
Thomas Merton and the Jesuit Poets

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Thomas Merton—the U.S. monk, poet, social and cultural critic, peace activist, and literary essayist—had written over fifty books, hundreds of articles, and thousands of letters by the time of his death by accidental electrocution on December 10, 1965. Vowed to silence, his written words were legion. Vowed to stability in the hills of Kentucky, he died in the East, in Bangkok, a learned student of its rich religious traditions.

A doctoral student in English literature at New York's Columbia University in the 1930s and a convert to Roman Catholicism, Merton began his literary career as a student editor and contributor to several magazines.

After his startling and dramatic entry into the severe and cloistered Roman Catholic monastic order known as the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, or the Trappists, Merton only temporarily set aside his literary talents. They would, in fact, flourish in the monastic enclosure, a prime example of the paradoxical existence of the "silent-speaking" poet.

Exploring the Jesuit Poetic Sensibility

One of the sources of his poetic and spiritual work was the Jesuit sensibility, particularly as it was mediated by specific Jesuit poets. Thomas Merton's attitude toward Jesuits was at best ambivalent. Jesuit poets, in particular, impressed him, perplexed him, and influenced him.

His first encounter with the Victorian divine and poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, via the good offices of F. C. Doherty, the Headmaster of Oakham College (an English public school that Merton attended) best illustrates the bewilderment Merton could feel in the presence of a Jesuit:

His headmaster had lent him a volume of poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

When he discovered these were religious he suspected Doherty was slyly reproving him after their argument over the proofs for the existence of God, in much the same way the music master was lending him classical records to protest Merton's taste for jazz.

There was no escaping the fact that Hopkins was a great poet. What worried Tom most about him was that he was not only a Roman Catholic and a convert, but he was a Jesuit priest.... That a poet could also be a Jesuit went on puzzling Tom even after he returned the book, well-read, to the headmaster (Mott 1984, 63).

Merton both puzzled and marvelled at the phenomenon of a Jesuit poet for the rest of his life, a good deal of that life spent as a Cistercian poet.

Merton, certainly in his pre-conversion phase at Columbia University, was awash with Jesuits and things Jesuit. He not only became reacquainted with Hopkins, but also found himself utterly absorbed by James Joyce, the Jesuit-trained and Jesuit-haunted Irish writer, and discovered to his surprise or horror that they "started to exercise a mysterious attraction over me." As Merton observed in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

In...late August of 1938, and September of that year, my life began to be surrounded, interiorly, by the Jesuits. They were the symbols of my new respect for the vitality and coordination of the Catholic Apostolate. Perhaps, in the back of my mind, was my greatest Jesuit hero: the glorious Father Rothschild of Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*, who plotted with all the diplomats, and rode away into the night on a motorcycle when everybody else was exhausted (Merton 1975, 212).

He later acquired a copy of Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* and with characteristic Mertonian zeal set about mastering the Jesuit technique. But the earnest and energetic Merton found the sophistication of the "Foundation" and the meditation on the "Two Standards" a little more than he had bargained for. These critical meditations concerned with discernment and vocation are at the very core of the *Spiritual Exercises*, the spiritual handbook that all Jesuits see as the defining *heart* of their order. Although he followed the Ignatian method religiously—the preludes, the composition of place, the colloquy—it didn't appear to resonate with his temperament. Years later he conceded as much in an entry

in his Asian diary dated November 3rd: "Are Tantrism, and meditation on the mandala, the evocations of minute visual detail like the Ignatian method in some respects? And as useless for me?" (Merton 1973, 91).

Still, if Merton did not find himself drawn to Ignatian spirituality, he did find himself repeatedly engaged with individual Jesuits. St. Ignatius, in particular, was an integral part of the tradition he had appropriated. Even Merton's private history, as recounted in his "Paris" reflection in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, makes room for the Basque courtier-turned-priest: "Paris means...St. Bonaventure, Duns Scotus. But Montmartre brings to mind St. Ignatius of Loyola also (who is not exactly part of my own puzzle, yet he is there too!)" (Merton 1968, 181).

Merton's mature thinking on the Society of Jesus is perhaps best represented in his correspondence with Brendan Connelly, a Boston College Jesuit with whom he exchanged books and ideas in the 1960s. In his letter to Connelly of February 23, 1964, Merton comments on the radical difference that exists between the monastic and modern orders, yet also acknowledges:

It is too easy for people to make sweeping generalizations about the Society, when in fact Jesuit life and spirituality is a very complex phenomenon and much deeper than most people take it to be. In reading documents by people like Jerome Nadal for instance, as well as Grou and that school, I find myself in a familiar atmosphere. And old Rodriguez after all uses monastic sources just as much and perhaps more than any Benedictine novice master (Merton 1990, 204–205).

Three years later, in a letter of April 3, 1965, Merton tells Connelly of his romantic notion of the Jesuit as a kind of free-lance commando, and observes further that "to be a flexible instrument in the hand of God is a great and sometimes terrible vocation. I think you people have that sense much more than anyone else in the church" (Merton 1990, 271). Certainly he would believe this of Dan Berrigan, a "flesh-and-blood" Jesuit, his ideal Jesuit, a man who, for Merton, embodied an activist spirit with a contemplative rootedness, like the founder of the Society of Jesus himself, Ignatius of Loyola. But before Berrigan there is the Gorgon at the gates, G.M. Hopkins.

Although his first encounter with Hopkins at Oakham left him reeling with questions about priesthood, Jesuit life, and art, his reacquaintance with Hopkins while at Columbia University prompted him to propose the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins as a dissertation subject. Hopkins was clearly central to the religious and intellectual life of the struggling Merton of the Columbia years, exercising a role second only to that of the nineteenth-century poet-visionary, William Blake. In fact, it

was while reading a chapter in a biography of Hopkins by Father G. F. Lahey, a chapter that told of Hopkins's own desire to be a Catholic, that Merton suddenly found he was asking the same questions of himself that Hopkins had asked in his correspondence with John Henry Newman:

Suddenly, I could bear it no longer. I put down the book, and got into my raincoat, and started down the stairs. I went out into the street. I crossed over, and walked along by the grey wooden fence, toward Broadway, in the light rain.

And then everything inside me began to sing—to sing with peace, to sing with strength and to sing with conviction (Merton 1975, 212).

His interest in Hopkins, however, did not translate into an immediate and sympathetic interest in the Jesuits. His own memories of the Jesuit Lycée Ingres at Montauban, a school marked by its severe discipline and intolerance of outsiders, coupled with the anti-Jesuit sentiment he found in the fiction of the iconoclastic James Joyce, prevented Merton from considering the Society of Jesus as his probable religious home when surveying the vocational landscape.

A Perduring Love of G. M. Hopkins

This combination of seeming contradictions—pursuing his interest in the poetry of Hopkins, undertaking a self-directed adaptation of the *Spiritual Exercises*, and recoiling at his own recollections and fears regarding the Society of Jesus—seems only too characteristic of Merton, a man given to widely dissimilar emotional reactions to the same entity. Still, rising above the ambivalence is his love of Hopkins. In a letter to fellow-poet and convert, Robert Lax, written from St. Elizabeth's Hospital in March 1940, Merton cryptically concludes his correspondence with the observation that "Boy, Hopkins is a good poet!"

In "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," first published in *Commonweal* October 24, 1958, Merton identifies what he considers to be essential for an authentic religious poet. Hopkins, in Merton's estimation, qualifies:

In the true Christian poet—in Dante, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis, Jacopone da Todi, Hopkins, Paul Claudel—we find it hard to distinguish between the inspiration of the prophet and mystic and the purely poetic enthusiasm of great artistic genius (Merton 1981, 344).

Like Hopkins, Merton struggled to reconcile the vocation of artist with the vocation of priest. Merton's theoretical attempt to resolve this monk-poet tension was first addressed in his 1947 essay "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," published in his volume of verse *Figures for an Apocalypse*.

It proved unsatisfactory, as did the already mentioned 1958 revision, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal." Merton laboured vainly for a theoretical resolution of the tension, even though in poems like "The Sowing of Meanings" (*Figures for an Apocalypse*) and "The Quickening of St. John the Baptist" (*The Tears of the Blind Lions*) he achieved a practical resolution. A successful theoretical resolution is finally achieved with his 1963 volume, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*. In his introduction to his translation of selected poems of fellow poet-priest Ernesto Cardenal, Merton reveals his own new and more balanced perspective on the monk-poet phenomenon:

The poet remains conscious of his relation to the world he has left and thinks a great deal about it, with the result that one recognizes how the purifying isolation of the monastery encourages a profound renewal and change of perspective in which "the world" is not forgotten, but seen in a clearer and less delusive light (Merton 1963, 115).

Similarly, Merton recognizes in Cardenal's accomplishment what hitherto he would have disallowed, on theoretical grounds, in his own as either impossible or spiritually dangerous:

He was one of the rare vocations we have had here (Cardenal was a Trappist at Gethsemani for a few years before his return to his native Nicaragua) who certainly and manifestly combined the gifts of a contemplative with those of an artist (Merton 1963, 114).

As a poet in and of the nuclear age, Merton lost his belief in the value of theoretical exercises like his 1947 and 1958 articles, and simply ceased to speak in the Scholastic terms and categories particular to a less insecure age. Political necessity rendered superfluous what had been an abiding obsession of his since he took up the pen as a monk—the essential superiority of contemplation over action, of priesthood over artistic vocation—for what was of cardinal importance from 1960 on was no longer the question of the tension between mysticism and art but rather that of the primacy of life in a death-creating environment.

In his "Message to Poets," Merton addressed a meeting of young poets gathered in Mexico City in 1964. Much like a manifesto, his words were both a challenge and an invitation to give expression to the primacy of life:

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 [hu]man[ity] (Merton 1966, 160).

For Hopkins, in contrast, there was no radical departure from earlier-held views:

We know from what he wrote when he was finally ordained that he thought the dedications of priest and poet were too much alike to exist easily in one person, since they derived from the same sources. And, like Savonarola, he was aware that art, even when it was guiltless in itself, could be highly distracting. A vocation to the priesthood implied that renunciation of worldly pursuits, and since poetry was surely dearest of those to him, it was the logical activity to be given up (Martin 1991, 67–68).

Still, for all that, he wrote poetry, and as we know from his disappointment over the failure of the English Jesuit publication, *The Month*, to print his “Wreck of the Deutschland,” his feelings over the dual vocations of poet and priest were to become increasingly more ambivalent as he matured in years. In one sense, at least, Merton fared appreciably better than did Hopkins, in that there were plenty about who nurtured his poetic genius, even if they were not to be found among his monastic *confrères*. Hopkins, by comparison, was not so fortunate, save for two outstanding exceptions: the Anglican poet, Canon R. W. Dixon, and the agnostic poet laureate, Robert Bridges. In 1975 the Editor of *The Month* wrote:

There is no convincing evidence that the Society [of Jesus] was an enemy to his genius. His fellow-Jesuits were also fellow-Victorians, neither more nor less perceptive than other men of their period and class. They neither helped nor hindered him much. The dark side of his own temperament was a greater enemy. The real trouble was duller but, in a sense, worse. It was the low valuation set on art by the Society after its restoration, and by no means consistent with its own more ancient and grander tradition. It had become, at least in England and more generally elsewhere, philistine, puritanical. Art, except in banal, popular forms, was regarded as irrelevant, a distraction from the main business of preaching the gospel. And its preaching see-sawed between the coldly rational and the sickly sentimental (*The Month* 1975, 339).

The Jesuits were ill-prepared to appreciate the innovative and daring poetic genius of one of their number. And Hopkins suffered accordingly. Not so Merton, insofar as the revolutionary and heterodox dimensions of his thinking were best expressed in his Blake-like mythdreams, his poetic epics, *Cables to the Ace* (1967) and *The Geography of Lograire* (1968), which were not immediately accessible to even the most erudite of Trappist censors and critics.

Perhaps Merton’s indebtedness to Hopkins is best discovered in his

efforts to imitate Hopkins's poetic style, and to choose as a model for the Christian poet a philosopher particularly important to Hopkins, Duns Scotus. Scotus was not a literal model but a metaphorical one, who burned with zeal and who in his "Sinai's furnace" shaped the iron of his thought into the "lance-lightning, blade-glitter, banner-progress" ("Duns Scotus") of his love. What moved Hopkins to write of Scotus in "Duns Scotus's Oxford," that he was

Of reality the rarest-veined unraveller; a not/Rivalled insight, be rival
Italy or Greece;/Who fired France for Mary without Spot

similarly compelled Merton to see in him her theologian:

Nor has there ever been a braver chivalry than his precision/His
thoughts are skies of cloudless peace/Bright as the vesture of her grand
aurora/Filled with the rising Christ.

Merton desired to be another Scotus, producing poems of which it may be said "there is no line of his that has not blazed your (the Virgin's) glory." In such a way Merton would serve his Christ, like Hopkins, "working and quiet in the dancelight of an everlasting arrow."

Dan Berrigan: A "Real" Jesuit

The other Jesuit who loomed large in Merton's life, as intimated earlier, and whose influence on him was more immediate, was the rebel and prophet Daniel Berrigan. Merton, early in his relationship with Berrigan, wrote to Thérèse Lentfoehr September 29, 1962: "Dan Berrigan's visit was most stimulating. He is a man full of fire, the right kind, and a real Jesuit, of which there are not too many perhaps" (Merton 1989, 241). His appreciation of Berrigan did not diminish. Although he occasionally distanced himself from some of Berrigan's peace activities, or at least queried their motivation and practicality, Merton vigorously defended Berrigan both within and without the monastery. As a sign of his affection and sympathy, Merton dedicated to Berrigan his critical study *The Plague of Albert Camus: A Commentary and Introduction* (1968).

What drew Merton to Berrigan was the sense that here was one who shared his apocalyptic and radical understanding of Christian witness, that here was a poet who felt that dark torment of our declining days, that here was one who could be his eyes and ears in the world:

At moments it seems we are in the middle of a total apostasy, an almost
total apostasy from Christ and His teaching. It is not comforting to read
the prophets in our night Office these days (November 10, 1961) (Mer-
ton 1985, 71).

Merton confided in Berrigan his ever-mounting dissatisfaction with institutional Catholicism, his anxiety over structures that were increasingly moribund, and his fear that we won't let God be God:

More and more I come to think we are living in one great big illusion. Centuries of triumphalist self-deception. The late Middle Ages, with all their sores, were more real....Everything is all twisted up and the worst thing is the facade of smoothness over all the busted iron and the fragments of a building that has perhaps fallen in. The front is man's work and that will really cave in. Who worries about that? We must learn not to, and even, when necessary, give it a good shove. Mitres, croziers, rings, slippers, baubles, documents, seals, bulls, rescripts, indults (June 30, 1964) (Merton 1985, 83).

Afflicted with various maladies aggravated, if not originally induced, by his own worries and tensions, Merton discovered in his ulcer-ridden Jesuit friend one other who knew the physical consequences of a life of resistance: "Crazy society makes us beat ourselves up inside as its delegates. We are our own concentration camp" (Merton 1985, 93).

Merton also valued Berrigan's poetry, particularly its discipline and energy. More important still, Berrigan found in the monk-poet of Gethsemani a literary and spiritual mentor. With Merton, especially the Merton from *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963) on, Berrigan could align himself with a poet who had declared for life and meaning in a chaotic and dissolute world governed by dangerous certitudes and a crazed reason. The mythdreams, prose poems, and anti-poems of Merton's mature years reflect his struggle to re-unite the word with truth, but, as Berrigan would have it in his unpublished 1986 poet's manifesto:

For now, perhaps we can only make do, not give up, come together in the bleak firelight, make what sense we can of it all. Dwelling as we do, in predawn, that darkest blink of night which seems for a horrid moment, like the blinding of the eye of the day...we keep intact the code of the nearly lost.

I hear this unquenchable poetry of survival. I hear it, it prevails, even on the winds of a firestorm.

It will decompose, into sweet compost of song even the vile prose of hell (Berrigan 1988, 343-44).

As Berrigan rightly notes of his friendship with Merton, "the late fifties and the sixties plunged us into a scene where sanity at times looked like madness, where the highest art possible to the artful was simply hanging on" (Merton 1985, 90). Theirs was a poetics of desperation, of judgement, of defiance. The tone of their work is Swiftian, apocalyptic, a poetry rooted in the mad hope of Christian witness, a poetry of stark

justice and raw emotion, like Berrigan's "Children in the Shelter":

Imagine; three of them.

As though survival/were a rat's word,/and a rat's death/waited there at
the end

and I must have/in the century's boneyard/heft of flesh and bone in my
arms

I picked up the littlest/boy, his face/breaded with rice (his sister calmly
feeding him/as we climbed down)

In my arms fathered/in a moment's grace, the messiah/of all my tears. I
bore, reborn/a Hiroshima child from hell.

In the early years—those years following Berrigan's first contact with Merton immediately consequent upon the appearance of *The Seven Storey Mountain*—Berrigan found in Merton, after Hopkins, a major voice in religious poetry. This is the Merton of the religious poems and other lyrics that we find up to and including the highly derivative, Eliot-like *The Strange Islands*. In time, Berrigan grew tired of them, as indeed did Merton, and when the monk departed, both stylistically and conceptually, from a traditional poetics, Berrigan found himself re-attracted to Merton and his new, experimental poetics of resistance and integration. Merton found in Berrigan his "eyes and ears," an activist poet who had no stomach for "cheap grace," a sentinel, like himself, on the periphery of society. And when he died he devastated the younger man:

I can't conceive of anything in my life, including my own death, that could do to me what Merton's death did. I was stymied for a decade. I couldn't talk about him, I couldn't really—I was wiped out. I could go on with my work, but that was a locked closet. I couldn't cope with his death; it was too much (Berrigan 1992).

When Merton died, we met, set/dumb/struck tearless. The old year's/
locking jaw/let blood, one last time; death,/then this death (Berrigan 1963, 314).

And so just as the Jesuit poet Hopkins nurtured Merton, the Cistercian poet nurtured the Jesuit poet Berrigan. Merton would have smiled at the "fearful symmetry."

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