodies in a breathless nonsense staccato symbolizing our immunity to communication (n. 48), all mistake the Advent of the Word in history. The Edenic garden recalls the innocence of paradise, the spiritual wakefulness again compromised. In n. 78 Merton has mirrored and recollected his own imaginative persona in an irrepressible hope. The poem was written in 1966, during his affair with a young nurse.

Love’s wreckage is then left to lie
All around the breathless shores
Of my voice
Which on the coasts of larking meadows
Invented all these and their mischievous noises

So those lovers teach April stars
To riot rebel and follow faithless courses
And it doesn’t matter
The seed is not afraid
Of winter or the terrible sweetness
Of spring’s convivial nightmare
Or the hot surprise and dizzy spark
Of their electric promise

For the lovers in the sleeping nerve
Are the hope and the address
Where I send you this burning garden
My talkative morning-glory
My climbing germ of poems. (CP, 44-48)

III

The biographer Michael Mott has remarked of Thomas Merton’s progress in the arena of literary criticism that “he changed from an occasional reviewer to a critic . . . .” At one point Merton openly named his method “sapiential,” a sophianic or wisdom approach germane to monastic culture. This heightened critical power coincided with the hermitage years, years in which he read without interruption and wrote porous essays on the hidden levels of truth in the fictional models of Faulkner, Camus, and Flannery O’Connor, and explored the writing of Walker Percy. His weekly
conferences with the novices and other monks dating from All Hallow’s Eve 1964 through late November 1966 are preoccupied with poetry and literary theory and expositions of the work of favorites: Eliot, Peguy, Auden, Blake, Hopkins, Rilke, and Edwin Muir.

While it would be mistaken to portray Merton as a *systematic* literary theorist or critic, one can trace an inchoate theory in the later period. In the context of his entire career, this development affords an additional perspective to appreciate and critically assess his own poetry. During the voluntary embargo on his writing of poetry in the 1950s, Merton ventured to survey the Psalms in a volume of 1953, *Bread in the Wilderness*. One of his earliest and most promising essays on poetic theory, it suggests an interest in the Psalms as poetry and in poetic form as a part of the Revelation communicated by the Psalmist. Of immediate interest is an image Merton employs to typify the poet’s vision of the objective, “given” world. The parallels between the original person in Creation (paradise) and the poet are characteristic of Merton. Created nature, he says, has been given to man as a clean “window.” The Fall symbolically renders it opaque so that we no longer view the transparency or, more strictly, translucency, of all things to the light of God. Human persons suffer an inability to penetrate the meaning of the world in which we live. Myths and symbols degenerate.

Merton renders this “corruption of cosmic symbolism” analogous to the dilemma of the poet in a room with his window the dominant medium of vision. As daylight prevails he sees through the window pane, clearly perceiving the objective, symbolic world, and through it, God. With nightfall, however, he maintains an ability to see through the window to the outside only as long as there is no light in the room. The problem begins when our lights go on, “Then we see only ourselves and our own room reflected in the pane.” An immense part of reality, Merton warns, is lost, abandoned in the process. The poet loses the rich, symbolic character of the world outside his window. The poet is no longer able to image the “world beyond.” The poet becomes absorbed in the self’s reflections in the window. “They began to worship what they themselves were doing,” Merton announces, and it was “too often an abomination.” Nature was no longer symbol but illusion. These coordinates of Merton’s own poetics—the window as symbol, paradise consciousness, and an objective theory of

115 KILCOURSE
art—map the geography of Merton’s poetry.

His abilities and talents as a teacher equipped Merton to initiate the younger monks at the abbey into the subtleties of poetry. Fortunately, tape recordings of these enthused classes survive to complement the fragments of critical theory scattered throughout his loosely collected essays, published in various books.

Like his sometime mentor, Jacques Maritain, Merton would affirm that “Nature is all the more beautiful as it is laden with emotion. Emotion is essential in the perception of beauty.” However, there is an appropriate mode for poetry to communicate emotion. A poet is successful to the degree that he offers his readers objective correlatives (images, symbols) that specify his emotions. In recreating that perception of reality, the reader has no other medium than the poem itself. “A great poet gives you a poem,” Merton says, “which stands on its own right and which is real; a reality that speaks of this encounter with life.” Conversely, “A less great poet tells you how he feels about it.”

Merton would turn repeatedly to Rilke throughout these lectures. He described him as the poet of innerlichkeit, inwardness or interiority. He reports on the “poetic phenomenology of the innocent ‘out-gazing’ proper to the child, against which the child is systematically educated.” In his zoo poems (e.g., “The Panther,” a particular Merton favorite) Rilke, Merton points out, reports that “the animal simply ‘gazes out’ without any consciousness of a center which gazes.” He turns to the Duino Elegies and comments on the child being taught “to ‘be opposite,’ to stand against objects, and to be never anything else but a subject confronting object.” We have a unique published Merton comment on Rilke in a few pages of Mystics and Zen Masters that develops Rilke’s poetic sensibility in a contrast of the Western mystical tradition and Zen:

The pure consciousness (as also the apophatic mystical intuition) does not look at things, and does not ignore them, annihilate them, negate them. It accepts them fully, in complete oneness with them. It looks “out of them,” as though fulfilling the role of consciousness not for itself only but for them also. This is certainly a deep spiritual insight on the part of Rilke. The “outgazing” of this Duino Elegy throws important light on the characteristic Rilkean “inseeing” (Einsehen). In-seeing implies identification, in
which, according to Rilke's normal poetic consciousness, the subject is aware of itself as having penetrated by poetic empathy into the heart of the object and being united with it.\textsuperscript{35}

While translating South American poets Merton discovered the work of Cesar Vallejo. It was evident that here he contacted another "solitude," another "marginal existence" kindred to himself. Beneath the superlatives (a characteristic fault of Merton's enthusiasm) he directed an encomium to Vallejo's identity as the "universal, Catholic . . . poet of this time."

So what I mean is that Vallejo is totally human as opposed to our zombie poets and our little girl poets and our incontinents. I have never really thought out all that must begin to be said about Vallejo, but he is tremendous and extraordinary, a huge phenomenon, so much more magnificent (in the classical sense) than Neruda, precisely because he is in every way poorer. No matter what they do with Vallejo, they can never get him into anybody's establishment.\textsuperscript{36}

No surprise that Merton had immersed himself in the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking poets of Latin America. Two essays in \textit{Raids on the Unspeakable} record his solidarity with and debt to their work. In part, these discussions are attempts to reformulate a theory of poetry. They refine and make emphatic Merton's own poetics. The second of the two essays, first published in 1965, is "Answers on Art and Freedom." In it, the autonomy of the artist, the "useless"-ness of the poet's work, Merton insists, must never be compromised. He protests both censorship and propaganda (even didactic or moral theories) in art, particularly poetry. Merton here reclaims his objective theory of art.

The better-known first essay, seven pages of vintage Merton, is "Message to Poets." "We who are poets know the reason for a poem is not discovered until the poem itself exists," he opens. He applauds the hope and "new fire" exhibited by the young Latin American poets, whose solidarity is "not in tutelage to established political systems or cultural structures." The spontaneity of their meeting (February 1964 in Mexico City) Merton attributes to an innocence on which the artist depends; it is a matter of "interior
personal conviction "in the spirit," a "belief" that roots "in fidelity to life rather than to artificial systems."

The prophetic and poetic functions merge once again for Merton in forwarding a spirit of hopefulness. Prophecy he recommends above derision, for "to prophesy is not to predict but to seize upon reality in its moment of highest expectation and tension toward the new." The poet's discovery of this in ordinary existence gives birth to a lyric definition of poetry:

Poetry is the flowering of ordinary possibilities. It is the fruit of ordinary and natural choice. This is its innocence and dignity.

Let us obey life, and the Spirit of Life that calls us to be poets, and we shall harvest many new fruits for which the world hungers—fruits of hope that have never been seen before. With these fruits we shall calm the resentments and the rage of man.

Merton's related description of the poets as dervishes suggests the ecstasy they bring into the form and structure of words, the "poem itself" that comes into existence. Merton goes on to describe the poets' "Heraklitean river which is never crossed twice":

When the poet puts his foot in that ever-moving river, poetry itself is born out of the flashing water. In that very instant, the truth is manifest to all who are able to receive it.

No one can come near the river unless he walks on his own feet. He cannot come there carried in a vehicle.

No one can enter the river wearing the garments of public and collective ideas. He must feel the water on his skin. He must know that immediacy is for naked minds only and for the innocent.37

This bears an unmistakable echo of "the uncrossed crystal / Water between our ignorance and her truth" in the poem "Grace's House."

Finally, in 1966 Merton sketched some enduring vectors for his
Merton remarks the "chaste and sparing" use of language. The sound of the music actually leads him to structure "the ideas muscially instead of logically"—which communicates more meaning than mere words; "so much so that it can not be broken down easily into concepts and the poem has to be respected, left alone, only to be read over and over." The fully mature, sophisticated, and difficult poetry of Zukofsky, Merton points out, is made up of the "language of children"—"the language of everyday becomes charged with expectations—the language of paradise."

It is this complete acceptance of the "whole thing" that one must hear with "the paradise ear," Merton insists. Zukofsky's childlike attitude he analyzes as "the unlimited curious senses of confused anticipation which is the stuff of ordinary life." And, likewise, this anticipation is "aware of itself as a question that does not provoke an answer to dispose of it." In effect, "each poem is very much the same question but brand new." Zukofsky had understood uniquely the reality of the question, Merton surmises, "because here is a poet who has the patience and the good sense to listen." Merton centers the critical commentary on an imaginative summary of "the paradise ear":

All really valid poetry (poetry that is fully alive, and asserts its reality by its power to generate imaginative life) is a kind of recovery of paradise. Not that the poet comes up with a report that he, an unusual man, has found his own way back into Eden; but the living line and the generative association, the new sound, the music, the structure, are somehow grounded in a renewal of vision and hearing so that he who reads and understands recognizes that here is a new start, a new creation.

A brief appreciation of Thomas Merton, poet, cannot presume to explore all the dimensions of this multifaceted, talented person; but it can invite both Merton scholars and readers to include more thoughtfully this dimension of the integral Merton in their study. I dare to envision Merton studies venturing beyond the plateau of these nearly twenty years of significant and valuable theological and spiritual investigations. A truly interdisciplinary scrutiny of his mature writings awaits. The poetry offers, Merton would have
said, with precious veins of metaphor and symbol, the "wrought passion" of his artist's gifts. To possess them, we must follow his advice:

To go down alone
Into the night sky
Hand over hand
And dig it like a mine.

(Cables to the Ace, n. 83, CP, 452)

NOTES

1 As quoted in Michael Mott, The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 242.
2 Commonweal 42 (1945): 240-42.
3 The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton (New York: New Directions, 1977), 395. All subsequent references to this volume will be abbreviated CP.
5 Mott, Seven Mountains, 338.
6 Merton, CP, 395.
7 The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton (New York: New Directions, 1981). All subsequent references to this volume will be abbreviated LE.
9 The Seven Storey Mountain (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1948), 85, 87, 3, 202-03. All subsequent references to this volume will be abbreviated SSM.
11 SSM, 110.
12 ibid., 100, 235.
14 The bibliographic entries of Merton poetry studies are considerable. I mention the following writers whose work warrants attention by serious readers: George Woodcock, Ross Labrie, Therese Lentfoehr, Ralph Sturm, Walter Sutton, Anthony Padovano, Victor Kramer. The Mott biography brims with literary details and fine, critical insights into the poetry canon.
15 The Sign of Jonas (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1953), 233;
24 Ibid, 42, 118.
26 Padovano, Human Journey, 136.
33 Mott, Seven Mountains, 477.
34 Bread in the Wilderness (New York: New Directions, 1953), especially 53-64.
36 LE, 310.
37 Raids on the Un speakable (New York: New Directions, 1966), 165-75; 155-61.