THOMAS MERTON'S POEMS
AS ILLUSTRATING THE RELATIONSHIP
OF THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE
TO THE DEVELOPMENT
OF
A CHRISTIAN POETRY

by

Thomas R. Maddon

A Thesis

Submitted to

The Department of English of

Carroll College

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Academic Honors

with the A. B. Degree in Philosophy

Carroll College

Helena, Montana

September 1, 1959

This Thesis Has Been Approved

for the Department of English

by Joseph T. Ward, Ph.D.

Sept 11, 1959

REGINAE POSTARUM

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PREFACE

This thesis is not intended to be a critique of representative examples of Thomas Merton's poetry in their conformity to the canons of art. Their validity as pieces of art is not brought into the discussion. The primary purpose of this thesis, as the title indicates, is to demonstrate the relationship that may exist between contemplation --either "active" or "passive"--and Christian poetry; assuming that as the contemplative life of the poet develops, his poetry, as all his other human activities, becomes more and more profoundly centered in Christ.

Christian poetry is not exempted from the canons of art simply because it may be devotional. To absolve a poetry from these canons is to destroy it as poetry. For this reason, some critical opinion on several of Merton's volumes of verse appears in an Appendix to this thesis.

It is brought out in the thesis that Merton's later poetry is <u>mystical</u>--the poet has joined a small group of poets who seek mystical contemplation. Because of this fact, Merton's poetry must needs be discussed in the light of the so-called "degrees" of the spiritual life, purgation, illumination, and union. This does not mean that a poet is not a

Christian poet unless he writes "mystical" poetry. The import of a discussion of mystical poetry for the many Christian poets who do not and never will pursue the mystical vocation lies in the stress on the concept of spirit in Merton's poetry. The emphasis on a spiritual reality is vital to all poetry, and the more this reality is sought by a mortification of self, the more fully will it be realized. If, in the case of the Christian poet, this mortification is prompted by the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the spiritual reality behind the material symbol will become none other than Christ Himself. In this manner, the Christian poet can at least begin to bridge the widening gulf between the myth and the metaphysic of modern society.

The writer wishes to express his gratitude to Dr. Joseph T. Ward, head of the English department at Carroll College, for his awakening of the writer's interest in the work of the poet, and for his constructive advice and criticism. Appreciation is expressed also to the Rev. John L. Flynn of the Carroll College faculty for his assistance in the metaphysics of beauty; and to the Rev. Cornelius J. Kelly of the Carroll faculty for his helpful suggestions regarding St. Augustine. The sincere thanks of the writer go to the president and administration of Carroll College for their consideration in extending the presentation date of the thesis, permitting its conclusion at the present time.

CHAPTER I

THE CONCEPT OF THE CHRISTIAN POET

"When those who love God try to talk about Him, their words are blind lions looking for springs in the desert."

These words of Leon Bloy's, written on the title page of an edition of Thomas Merton's poems,[1] express the central problem of the contemplative who is also an artist: whether the artist-contemplative should abandon his art in favor of his vocation to contemplation.

Merton has twice publicly commented on this problem, on both occasions in articles originally appearing in The Commonweal. The second article is a revision and partial retraction of the first, and as such is by far the most important of the two as a document on modern Christian poetry and as a vital part of the substratum of this thesis. The first article appeared almost twelve years ago;[2] the second only a few months ago.[3]

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1 Thomas Merton, The Tears of the Blind Lions (New York, 1949).

2 Thomas Merton, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," The Commonweal, XLVI (July 4, 1947), 280-286.

3 Thomas Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," The Commonweal, LXIX (October 24, 1958), 87-92.

In the 1958 article, Merton "reappraises" his 1947 view of poetry and contemplation, in which he had claimed that "poetry can, indeed, help to bring us rapidly through that part of the journey to contemplation that is called active; but when we are entering the realm of true contemplation, where eternal happiness begins, it may turn around and bar our way."[1] He goes on to say that when this occurs there is only one course left open to the poet, if he still values his personal sanctification: "the ruthless and complete sacrifice of his art."[2]

More than a decade of reflection has convinced Merton that the above contention is an overstatement. In his 1958 revision of the 1947 article, he states that the sacrifice of the poet's art is dependent on the will of God. A clear-cut statement on the matter by a human commentator is impossible. He is now certain that his "wrong-headed propositions" distorted the true picture of contemplation and its relation to poetry. In the earlier work, he had also divided life "into formally separate compartments of 'action' and 'contemplation.'"[3] But true contemplation, he maintains in the present article, is "not to be thought of as a separate department of life....

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1 Merton, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," 285.

2 Idem. (not my italics).

3 Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," 87.

it is the very fullness of a fully integrated life."[1]

In the recent Commonweal article, Merton succinctly sets forth the relationship between the contemplative life and esthetic experience. He describes the nature of the Christian poet in the light of this relationship, and because he is a Trappist monk and an honest creative artist, he points out the only resolution of the conflict between the Christian poet and the true contemplative. In doing this, he points out that there is a point beyond which poetry cannot go; it is a purely natural faculty of man, even though it is supra-rational. Contemplation, however, is "absolutely beyond the reach of man's natural activity."[2] More important, the very nature of the poet's work demands that he create. "When the poet enters into himself, it is in order to reflect upon his inspiration and to clothe it with a special and splendid form and then return to display it to those outside."[3] There can be no such return for the true contemplative. He enters into himself, in order that he may "pass through the center of his own soul"[4] and enter into a union with God which is above all considerations of subject and object, matter and form.

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1 Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," 87.

2 Ibid., 91. 3 Idem. (not my italics).

4 Idem.

To develop the paradox further, Merton describes the Christian poet by remarking: "no Christian poetry worthy of the name has been written by anyone who was not in some degree a contemplative."[1] The life of the contemplative, Merton says is "the fullness of the Christian vocation--the full flowering of baptismal grace and of the Christ-life in our souls."[2] Moreover, he defines infused contemplation, at the apex of the contemplative life, as a "quasi-experimental knowledge of God's goodness, 'tasted' and 'possessed" by a vital contact in the soul."[3] If, then, the Christian poet's one worthy subject is "the great mystery of God, revealing His mercy to us in Christ,"[4] he will require an insight into that ultimate reality which can be gained only through the assistance of "the fullness of the Christian vocation"--contemplation, at least to a degree.

On the other hand, it is apparent from the earlier casual examination of the natures of poetry and contemplation that the artist-contemplative seems to be faced with two choices: he may either abandon his art, lest it interfere with the contemplative gift, or he may return and "display" his inspiration to the world, thereby destroying his imminent union

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1 Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," 89.

2 Ibid., 88. 3 Idem. 4 Idem.

with God. In 1947, Merton maintained that either one or the other alternative was inevitable. He felt then that active contemplation--"in which a baptized Christian, making full use of all the means which the Church puts at his disposal... ...strives to conform his will with God's will...."[1]--was in a position to be benefited by poetry, but that pure, or passive contemplation was placed at grave disadvantage by it. However, Merton points out in the 1958 article that there have been many mystic-poets--poets who have been gifted with passive or mystical contemplation. Among these he numbers Dante, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis, Jacopone da Todi, Hopkins, and Claudel. In these men, then the poetry-contemplation conflict, apparently rooted in the artist-mystical contemplative and not in the artist-active contemplative, has disappeared. In them, as Merton says, "we find it hard to distinguish between the inspiration of the prophet and the mystic, and the purely poetic enthusiasm of great artistic genius."[2]

What is the answer to the conflict? As we have indicated, Merton now insists the resolution of any conflict is in the hands of God. "It might conceivably be the will of God....that a man should remain at the same time a mystic

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1 Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation: "A Reappraisal," 87-88.

2 Ibid., 88.

and a poet and ascent to the greatest heights of poetic creation and of mystical prayer without any evident contradiction between them."[1] So it seems clear that there need be no problem for the artist who seeks the gift of mystical contemplation through his religious vocation. He, as Merton has done, must let the matter rest with God. Whether he shall remain artist is not for him to decide.

Merton, as the artist who asks for the gift of mystical contemplation, has not only clarified the position of the mystic in relation to poetry; he has given a positive and convincing answer to the nature and the apostolate of the Christian poet who is by no stretch of the imagination a mystic, who must live in and with the world. By his statement that worthy Christian poetry can be written only by a poet "in some degree" a contemplative, Merton means that the Christian poet must strive to become the active contemplative, a life where "much of the initiative belongs to our own powers, prompted and sustained by grace."[2] And the powers of the individual, the contribution of self, are factors essential to poetry.[3]

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1 Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," 92 (not my italics.)

2 Ibid., p. 88.

3 The effect of the disappearance of the creative self will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Moreover, the poet's work is supra-rational; through his poetic insight, his intuition, he grasps a facet of a many-sided inner reality. Baudelaire and Rimbaud spoke of the poet as a "voyant," a seer, one gifted with a vision beyond that possessed by his fellows, through which he was enabled to perceive the beauty at the center of reality. It is true that the symbolists, among others, were not always certain just what was at the center of reality. Was it life, power, love? In a memorable letter to Paul Demeny, Rimbaud says that "...the poet is truly a thief of fire."[1] He is a thief of the unknown, the ultimate explanation of the real. "If what he brings back has form, he gives it form, if it is formless, he gives it formlessness."[2]

In our own day, Jacques Maritain has stressed the fact that the artist must be more than the "voyant;" it is his function to create, and in line with the metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas, Maritain shows that the artist creates a work of beauty.[3] What the poet "sees" through his intuition is a kind of immediate, instantaneous grasp of reality which has nothing to do with the familiar modes of rational

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1 Arthur Rimbaud, Illuminations and other Prose Poems, trans. Louise Varese, (New York, 1957), p. xxxi.

2 Ibid., pp. xxxi-xxxii.

3 Jacques Maritain, Art and Scholasticism, (London, 1949), pp. 26-27.

knowledge: abstraction, judgment, and inference. There are many capable of such intuitive graspings, but a mere "seer" is not a poet; poet cannot be poet, nor artist artist without that identification of self with object which is connatural knowledge, a knowledge which can express itself only in self-creation.[1]

For the Christian poet--he who is both seer and creator--the world is filled with "signs and symbols" of God.[2] Merton explains that the true Christian poet sees God in his mysteries and in all creation. The poet, by means of his intuitive view of the concrete object's spiritual meaning, sees the object as a sign of God. His task as a creator is to construct an intelligible and beautiful framework for the intuition. This he does with his imagery.

Because Christ in His Incarnation and Redemption is at the heart of the Christian religion, the Christian poet must recreate the mystery of Christ. He must be fully aware of the implications of the Mystical Body of Christ and possess a deep appreciation of the Liturgy and the Scriptures. But these attributes are qualities of the true requirement of the active contemplative: the poet must "see and love God

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1 Maritain's concept of connatural knowledge will be treated in later chapters.

2 Merton's debt to the symbolists will be discussed in Chapter Two.

his destiny. In any case, the tenet that man is of the spirit is obscured in the modern world because man himself, by his own activity, has virtually immured himself in matter, in extended being. Eliot's Waste Land is a real place for the modern who ignores spirit--it becomes the little circle of places and associations in which he moves. The modern poet does not deny that the world is not a flower garden. If he is typical, he contends that there must be some adhesive which will bind together a disparate myth and metaphysic. This adhesive cannot be more of the matter which is the principle of division in the first place, which is unfortunately utilized by some as a principle of unity, and by others as an anaesthetic to their realization of disunity. Only a return to the spirit can fuse the two contrary elements of society. Whether this spirit is the spirit of Christ, of Buddha, of Plato, of Marx, is disputed. There are those who say that a new spirit, a new metaphysic must be found. The poets are at least unanimous in their prophecy of doom: the modern world will fall unless it ceases to make its symbols its ultimate goal. The world must back up its myth with a metaphysic of spiritual values.

For the Christian, there can be only one "value" upon which to base a system of myth--He Who is Christ. It is Christ who is the principle of unity in a disordered world.

There is no proportion or integrity in modern society because of the gulf between myth and metaphysic. The Christian poet, committed to the making of proportion and integrity by virtue of his calling as artist, must bridge the chasm with Christ. Christ, for the Christian poet, must become the tertium quid which is the ultimate reason for the poet's self-identification with creation, the Being to Whom his realization of relationship is finally directed.

If the Christian poet is to do these things, he is required to strive for active contemplation: to submerge his will in God's; to place Christ at the center of his life as he would at the center of his poetry.

CHAPTER II

MERTON: GENERAL BACKGROUND

Thomas Merton differs from most Christian poets in that he belongs to a select group who have sought the gift of mystical contemplation. We are sure that some mystics have successfully fused their gift with the poetic intuition; we have no assurance that Merton, however, is a mystic. Because he is contemporary, because of his vocation, he is an enigma. He lives apart from the world, and his only contact with people in the world is through his writings. In the last decade, he has published little, if any, poetry, leading to interesting if futile speculation as to whether he has finally yielded his artistic talents in favor of the mystical life. For several years following the publication of his autobiography The Seven Storey Mountain, in 1948, Merton was almost lionized by some of the literary-minded as a sort of second St. Augustine. The very notion of a hardened young man of the world entering a Trappist monastery electrified the worldly consciousness and startled minds by its exalting of a dedication of self and a heroic asceticism, attributes which apparently owed their effectiveness to their absolute

novelty. Since that time, because Merton has ceased to be a romantic figure in the public imagination, it is possible to judge him on his merits as a prose writer and as a poet.

Merton's own poems become an illustration of his thesis on the relationship of the contemplative life to Christian poetry, because at one time Merton himself was not a Christian. His conversion to Catholicism led to changes in his life which are more or less reflected in his poetry. Because Merton's life prior to 1938, the year of his conversion, has its antithesis in the life he now leads, it may be well to speak of Merton the man before entering into analyses of his poetry. A brief resume of his life, a note on his prose, and some discussion of his spiritual and intellectual framework follow.

Merton was born on January 31, 1915, in Prades, France, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Owen Merton. Both of his parents were artists. Merton says his father, a New Zealander, "painted like Cezanne." His mother was an American whom the elder Merton met and married in Paris. She died when the young Thomas Merton was about six years of age, and Merton gives us the impression in The Seven Storey Mountain that there was never real rapport between mother and son, due in part perhaps to the mother's early death. As could be expected, Merton's youth was somewhat exotic. He shuttled

between America, France and Bermuda with his father, who was on the artist's eternal quest for subjects to paint. He attended school in all three places, finally going to England, where he attended Oakham Prep before entering Cambridge University. Because his father was an Episcopalian, and his mother possessed vague Quaker leanings, Merton seems to have absorbed little or no religious conviction, other than a half-hearted bias against Catholicism.

Merton came back to America after Cambridge and entered Columbia University, where his intellectual abilities were recognized by Mark Van Doren, Dan Walsh, and others. While there he was a member of the Young Communist League for a short time--a short-lived tenure as a "young revolutionary," he tells us.

The important thing about his life up to the time of his entry into the Church seems to be its total lack of purpose. Unhappiness followed unhappiness for this complex young man. Gradually he became aware of the necessity of values deeper than cigarettes and beer in a New York bar at four in the morning. "The thing that depressed me most of all was the shame and despair that invaded my whole nature when the sun came up, and all the laborers were going to work: men healthy and awake and quiet, with their eyes clear, and

some rational purpose before them."[1] His travels and his voracious reading began to incline him more and more toward the Catholic Church. When he read Gilson's The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy he discovered that "the Catholic conception of God was something tremendously solid."[2] An old Hindu monk named Brahmachari befriended Merton, and "we got along very well together, especially since he sensed that I was trying to feel my way into a settled religious conviction, and into some kind of a life that was centered, as his was, on God."[3]

Merton's master's thesis, on William Blake, was another factor in his course toward the Church. What [Blake] was glorifying was the transfiguration of man's natural love, his natural powers, in the refining fires of mystical experience."[4]

Finally, he went to Mass in one of the New York churches. As further evidence of his interest in the Church, he became "absorbed in the poetry of Hopkins and in his notebooks..."[5] He was reading a life of Hopkins and had reached the point where Hopkins was corresponding with Newman, concerning his decision to become a Catholic. At this spot in

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1 Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain (New York, 1948), p. 158.

2 Ibid., p. 184.

3 Ibid., p. 195.

4 Ibid., p. 203.

5 Ibid., p. 211.

the biography, Merton's conversion was completed. First and last, it was an intellectual conversion: his mind opened sufficiently for a logical realization of his position; his soul was then able to receive the grace of faith.

It would be a mistake to state that the introspective, complex Thomas Merton found peace after his conversion. He found satisfaction for his soul, but it was three years from the time of his November, 1938 conversion until he entered the Trappists at Gethsemani. They were years of deep thought, much indecision. Problems he has faced since entering the monastery certainly include the question of the artist-contemplative discussed in Chapter One. Another problem has concerned the primacy of the pursuit of mystical contemplation. It is this last that is closely related to much of his prose work, and is a problem that has seen Merton criticized, sometimes sharply.

There seem to be three chief criticisms of Merton's prose, here prescinding from technical considerations. The first is that Merton's spiritual prose writing has tended to set the vocation of the mystical contemplative on a pedestal as the only true way to Christian perfection. The second is that some of his works make spiritual progress an involved exercise in introspection and psychoanalysis. The third and perhaps least weighty criticism holds that Merton's prose is

too poetic to be of any value to Christian minds.

In regard to the first criticism, it is fairly obvious that much of Merton's earlier prose works place the vocation to mystical contemplation (e. g., the Trappist life) quite above other ways of life, as far as eternal salvation is concerned. One commentator has pointed out that "there is always the strong implication that those who do not follow this way are outside the kingdom."[1]

For Thomas Merton there probably is no other way to salvation than life in a Trappist monastery. His life in Gethsemani is, to all appearances, the place in which God wishes him to live his life. That there are innumerable people in the world who will never enter a monastery, never enter the religious life, who must live in the world and raise their families, seems to have been unconsciously minimized by Merton in his certainty that the way of mystical contemplation is the only true way to perfection. "It is only through living in the midst of those things the world that we find reality, God."[2] The recent Commonweal article seems to be an indication that with the passage of time, Merton is coming back into balance on this point. He stresses

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1 Virginia M. Shaddy, "Thomas Merton and No Man Is an Island," The Catholic World, 184 (October, 1956), 54.

2 Idem.

the fact that mystical contemplation is purely a divine gift, and that men, if they will live as Christians, must live as "contemplatives" in their state.

The second criticism maintains that a good deal of Merton's prose is bogged down in self-analysis. Commenting on his No Man Is an Island, Miss Shaddy remarks that "it is not the kind of book that will awaken or inspire devotion or an eagerness to serve God. But it may, as a matter of fact, easily plunge those who have had no experience in the spiritual life---into confusion, discouragement, and the endless, inward whirl of self-contemplation, self-analysis."[1] She maintains that Merton's discussion of prayer "is a clinical analysis of the subconscious rather than enlightening and simple directions as how to pray well."[2] Merton, it is true, is a writer in an age of introspection, but the reason for his tendency to self-analysis is rooted in his own personality. If the mental gymnastics he underwent before and after his conversion and before and after his entrance into the Trappists indicate anything of importance, they show that here is a man who is deeply concerned with the workings of his mind and heart. What made him resist the grace of God? Why was he up, then down, in the spiritual life? These are

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1 Virginia Shaddy, pp. 51-52.

2 Ibid., p. 52.

typical of questions that have perplexed Merton. Such questions concern everyone--all men have similar problems--but they are soul-perplexing and keenly so to Merton.

The third criticism holds that some of Merton's concepts are too poetic to be of any practical use for spiritual advancement. Such a criticism may demonstrate a lack of understanding, both of poetry and of spiritual practicality. Merton writes principally about contemplation, which has nothing to do with a concrete material practicality. Contemplation is the supernatural analogue of the poetic supra-rational intuition. If practicality means utility brought about by the rational process, then contemplation has nothing to do with practicality. But a spiritual practicality must be of benefit to the entire soul, and by this line of thinking, a poetic interpretation of contemplative principles is by no means impractical. It is possible that such an interpretation may be of more value than mere discursive discussion to the more sensitive Christian mind, i. e., the mind which is capable of utilizing an esthetic experience.

Merton's intellectual environment, as far as his poetry is concerned, has consisted of two main groups: poets, principally in the so-called "modern" tradition; and the great spiritual writers of the church, especially those who dealt in mystical contemplation.

As a modern poet, Merton has certainly fallen under the influence of T. S. Eliot; Gerard Manley Hopkins and the French symbolists Baudelaire and Rimbaud would recognize some of their own devices in Merton's work. Certainly every contemporary poet and many a contemporary thinker has felt the weight of T. S. Eliot. Some have acknowledged his humanistic vision of what the world must become if it is to survive; there are others who refuse him admittance into their thinking. Eliot, of course, is a Christian; many of the contemporary poets and thinkers are not, or at least do not profess to be. Nevertheless, nearly every modern thinker admits half of Eliot's main contention: the world, and especially Western civilization, is drowning in matter. The other half of Eliot's contention is that Christianity is society's sole bulwark in the tempest of dissociate myth and metaphysic. Upon this point, as was suggested in the previous chapter, the moderns are not in agreement. To cite two other poets: Yeats possessed his own ideas on what would save the world, and, for that matter, he had his own ideas on just what the world is. Pound proposed a solution for the disunity which engendered a great deal of excitement, and his proposal seems to have created a confusion that may have further burdened a troubled mind.

Eliot is a Christian humanist: his ideal is a

European society welded together by the bonds of Christian love. His poetry is his intuitive weapon, his criticism his discursive tool toward that end. Eliot's main theme has woven itself into Merton's thinking, except that Merton, as a priest and monk, has made some modifications. Merton is a true humanist, but of a different stamp than Eliot. Merton is not so much concerned with the whole organism of an earthly society, perfected by Christianity, and living out its span toward God. Merton is vitally concerned with the individual, the state of his soul, and the effects that existence in a material world will bring about in the soul.[1] His ideal is the apostolate of withdrawal. It is on this consideration of withdrawal from the world that Merton can be dangerously misinterpreted. It seems evident now that Merton is referring to a withdrawal which is ideally material and spiritual; realistically, only spiritual. Such a withdrawal may be undertaken by anyone in any state of life. Some withdrawal of self from life in and with matter, even only in spirit, Merton contends, is necessary for Christ to be heard in the soul.

More evident to the reader of Merton's poems, perhaps,

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1 In other words, Merton deals more with man and his personal sanctification; Eliot more with man's "social goodness," i. e., his efficacy as a contributing member to the good of a Christian society.

is his debt to the French symbolists, a debt shared by Eliot and again, by nearly all the moderns. It has been pointed out many times that the task of the symbolist--the quest of an inner reality beyond their symbols, worldly things--is a task that is natural to the modern poet who must live and work in a "Waste Land."

Symbolism itself is an instrument which is native to the structure of language, a requisite for everyday communication of ideas. Words are terms for things. This statement simply means that the words men speak are symbols of their ideas. Arthur Symons, in his pioneering work on the French symbolists, begins with these words of Thomas Carlyle:

> It is in and through Symbols that man, consciously or unconsciously, lives, works, and has his being: those ages, moreover, are accounted the noblest which can the best recognize symbolical worth, and prize it highest.[1]

It is the second part of Carlyle's sentence that Symons considers to be the yardstick of the French symbolists. They were men who realized the value of the symbol as a means of expressing the innerness of things. As Symons says, "what distinguishes the Symbolism of our day from the Symbolism of the past is that it has now become conscious of

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1 Arthur Symons, The Symbolist Movement in Literature, (New York, 1958), p. 1.

itself....."[1] Symons wrote these words in 1899. Since that time symbolism seems to have become too conscious of itself, and this not only in literature. There are numerous obvious examples of this confusion of symbol with reality on the American scene today. The logical conclusion of the identification of symbol and reality could be the poem "Howl," by Allan Ginsberg, supposedly the best of the "beatnik" tradition of poets. "Howl" is the final outcry of disoriented man who finds himself at the extremes of material satisfaction, of sensual pleasure. A distorted "realism" has become synonymous with sense experience. Ginsberg gives voice to a man who clings to the last outpost of self, a man who cannot let himself sink into a final, thorough materialism without a pronounced metaphysical shudder.

Many of the French symbolists were guilty of a related fault, but were by no means as profoundly in error as so many of the modern citizens. What the symbolists had done was to equate Christianity with the mid-19th century European bourgeoisie, and as a result

> The fabric of their Christian beliefs had been mutilated or undermined, and feeling a need for a gospel to take its place they found in the Beautiful something which unified their activities and gave a goal to their work. To this belief, they clung with a conviction which can only be called mystical because of its intensity, its

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1 Arthur Symons, The Symbolist Movement in Literature, p. 2

> irrationality, its disregard for other beliefs and its reliance on a world beyond the senses.[1]

Actually, numerous symbolists made a close, if oblique, approach to Christianity. Baudelaire's obsession with diabolism--"an inverted form of Catholicism"[2]--and Rimbaud's twisting of poetry into a religion prompts Merton to call them "Christians turned inside out."[3] Their bizarre noun-adjective combinations, their strange and startling metaphors, give evidence of their struggle to make unwieldy idiom express the "cosmic" unity of all physical and spiritual reality. Eliot has admitted his debt to Symon's book. Through it he first realized the affinity between the French symbolists of the 19th century and the English metaphysicals of the 17th, thus assisting him in beginning the "new poetry" which has touched so many modern minds.

As a further influence, the sense-stress rhythms and the concentration upon the individuality of particular things come into Merton's poetry from the theories of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Too, the ellipsis and the inverted word order in some examples of Merton's work are definitely Hopkinsian. The first of Merton's poems the writer will attempt to

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1 C. M. Bowra, The Heritage of Symbolism (London, 1954), p.3.

2 Idem.

3 Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," 90.

analyze in the next chapter is Hopkinsian. Merton remarks in The Seven Storey Mountain that he had never heard of Hopkins until he opened a book of the Jesuit's poems at Oakham, beginning a long acquaintance. It will be recalled that Merton was reading a life of Hopkins at the time he made the final decision to enter the Church.

Merton discovered Jacques Maritain through Art and Scholasticism. For Merton, Maritain provided a solid philosophy of esthetics which originally aided him in the writing of his master's thesis. Merton's subsequent poems, his writings on the nature of the Christian poet, his contemplative thinking have been indelibly colored by Maritain's synthetical, epochal works on Thomistic esthetics: Art and Scholasticism and Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry.

St. John of the Cross and St. Augustine have probably been the two men who have produced the greatest impact upon Thomas Merton as a contemplative. Both men have figured prominently in his writing. He has devoted one book to the exposition and application of St. John's theories on contemplation.[1] St. Augustine's thoughts, too, form much of the substratum of Merton's writing.

It may be well to digress here in order to clarify an

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1 Thomas Merton, The Ascent to Truth (New York, 1951).

important point. We can be fairly certain that Merton has a vocation to the life of the mystical contemplative. Only God and Merton himself know whether or not he has been gifted with true mystical contemplation. We know that Merton disposes himself for the gift insofar as he is able--this can be deduced from his prose. However, this thesis is concerned with Merton's growth in the contemplative life only as it is made manifest in his poems. These poems show the development of a Christian poetry only insofar as they reflect such growth. It would be rash indeed to claim that Merton possesses infused contemplation because of some manifestation in his poetry. His poems are Christian because they try to express the beauty of the contemplative vision. As such, they are indications, not attestations, of Merton's contemplative life.

Now that this distinction has been made, a discussion of Merton's contemplative thought can begin. He has defined contemplation as "quasi-experimental knowledge of God," closely approximating the words of St. John of the Cross himself:

> This knowledge consists in a certain contact of the soul with the Divinity, and it is God Himself Who is then felt and tasted, though not manifestly and distinctly, as it will be in glory. But this touch of knowledge and sweetness is so deep and so profound that it penetrates into the inmost substance of the soul. This knowledge savors in some measure of the Divine Essence and of everlasting

life.[1]

St. John also remarks:

> The end I have in view is the divine Embracing, the union of the soul with the divine Substance. In this loving, obscure knowledge God unites Himself with the soul eminently and divinely.[2]

Here, again, Merton almost paraphrases St. John:

> Infused contemplation is a quasi-experimental knowledge of God's goodness "tasted" and "possessed" by a vital contact in the depths of the soul. By infused love, we are given an immediate grasp of God's own substance, and rest in the obscure and profound sense of His presence and transcendent actions within our inmost selves, yielding ourselves altogether to the work of His transforming Spirit.[3]

Another major texture in Merton's contemplative thought is his use of St. Augustine's concept of the human soul. Merton maintains, with the Bishop of Hippo, that the soul is composed of two parts, the inferior and the superior. Naturally, this is no denial of the soul's simplicity; the two parts are considered as logically distinct principles of different types of activity. Thus the pars inferior is the principle for the soul's vital and sensitive powers; the pars superior is the principle of its rational or intellectual

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1 St. John of the Cross, Ascent of Mount Carmel, II, c. 26, quoted by Dom Cuthbert Butler, Western Mysticism (London, 1951), p. 10.

2 Idem.

3 Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," pp. 88.

activities.[1] Merton says that "the 'superior' soul is the same soul, but now considered as the principle or actus primus of these other diverse and multiple acts of the faculties which as it were flow from this inner principle."[2]

Merton continues:

> Only the superior soul is strictly the image of God within us. And if we are to contemplate God at all, this internal image must be reformed by grace, and then we must enter into this inner sanctuary which is the substance of the soul itself....it is here that mystical contemplation begins....we are united to Him in the mystery of love and its transcendent subjectivity, and see Him ourselves by losing ourselves in Him.[3]

It is here that Merton gives a positive demonstration of the analogy existing between esthetic experience and mystical contemplation.

> Contemplation is a transit from objectivization to knowledge by intuition and connaturality....yet, even in the natural order....the esthetic experience introduces us into the interior sanctuary of the soul and to its inexpressible simplicity. For the esthetic intuition is also beyond objectivity—it "sees" by identifying itself spiritually with what it contemplates.[4]

Esthetic experience and mystical contemplation, then, are alike in that they are both species of connatural knowledge—one in the natural order, the other in the supernatural.

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1 William P. O'Connor, The Concept of the Human Soul According to St. Augustine (published Ph.D. dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1921), p. 38.

2 Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," 90.

3 Idem. 4 Idem.

Connatural knowledge is knowledge of self-identification: it is subjective, not objective, and the union of subject and object (knower and known) which characterizes rational knowledge is absent. Poets, some of the Romantics and a symbolist like Rimbaud, had noted before that man's grasp of poetic knowledge was rooted in his identification with the object of his knowledge--which made the object object no longer, but subject.[1]

Maritain has explained connatural knowledge as experience rather than knowledge. By its very nature, it is a creative experience; the mind does not tend to become other things, but to produce a thing in being.

> The poet cannot express his own substance in a work except on condition that things strike their resonance in him and that in him, in the same revelation, they and he are stirred from their slumber. Everything that he discerns and divines in things is thus perceived as inseparable from himself--and more precisely, as identical with himself. And all this he perceives in order to grasp his own being darkly within himself, by a knowledge which achieves itself only in being creative ....His intuition, the creative intuition or emotion, is an obscure grasping of self and things together in a knowledge by union or connaturality....Here is a knowledge different indeed from which we commonly call knowledge; a knowledge....which is rather experience than knowledge, and creative experience, for it seeks to express itself and is expressible only in a work. This knowledge is not preliminary to or presupposed by the creative activity but is intimately one with it, consubstantial with the movement toward the work; and

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1 Rimbaud remarked in a letter to G. Izambard: "It is wrong to say: I think. One should say: I am thought....I is someone else."

its properly this that I call poetic knowledge.[1]

Signs and symbols are the stuff of which modern poetry is made. Certainly, as Merton pointed out, Christian poetry must use its "signs and symbols;" otherwise there would be no medium through which to depict the Divine. In Merton's idea of the sacramental nature of reality there is an echo of St. Augustine's concept of sign. St. Augustine was a mystic and thereby not overly concerned with things as symbols; yet, he was a bishop and realized that the worship of those not gifted like himself is necessarily closely related to symbols. Speaking of the instruction of candidates for Baptism, St. Augustine says:

> As to the sacrament of salt which he receives, when it has been well explained to him that the symbols of divine things are, it is true, visible, but that invisible things are therein honored....he should likewise be told what is meant by the form of words which he has heard, and what the seasoning element in it is of which this species of salt is the symbol.[2]

Although St. Augustine is referring expressly to Baptism here, an echo vital to the Christian poet can be heard: "that the symbols of divine things are, it is true, visible, but that invisible things are therein honored...." A few

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1 Jacques Maritain, "Poetic Experience," The Review of Politics, VI (October, 1944), 395.

2 St. Augustine, De Catechizandis Rudibus, trans. Joseph P. Christopher in Catholic University of America Patristic Studies, VIII (Washington, D.C., 1926), p. 113.

sentences later he remarks: "....if he hears anything even in the Scriptures that has a carnal ring, he should believe, even if he does not understand, that something spiritual is therein signified that has reference to holy living and the life to come."[1]

Augustine's words carnaliter sonet directly refer to anything in Scripture or in spiritual writing that might hint at fleshly pleasures. The statement, however, may well be pointed toward all material reality--if it does have a "carnal ring," perhaps even because of it, there is something spiritual "therein signified." In his Enarratio in Psalmum XLI, St. Augustine says again: "....wishing to see the invisible things of my God, being understood by the things made, I have poured forth my soul above myself...."[2]

Speaking in this vein, Merton comments on the relation between poet and mystic:

> ....the true poet is always akin to the mystic because of the "prophetic" intuition by which he sees the spiritual reality, the inner meaning of the object he contemplates, which makes that concrete reality not only a thing worthy of admiration in itself, but also and above all makes it a sign of God....Christian poets....are contemplatives in the sense that they see God everywhere in his Creation and His mysteries....[3]

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1 St. Augustine, De Catechizandis Rudibus, trans. Joseph P. Christopher in Catholic University of America Patristic Studies, VIXI (Washington D.C., 1926), p. 113.

2 St. Augustine, Enarratio in Psalmum XLI, para 8, quoted by Butler in Western Mysticism, p. 22 (not my italics).

3 Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," 89.

The matter quoted from St. Augustine above is meant to show the importance of symbol in the attainment of higher reality. The symbolists grasped this importance--a realization gained largely from deep introspection, and from the subsequent relating of what they discovered within themselves to the rest of reality. It may be wise to point out here that the most important symbols in the Christian tradition, the seven Sacraments, do not possess their sole dignity as signs. They are vital realities in themselves, giving grace merely by their act of signifying. Merton underlines this fact in quoting Dom Vonier: "'....they [the Sacraments] are complete realities in themselves....it would be a great disparagement to their character to look upon them as mere veils of more substantial spiritual realities.'"[1]

With the exception of the Sacraments, then, a sign is an entity that represents another entity. In this regard, it is a symbol, "a representation which does not aim at being a reproduction."[2]

St. Augustine expresses the poet's quest for the harmony that lies behind the symbol: "It is a wretched slavery of the soul, indeed to be satisfied with signs instead of realities, and not be able to elevate the eye of

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1 Merton, The Living Bread, (New York, 1956), p. 65.

2 Comte Goblet d'Alviella, The Migration of Symbols, quoted by Symons in The Symbolist Movement in Literature, p. 1.

the mind above sensible creation to drink in eternal light;"[1] and again, "he who produces or worships any symbol, unaware of what it means, is enslaved to a sign."[2]

Beginning with the 19th century symbolists, the poets of the modern era have been striving to avoid their enslavement to signs. If they would ever aspire to the eventual relocation of myth and metaphysic to a proper order, they cannot afford to ignore what may lie behind extended creation. Extended beings, for the Christian poet, should "tend to be sacraments--signs of God, signs of His love working in the world."[3]

The next chapters of this thesis will attempt to show how these concepts of poetry and contemplation have been woven by Thomas Merton into a product which is the tapestry of Christian poetry.

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1 St. Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, c. 5, trans. John J. Gavigan in The Fathers of the Church, II (New York, 1950), pp. 124-125.

2 Ibid., c. 9, p. 128.

3 Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," 89.

CHAPTER III

PURGATION AND ILLUMINATION

It was remarked at the outset of the previous chapter that Merton is a good illustration of his own thesis on the true nature of the Christian poet. When Merton first began writing poetry, he was, for all practical purposes, nothing more than a materialist. He has been converted to Catholicism, and is now at the opposite end of the pendulum from whence he began: he now pursues the vocation of the mystical contemplative, which can remove a willing subject as far from the world and the flesh as is possible in this life.

Because Merton is one of the few Christian poets who follow the mystical vocation, any approach to his poetry must include some discussion of this vocation, in its three traditional steps of purgation, illumination and union. By virtue of his vocation, his life is committed to progress in these steps, though, to be sure, the final union depends entirely on the grace of God. The important fact to note in the three poems to be analyzed in Chapters Three and Four is that in each poem the material world and the self progressively

disappear. The poet becomes less and less concerned with self and more and more absorbed in God. The Spirit, only a thread in the first poem, widens to a broad stream in the third. Any Christian poetry has the entire world at its disposal, but it cannot be Christian poetry unless its inspiration is of the Spirit.

The growth of the Spirit, and thus the growth of Christian poetry, is fairly evident in Merton's work herein quoted. The poems progress from matter, to the self, to the Spirit, and thus roughly correspond to the three degrees of the mystical life. It must be stressed now that a poetry need not concern itself solely with the mystical to be Christian; it needs only to have at its roots Christ in His Spirit.

From here on, however, the discussion will concern itself with the Christian poetry of one in the vocation of a mystical contemplative for the simple reason that Merton's poetry can now be discussed against no other framework. One advantage of a demonstration of this type is that it can, by its emphasis on the mystical life, highlight the importance of the "full Christian life" for poetry in general.

The quest of the unitive vision must begin in matter. It is into a material world that a man is born, and he lives and will die in that world. His eternal status will be

determined by the degree of his alienation from the lower desires of his world, his flesh, and his spirit. The process of this alienation is termed purgation.[1] Everyone desirous of eternal salvation must be committed to the purgative struggle. The struggle is what matters in the eyes of God, for the soul possesses the advantage as long as it perseveres in its struggle to control its contrary desires. St. Paul could say with a world of meaning that "I have fought the good fight."[2] He who has been given the contemplative gift must pass through the purgative stage--what St. Augustine called "the purification of the soul."[3] When he has arrived at a point where, by constant vigilance, his soul can control world, flesh and spirit, the second stage of mystic progression can begin: that of recollection and introversion, the illuminative way. St. Gregory the Great describes its beginnings: "The first step is that the mind recollect itself--gather itself to itself."[4] The second step towards illumination is introversion: "That it [the soul] should see itself

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1 Purgation, then, concerns itself with three elements: the purifying of the soul from the base desires occasioned by the world, the flesh, and the spirit itself. The fault of the spirit is spiritual pride, which is a far greater obstacle to sanctity than that interposed by the world and by the flesh.

2 II Tim. 4:7. 3 Butler, Western Mysticism, p. 27.

4 Ibid., p. 69.

as it is when recollected."[1] What these two points mean is that the soul should first "pull itself together" after emerging from the dominion of the body, and then should take a sharp inward look at itself. Here, it can become "illuminated"—the light of the Holy Spirit brightens it as it considers itself as the base of its ultimate earthly act, the act of infused contemplation. Both the purgative and illuminative stages are vital in any pursuit of infused contemplation. The illuminated soul withdraws within itself in preparation for the act of union, which Dom Cuthbert Butler explains in this manner: "That what is accepted by Christian belief as realities of faith in the case of all souls in the state of grace, becomes consciously realized in the mystic vision."[2] Once the soul has withdrawn into its own "center," or essence, it is disposed to receive the gift of mystical contemplation.

> The essence of the soul, the soul itself, is what the mystics mean when they speak of the center of the soul, or its apex, or ground, or the fund of the spirit, or the synteresis. It has been called also in modern terminology the core of personality, and the transcendental self. For the Catholic mystics it is this essence of the soul that enters into union with God. This we learned from St. Gregory: he says that the mind must first clear itself of all sense perceptions and of all images of things bodily and spiritual, so that it may

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1 Butler, Western Mysticism. p. 27.

2 Ibid., p. 138.

> be able to find and consider itself as it is in itself, i. e., its essence; and then, by means of this realization of itself thus stript of all, it rises to the contemplation of God....[1]

Jacques Maritain, in Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry, has related the almost ineffable concept of the "center" of the soul to his theory of the source of poetic knowledge. He regards the soul, for practical reasons, as a sort of logical triangle, with sense and intellectual powers beneath the apex, which represents the center or the essence of the soul. In Maritain's concept, also, enter the consideration of the preconscious of the spirit and the automatic unconscious, but they need not be treated here.

> Here it is, in this free life of the intellect which involves a free life of the imagination, at the single root of the soul's powers, and in the unconscious of the spirit, that poetry, I think, has its source.... And because poetry is born in this root life where the powers of the soul are active in common, poetry implies an essential requirement of totality or integrity. Poetry is the fruit neither of the intellect alone, nor of imagination alone. May more, it proceeds from the totality of man, sense, imagination, intellect, love, desire, instinct, blood and spirit together. And the first obligation imposed on the poet is to consent to be brought back to the hidden place, near the center of the soul, where this totality exists in the state of a creative source.[2]

With some background set forth, then, on purgation

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1 Butler, Western Mysticism, p. 140.

2.Jacques Maritain, Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry, Bollingen Series XXXV·1 (Kingsport, Tenn., 1953), p. 111.

and illumination, and on the relationship of the substance of the soul to poetic knowledge, the analysis of two of Merton's poems can commence. These poems are entitled "The Sponge Full of Vinegar" and "Song." The former, to be analyzed first, originally appeared in Merton's first volume of poems, Thirty Poems (New York, 1944). It is an example of the poetry written prior to his entrance into the Trappists, and for the purposes of this thesis, is meant to illustrate the beginnings of the mystic progression in the purgative level.

Before beginning any analysis, another basic consideration should be stressed: it is practically impossible to divide the spiritual life into the several compartments of purgation, illumination, and union. The word 'practically' is used because the division can be made logically, but in the real order, the human soul does not attain to perfection in this way. The soul may begin its spiritual life at the bottom of the ladder--in matter, as has been said--but as the ladder is ascended there is no soul capable of abandoning the previous steps. As the soul nears its final disposition for the act of union, it will almost certainly fail if it has not constantly considered the importance of what has gone before, namely, the emptying of self, or purgation, and the recollection and realization of self, or illumination. Only the greatest mystics have achieved a permanent control of all

their inordinate desires and lasting recollection and introversion of the spirit. If they had not previously secured these two stages, they would probably never have been mystics.

With that point made, then, the analysis of "The Sponge Full of Vinegar" begins. The poem is here quoted:

> When Romans gambled in the clash of lancelight,
> Dicing amid the lightnings for the unsewn mantle,
> Thirst burned crimson, like a crosswise firebird
> Even in the eyes of dying Christ.
> But the world's gall, and all its rotten vinegar
> Reeked in the sponge, flamed on His swollen mouth,
> And all was paid in poison, in the taste of our feasts!
>
> O Lord! When I lie breathless in Thy churches
> Knowing it is Thy glory goes again
> Torn from the wise world in the daily thundercrack of Massbells,
> I drink new fear from the four clean prayers I ever gave Thee!
> For even the Word of Thy Name, caught from Thy grace,
> And offered up out of my deepest terror,
> Goes back gallsavored of flesh.
> Even the one good sacrifice,
> The thirst of heaven, comes to Thee: vinegar!
> Reeks of the death-thirst manlife found in the forbidden apple.[1]

The poem itself is a sonnet with one coda, and is modeled after some of Hopkins' variations on the Petrarchan sonnet, e.g., "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Reasurrection," which is a sonnet with three codas. Merton's sonnet is roughly Petrarchan in structure, with a septet in place of the octave and a decet replacing

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1 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea (New York, 1946), p. 155.

the sestet. Without consulting Merton himself, it is impossible to ascertain the poem's exact date of composition, though its tone, which is of the sudden realization of man's material bondage, seems to indicate that "The Sponge Full of Vinegar" was written shortly after Merton's conversion to the Faith. It is important to realise that any poet is more likely to write about concepts that fill his soul at a particular time. The poet creates the poem from the contents of his soul. If the mind of the poet were deeply involved, to an almost Platonic degree, with the flesh's ignobling of the soul, then that concept could reasonably be expected to become thematically concerned in his poetry. The period of Merton's conversion appears to be time when he was deeply concerned with the effect his submersion in a material world had had upon him.[1] His reference to "four clean prayers" in the poem will be discussed later in relation to the time of his conversion. Merton says himself that "I had never been able to write verse before I became a Catholic."[2] He mentions attempts at Oakham, Cambridge, and Columbia. "The only other verse I had ever been able to turn out before my Baptism was an occasional line for the Jester."[3] So "The Sponge Full of

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1 Cf. The Seven Storey Mountain, pp. 169-216.

2 Ibid., p. 235.

3 Idem. (The Jester was the Columbia magazine of student humor).

Vinegar" seems to have been certainly composed after Merton's Baptism.

The theme of the poem is a statement of fact and a realization. "For even the Word of Thy Name....Goes back gallsavored of flesh." The vinegar-filled sponge is all the world has to offer to the dying Christ—a sponge reeking of the repeated denials of the Father by men. Even the prayers men utter from the depths of terror are tinged by the draught of the forbidden apple—this is the realization contained in the decet. The septet is principally the statement of fact prior to the soul-shattering realization. The poem is not about purgation; there is no note of perseverance present. Rather, it treats of the realization which must precede the intention of purification. The poem ends on an extreme note which nearly borders despair—and the poet's disgust with corporeal reality is almost irrational. Merton's lament: "Even the one good sacrifice, the thirst of Heaven, comes to Thee: vinegar!" is the cry of a man who has suddenly had the realization of man's self-degredation burst upon him like a thunderbolt. The poet, revolted by what he sees in himself as well as in others, momentarily loses his rational balance. He gins to slip to the left, into the morass of near-despair. His mind, numbed by his realization, seems unable to consider the need for purification. If the poem had continued (if it

had done so it would be less a poem) there would probably be the cooling-down, the gradual return to the knife-edge of hope between presumption and despair, which is rational faith.

The poet is the crier of catastrophe, the reader of disaster. He is a reporter, depicting in the first seven lines what casual observation tells him of the Sacrifice of the Cross. In the last ten lines, he is gripped with horror, because he sees himself, the representative of the world's individuals, as much a villain as the soldiers who threw dice for the cloak. The terror that must grip men in prison death cells is his, as the significance of man's smallness in God's sight makes itself felt, and the monstrosity of the willful bargain with the flesh is brought home.

The "Lord" becomes the Old Testament God of Fear as the poet "lies breathless," fearing that he will be reduced to nothingness for his transgressions. The infinite weight of man's smallest offense against God is upon Merton's shoulders only briefly, but it is enough to tilt his mind toward despair, in a burst of panic. The poem is an outcry and a desperate plea in its fearful acknowledgment of guilt. The poet can go no further; dumb homage is all that remains for him, with a silent prayer of thanksgiving that God is the Lord of Love and Mercy. That realization is the ingredient of which faith and hope are made.

The poem will fit in no standard classical metrical arrangement. Sense-stress rhythm is used throughout, and the work is rich in assonance and alliteration. These factors, coupled with the poet's almost exclusive use of Anglo-Saxon diction and imagery, inverted word order and clever juxtaposition are a clear indication of his interest in the method of Hopkins. The lines themselves for the most part approximate the standard Petrarchan 11-syllable line, though there are variations.

In the opening lines of the poem, the poet, as reporter, sets the stage. He is attending the execution of a criminal. The imagery of the first line points up the metallic pallor of the guards as they stand gambling behind the Cross. The assonance on the letter 'a' in the first line (gambled, clash, lancelight), and on the letter 'i' in the second (dicing, lightnings), bring out this effect. The word lancelight is a typical Hopkinsian inversion and brings to mind this line from "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection:" "Shivelights and shadow-tackle in long lashes lace, lance, and pair." The execution continues and the thirst of the condemned Man burns "crimson." Then follows one of the most powerful images in the poem, "like a crosswise firebird," which expresses not only the infinite thirst of Christ, but also the sublimity of the

Sacrifice of the Cross. Christ Himself is the "crosswise firebird," a Victim for the glory of His Father. A world of allusion is opened here. The firebird, or phoenix, was the many-hued bird of ancient mythology which was sacred to the sun. At the end of 500 years, according to one account, the bird, heretofore the only one of its kind, built a nest and then set fire to it, and was consumed in the flames. From the ashes arose a small grub, which grew into an adult firebird. One of its first tasks was to carry the ashes of its dead parent to Heliopolis, there placing them on the altar of the sun god.

Thus the word 'crosswise' in this context is another Hopkinsian inversion, and means "attached to a cross." A most unusual parallel between the respective sacrifices of Christ and of the firebird has been drawn by the poet. One sacrifice is mythological, and the other supernatural, but the image of the firebird has immeasurably enriched the line by its resultant emphasis on Christ's sacrifice. The burning connotes love, as the Sacrifice of the Cross is a sacrifice of love. The continuation of the sacred life of the phoenix by means of the grub's birth from ashes parallels the rise of the Church from the paradox of Calvary, as the offering of ashes to the sun god is a parallel of the renewal of Calvary in the Mass.

The final three lines of the septet conclude with the burden of realization imminent. The alliterative "paid in poison" expresses the irony of the gift man has given to the thirsty Christ: a sponge filled with the leavings of feasts, "our" feasts. It is in the final ten lines that the most convincing evidence of the poem's composition shortly following Merton's conversion appears. Even the "wise world," wise as the "children of this generation" are wise, must glorify God, and this glory is torn from it "in the daily thundercrack of Nasabella." Hopkinsian ellipsis in the preceding line--"glory goes again"--set the contrast for the poet's own confession of terror: "I drink new fear from the four clean prayers I ever gave Thee!" What are these "four clean prayers" which stand so small alongside the Mass, a sacrifice in which even a "wise world" participates? The inference seems to be that these were the only prayers Merton ever uttered in his previous life that were true and sincere prayers. What the prayers were and when they occurred we do not know. It is sufficient to know that the poet is now acknowledging his smallness before the altar. The tone of the lines would indicate that they describe an actual occurrence--perhaps one of the first Masses Merton attended as a Catholic, and possibly the Mass on the day of his baptism, November 16, 1938.

> I was kneeling at the altar rail. The bright sanctuary was all mine. I could hear the murmur of the priest's

> voice, and the responses of the server, and it did not matter that I had no one to look at, so that I could tell when to stand up and kneel down again, for I was still not very sure of these ordinary ceremonies. But when the little bells were rung I knew what was happening. And I saw the raised Host--the silence and simplicity with which Christ once again triumphed, raised up, drawing all things to Himself--drawing me to Himself.[1]

Even the uttering of the name of Christ is poisoned by the material instrument the poet's mind must utilize in the utterance-- "gallsavored of flesh." These three words almost conclude the sonnet. The poet admits that his smallest act of worship is soured by the flesh with the striking Hopkinsian image "gallsavored." He is stopped in his act of putting down the pen by the realization that "even the one good sacrifice" is tainted by man's material lot. Before, in the septet, he stated this fact, but it is not until the coda that Merton fully grasps its import. The coda, which utilizes a disrupted word order, is a two-pronged sentence. In the first part, the sacrifice is the "thirst of heaven," the intense desire of the beloved Son to glorify the Father. The thirst is slaked, with cosmic irony, by a sponge of vinegar, which represents the sins of men. The final line can either be regarded as a new predication of "one good sacrifice"--(the more startling)--or as a continuation of the line immediately preceding it. Even the Sacrifice of Calvary

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1 Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 224.

reeks of man's search for ease and softness; were not men so inclined, there would have been no Calvary. The antithesis between "death-thirst" and "manlife" (both Hopkinsian constructions) points out that "manlife" is really a "death-thirst" if that life is uncontrolled by the will. Here again occurs the implication that men are unbalanced, sliding toward perdition, by virtue of the fact that they are imprisoned in a material body. The second view of the final line, as a continuation of the line before it, brings into play "vinegar" in its close pomological relationship to "forbidden apple." It is because of the initial disobedience in Eden that humans are in their present state.

"The Sponge Full of Vinegar," then, begins the trilogy of outposts on the way to union: self and matter, self and self, and self and God. God exists in all three, but it is only in the last that He becomes the sole consideration. In actual mystical contemplation, the self disappears, but this cannot be so in poetry, as was mentioned earlier. This poem is not precisely purgative: it treats of the realization which must precede purgation, but insofar as it is concerned with man and his relationship with matter as the first step toward eventual complete union with God, it is the beginning of a Christian poetry which is rooted in mystical contemplation.

A reflection of Miss Shaddy's assertion that Merton implies those who do not seek mystical contemplation (as a vocation) are "outside the kingdom" can be seen in this poem. The work's Platonic view of soul and body has already been mentioned: the echo of the errant star-soul imprisoned in flesh may be heard in the closing lines of the sonnet proper. The most powerful indication of any lapse from balance can be perceived in the final line, the "death-thirst manlife" sequence referred to above. Here the poet's disgust with a worldly life and his tacit determination to flee its confinements are shown. Merton was so repelled by what he had been that

> ....after the spiritual mangle I have gone through, it will never be possible for me to do without the sacraments daily, and without much prayer and penance and meditation and mortification.[1]

A man of acute sensibility, Merton could clearly see that his only reparation, his only true worship, could be given in a Trappist monastery. He has erred only in his inclusion of all or most of the members of the Mystical Body of Christ in this mandate. The flesh which he must flee as completely as he can is not evil. Though prone to evil, it is good. Merton's subjective despair of the flesh almost leads him to an abandonment of hope for those who must live in and with flesh in the world. This distaste for the flesh

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1 Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, p. 232.

could be part of the reason that his earlier spiritual writings caused alarm in less sensitive and therefore to a degree better balanced minds. In all probability, Merton's secular life was in actual fact no better or no worse than any of his fellows. It was bad enough, however, for his own sharp insight to perceive just how far he had committed himself to submersion in matter. It was this insight that sent him, with the grace of God, to Gethsemani.

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The concluding section of this chapter will be devoted to the analysis of a poem written considerably later than "The Sponge Full of Vinegar." The poem is entitled "Song," and appears in The Tears of the Blind Lions. That "Song" does not appear in Figures For an Apocalypse (New York, 1948), is not an indication that it was written between 1948 and 1949, the year The Tears of the Blind Lions appeared. All that can safely be said about "Song" is that it was probably composed after 1946 and certainly prior to its publication in The Tears of the Blind Lions. The final poem of the collection in A Man in the Divided Sea is entitled "La Salette" and begins

> It is a hundred years since your shy feet
> Ventured to stand upon the pasture grass of the
> high Alps,

which would indicate this poem's composition during 1946, the centenary of the La Salette apparition, and the copyright year of A Man in the Divided Sea.[1]

"Song" prescinds from the relation of self to the world and the flesh, and concerns the self regarding itself as a part of its ultimate relationship with God. The analysis of "Song" will demonstrate that the poem expresses certain concepts which are native to the illuminative stage of the pursuit of mystical contemplation. Again, in discussing the spiritual progress of a soul, there is a considerable incidence of error. The commentator must depend upon external manifestations to determine the degree of a soul's alienation from matter, and these remain manifestations, as in the case of Merton's poetry. Let it be stressed, however, that by the time "Song" was written, Merton had been in the Trappists at least five years. He was a student of theology; moreover, he was more or less committed to his new life. At the end of five years in the monastery he had completed postulancy, the novitiate, and the three-year period of temporary simple vows. In 1947, when he made his solemn profession, he was two years from ordination to the priesthood. It can be assumed that during these years his soul was bent more and more toward the pursuit of the mystical union. On the other hand, his soul

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1 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, p. 108.

was not without resiliency: The Sign of Jonas (New York, 1953), part of a journal Merton kept between 1946 and 1952 at Gethsemani, refers to some of the difficulties he experienced in the spiritual life.

"Song", in any case, is concerned with that withdrawal of the spirit which St. Gregory the Great maintains as so vital for the illuminative way. At the outset of this chapter, it was mentioned that recollection and introversion are the two primary conditions of the illuminative stage. St. Gregory echoes St. Augustine here, although Dom Butler remarks that St. Gregory's passage on introversion is of "greatly inferior power."[1] For the most part allegorical, St. Gregory's discussion relates the doors and windows of Ezechiel's Temple to the spiritual life, thus presenting difficult problems of interpretation. In Chapter Eight of the Homilies on Ezechiel, St. Gregory speaks of the soul's ascension of ladders in its attainment of the various degrees of the spiritual life. The soul "makes of itself a ladder for itself" as the result of its introversion, readying itself for actual infused contemplation.[2] Butler says that most of St. Gregory's teachings on contemplation are found in the Morals on Job, and one passage which he cites is an excellent illustration of the soul's

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1 Butler, Western Mysticism, p. 69.

2 Idem.

gradual ascent to the actual vision of God:

> When with marvelous efforts it strives to rise up from corporeal things and images, it is a great thing indeed if the soul, thrusting aside the bodily form, be brought to the knowledge of itself, so as to think of itself without bodily figure, and by thus thinking of itself, to prepare a pathway to contemplate the substance of eternity. In this way it exhibits itself to itself as a kind of ladder, whereby in ascending from outward things it may pass into itself, and from itself may tend unto its Maker.[1]

It can be seen, then, that a withdrawal of the spirit is vital to an achievement of illumination. The soul, as it were, ascends by means of itself to the center of itself, and once arrived there, it is considered illuminated, or flooded with the light of the Holy Spirit to which it has been exposed. This concept of withdrawal can be carried too far; it can lead to a dangerous quietism and to mere selfish introversion. Would-be contemplatives can become so engrossed in the psychological machinery of mystical contemplation that they achieve a sort of negative illumination, a self-contemplation which may nullify their disposition for the receipt of the gift of infused contemplation.

Merton's more recent writings seem to give full weight to the fact that the entire pursuit of holiness is centered in the will. Thus the recollection and introversion of the

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1 St. Gregory the Great, Morals on Job, v. 61, 62, quoted by Butler, p. 71.

spirit necessary for illumination can be realized, though with proportionate difficulty, in the midst of worldly occupations and material cares. In "Song", the principal withdrawal is that of the soul; however, the corporeal withdrawal, though secondary, is definitely implied.

"Song" is here quoted:

> 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
> In the rude door, my shelter.
> And there I eat my air alone
> With pure and solitary songs
>
> While others sit in conference.
> Their windows grieve, and soon frown
> And glass begins to wrinkle with a multitude of water
> Till I no longer see their speech
> And they no longer know my theater.
>
> Rivers clothe their houses
> And hide their naked wisdom.
> Their conversations
> Go down into the deep like submarines:
> Submerge them, with their pale expressions, in my storm.
>
> But I drink rain, drink wind
> Distinguish poems
> Boiling up out of the cold forest:
> Lift to the wind my eyes full of water,
> My face and mind, to take their free refreshment.
>
> Thus I live on my own land, on my own island
> And speak to God, my God, under the doorway
> And rain (sings light) rain has devoured my house
> And winds wade through my trees.[1]

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1 Merton, The Tears of the Blind Lions, p. 5.

"Song," first of all, is a lyric, like the other poems analyzed in this thesis. It comprises five irregular stanzas, unrhymed. The three middle stanzas are five lines each; the first, seven, and the last, four, a total of 26 lines. As was the case with "The Sponge Full of Vinegar," there is no consistent metric pattern. A casual scanning of the poem furnishes a scramble of classical rhythms which stretch the quantitative metric far beyond its breaking point. Three or four types of classical feet appear in one line; syllabic length is irregular; in several lines a classical scanning produces a dangling syllable. The evidence shows, then, that Merton has here utilized a type of free verse, with sense-stress rhythm. The rhythm, however, does not seem to be Hopkinsian, as Hopkins used more rigid forms; that is, his sense-stress lines generally had a regular number of feet, as in his variations on the Petrarchan sonnet; or, with the "outriders" or slack syllables removed, the stressed feet would often present one classical pattern. For example, in No. 1 of his "Terrible Sonnets," the metrics would be principally iambic pentameter if the "outriders" were removed. In "Song" there are several lines which seem to lack slack syllables entirely. They include stressed fragmentary lines, and at least one or two other lines composed mainly of stresses.

"Song" is a capsule commentary which strikes at the root of the disease afflicting modern man--a faithless materialism. Its theme of the withdrawal of the spirit conveys the powerful message that the voice of Christ is not audible over the noise and discord of a life centered in the material. To be heard, Christ must be at the center of life, at the center of the soul. The work is a nature poem; it is allegorical and exhibits more of the influence of the French symbolists than do the other two poems of this thesis. The poet has made a double withdrawal, a retreat of both body and mind, into a stormy woodland, which appears to symbolize the center of the poet's soul. In a previous analysis of this poem, the writer passed over the recurrent phrase "(sings light)", which appears in the first and last stanzas. It was pointed out to the writer that the employment of this phrase was reminiscent of the first-person lyrics of Charles Peguy. Two of these lyrics, "Sommeil" and "Vision de Priere," are prefaced by the sentence "Dieu Parle:" or "God Speaks:". The first line of "Sommeil" is

Je n'aime pas celui qui ne dort pas, dit Dieu.[1]

The opening line of "Vision de Priere" reads

Je suis leur père, dit Dieu. Notre Père, qui êtes

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1 "I don't like the man who doesn't sleep, says God." Charles Peguy, Basic Verities, trans. Ann and Julian Green (New York, 1943), p. 208.

Aux Cieux.[1]

By this device, then, "Light" is the speaker of the poem, the singer of the lyric. In itself, the phrase "(sings light)" qualifies the entire poem; it super-elevates it to the level of grace. "Light" can be nothing else than the illuminated soul, personified. It is certainly and primarily the soul of Merton, but "Light" also re-creates the substance of the relationship existing between the souls of those, who, after the purgative struggle, have achieved a measure of the center of their souls, and the souls of those, who, through self-will, are still enmeshed in the material, in the limitations of extended being.

This re-creation is accomplished by imagery that is both allegorical and symbolistic. The poem seems to move on two levels; the first, that of a corporeal withdrawal into natural surroundings, and the second, that of the soul's spiritual withdrawal into its own center, where its surroundings are allegorically similar to those of the body withdrawn into a place free of the manufacture and traffic of men. Thus "Song" would seem to reflect the symbolistic influence on the first level, and to be a manifestation of the poet's confiction of the sacramentality of material reality. On the

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1 "I am their father, says God. Our Father who art in Heaven." Charles Peguy, Basic Verities, trans. Ann and Julian Green (New York, 1943), p. 254 (not my italics).

second level, then, the poem is the expression of the illuminated soul considering itself as the receptor of the contemplative experience. The distinction between "Song" and the poem to follow, "A Psalm," would appear to be this: in "Song" the poet is more soul-oriented--he remains more or less within himself, singing the praises of God through a lyrical declaration of his actions under the influence of grace; however, in "A Psalm," the poet is rendered nearly speechless as he approaches the actual contemplative experience. Here, in rapturous imagery, he tries to describe what he experiences after "the bottom drops out of my soul." Thus "A Psalm" is more God-oriented, as illustrative of the effect of mystical union itself.

A principal symbol in "Song" is "rain," which in this interpretation is grace. Rain is the refreshment for the soul of the poet--it is the life-giver, the agent which lifts the soul out of itself. The fact that rain seems to be two different things for the poet and for the man of the world whom he observes is the paradox that is wrought by man's submersion in matter. The first stanza begins with the singer, "light", the illuminated soul, lyricizing on its state. On the first level, "rain has devoured my house" may mean that the outdoor habitat of the solitary singer has been rendered too wet--thus he has retreated to the shelter of a door to

watch the storm. Throughout the poem, such references to an external episode which may or may not have occurred are fairly obvious. When "rain" is considered as grace, the image tells the story of grace's dissolving of the poet's ("light's") material component. Thus "wind" is the effect of grace upon the soul. The poet here allegorically demonstrates what is the function of grace. His self, his "house," has been destroyed by the influx of grace. The third line paints a beautiful image: in nature, the cedars bow in dumb adoration, so to speak, of the wind and the storm. When the storm of grace strikes, so too the soul must humble itself in adoration. "Trees" and "cedars" may refer to the substance of the soul. The alliteration in the second line (wind wades) connotes the penetration of the soul by grace, and the assonance in "devoured" and "house" is emphatic of the need for a spiritual withdrawal.

The quiet that must reign near the center of the soul is the "silence....louder than a cyclone," because it is at this point that the dissonance of materiality is muted, and the supersonic power of grace has rooted the soul's attention to itself. It is interesting to note how frequent is the occurrence of words like 'light,' 'wind,' 'air,' 'sound,' 'song,' 'fire,' in this poem and in "A Psalm." It would seem that the poet can find only some of the elementary components

of beautiful things to describe the Almighty.

"The rude door" is the soul, more or less stripped of self, which now becomes its own entrance to the act of mystical contemplation. Solitude, withdrawal, are dominant in the next Rimbaudian line: "And there I eat my air alone." The sense derangement here, an attempt to express the magnitude and omnipotence of God, affords an unusual and striking image. St. John of the Cross, in Spiritual Canticle, speaks of

> The breathing of the air,
> The song of the sweet Philomel,[1]

which may be paraphrased in the last two lines of the first stanza. If so, "air" again means grace, or the Holy Spirit. Merton, in The Ascent to Truth, says that the "breathing of the air" is the spiration of the Holy Spirit in the soul, communicated to it by the Father through the mystery of Christ.[2]

The ironical run-on line which begins the next stanza declares the antithesis between men oriented in themselves and men oriented in God. The spirit in men cannot be absorbed in matter indiscriminately without suffering grave harm. This reality must be recognized by a spiritual solitude, a withdrawal,

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1 St. John of the Cross, Spiritual Canticle, stanza 39, quoted by Merton in The Ascent to Truth, p. 313.

2 Merton, Idem.

from the limitations of extended matter. The second stanza describes what happens to men who bury themselves in their material surroundings: their souls, by nature favorable to the reception of spiritual gifts, become self-contained, encrusted with the shell of the world. "Their windows," their souls, designed to transmit light, to illuminate within, indeed "grieve" and "frown". The imagery here suggests the distortion that occurs when rain floods a windowpane. Men who look at life through such an instrument (here the closed soul) must be dissatisfied, unhappy. The assonical third line construes the actual image of the rain-streaked glass. The glass in the souls of the men of the world should not be there--the window which is thereby covered should be open. "The multitude of water" which is grace does not penetrate the soul which matter has sealed off. It is inevitable that these men soon become incapable of a communication beyond their own level: they do not realize their spiritual nature, and they remove themselves from the ken of those truly human. This is the burden of the final two lines of the stanza. The alliterative "see their speech" and the alliteration on "theater" and "water" depicts the lack of communication between the positivist and the theist of today, whether or not this was intended by the poet. "Theater" is again the center of the soul, the spot from which man views God. This area

is one never entered by the men "in conference."

"Their naked wisdom," a wisdom which exposes its own smallness, is covered by the grace which flows, spurned, about them. Unable to enter these closed souls, the grace manages, through its acceptance by some, to obviate the nothings of the worldling. The entire stanza, on the surface, is the description of the gradual obliteration of buildings and men in an actual storm. The men in question here, by "their conversations" (hinting that talk is their sole activity of mind), are submerged deep within themselves by "their pale expressions," a mild pun on their countenances and their thoughts. The storm of grace rages outside, but those who do not withdraw from their material selves never emerge outside into the storm, the rain of grace.

The absolute necessity of spiritual solitude is forcefully brought home here. If this solitude, this withdrawal, is the basis for the contemplative life, then it is the duty of every man to strive to see God beyond the mortal sphere. The symbolist conviction of the inner reality in material things is thus a most proper device for this poem. The very materialities in which men find themselves should be indications of their spiritual makeup. Therefore, a refusal to recognize the beauties in nature--by remaining "in conference" throughout a storm of striking effect--can construe

only an inordinate involvement with self, as far as the men in the poem are concerned. Nature is of God, as is man; nature, too, is a reflection of the Divine Essence, if a lesser likeness. Men concerned with the spirit will necessarily practice solitude of spirit; they will not be duped into a rejection of all save themselves and their surroundings.

In one of his latest works, Thoughts in Solitude, Merton makes this comment on solitude and its relation to men's lives:

> When society is made up of men who know no interior solitude it can no longer be held together by love: and consequently it is held together by a violent and abusive authority. But when men are violently deprived of the solitude and freedom which are their due, the society in which they live becomes putrid, it festers with servility, resentment, and hate.[1]

Merton goes on to say that this hatred is like a spiritual cancer; it "eats away the vitals of materialistic society." The cure is spiritual, but there is no use talking to men about God and love if they cannot listen. "The ears with which one hears the message of the Gospel are hidden in a man's heart, and these ears do not hear anything unless they are favored with a certain interior solitude and silence."[2]

The final two stanzas of "Song" continue the first

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1 Merton, Thoughts in Solitude (New York, 1959), p. 13.

2 Idem.

stanza and are the contradiction of the middle stanzas. On the symbolistic level, "light," the illuminated soul, recognizes the instrumentality of nature--the reality behind the symbol. As was said in Chapter Two, moderns seem to make an end and a way of life out of symbols which are only a means. The lyricist is reminiscent of Rimbaud with his "drinking" of the rain, his finding of poems in a wet forest. His soul is open; he has thrown wide the corporeal gates, exposing a soul thirsting for the grace of God. The tone is one of almost ecstatic joy. The poet's eyes, face and mind all share in the "free refreshment" of grace. The soul lives "on my own land, on my own island," expressing its perception of its own center. It "speaks to God....under the doorway," thrusting beyond itself, to a degree experiencing what it has heretofore only believed. But first, the grace of God must "devour" --the image implies a violent dissolution--the base influence wielded by the flesh upon the spirit.

In a sense, then, "Song" unites all three degrees of the spiritual life: "rain," or grace, has, with the soul's cooperation, helped it win out in the struggle to attain its center. By virtue of this attainment, the soul becomes "illuminated" in its "rude door", its center. The "drinking" depicts the first taste of the experiencing of the God-life, or union.

"Song" is primarily illustrative of the illuminative way, however, because it concerns itself with the withdrawal of the spirit so necessary in the eventual achievement of the center of the soul.

The two poems treated in this chapter dealt with the gradual freeing of the spirit of man, his soul, from a material preoccupation. The freeing agent, especially to be noted in the poem just analyzed, was the Holy Spirit. The poems manifest a widening of the spirit of the poet; his soul becomes conscious, almost to an extreme, of its material enslavement in the first poem, and in the second poem, he has, with the aid of the spirit, abrogated his material self until all that remains is the center of himself, his substance. He is thus conscious only of his own soul as a being which experiences the God-life. Merton's poetry becomes more Christian in "Song" because the material world and the material self are made to disappear. It is the spirit and only the spirit that is important.

This mystical progression will reach its conclusion in Chapter Four with the disappearance of the entire self in the mystical union. Christian poetry has reached its apex here; it can go no farther, as another step upward would banish the creative self.

CHAPTER IV

UNION

Several problems arise for the commentator when he begins the discussion of the unitive way, the mystical union itself. The most basic difficulty is perhaps one of communication: the concept of union is so intimate with the concept of spirit that it is discouraging to attempt its description in words. Words, however, are the only alternative to complete ignorance, even though the picture of mystical contemplation that they paint is as inadequate as can be a depiction of the supernatural by the natural, the supra-rational by the rational. Union, as has been said, is basically the actual experiencing of the realities of the Faith that were known before only through the virtue of faith. Infused contemplation is an absolute gift of God; man's activities, even in cooperation with grace, will avail him nothing if God does not choose to grant him the gift. The knowledge of God gained through mystical contemplation is the supernatural analogue of the connatural knowledge of which Maritain speaks in relation to the poet; however, the connatural knowledge of the

poet, on the natural level, differs in that it tends to create an external work of beauty. In the case of the true passive, or mystical, contemplative, there cannot be the desire to return to the world, to create; for at this point the soul has attached itself to the one Being Who can satisfy its desire for happiness.

Just what can be understood by the phrase "connatural knowledge of God?" It will be recalled that connatural knowledge is substantially a knowledge of self-identification--rather experience than knowledge, as Maritain says.

> Everything that he discerns and divines in things is thus perceived as inseparable from himself--and more precisely, as identical with himself. And all this he perceives in order to grasp his own being darkly within himself, by a knowledge which achieves itself only by being creative.[1]

Here, Maritain is discussing the poet, stressing that the poet's intuition, his grasp of his connatural relationship with external things, is "expressible only in a work."[2] For Maritain, this necessity of creation is basic to all of the Fine Arts because they are rooted in connatural knowledge, knowledge by intuition. It is for this reason that Maritain considers all of the Fine Arts as "Poetry" in the broad sense: all find their beginnings in this obscure act of connatural

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1 Maritain, "Poetic Experience," The Review of Politics, October, 1944, 395.

2 Idem.

knowledge, driving man to creation. The necessity of creation exemplifies the gulf between the connatural knowledge of mystical contemplation and its poetic analogue. Art is the expression of the complete man striving to depict his intimate communion with creation;[1] it is man-centered, and creation, as a function of man, makes connatural knowledge on this level wholly man's; man's creation puts his stamp of ownership upon his intuition; and so, without creation, artistic endeavor as man-at-work would not be. Self-identificative knowledge would not be of man without creation, because man has no other means for its expression.

On the other hand, a connatural knowledge of God is not man-centered--it finds its orientation in God. The true mystical contemplative has no need of the Fine Arts or of any art. Art is null and void for him, because it, on the natural level, cannot reach the plateau of infused contemplation. Contemplation has no need of man's creation, for man is himself submerged completely in this new union. It is God Who works, Who creates in man's soul, and thus man may merely give his consent as a passive instrument of God if he is favored with the contemplative gift. As Merton says,

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1 In Art and Scholasticism, Maritain defines Art (in general) as "the undeviating determination of work to be done" (p.7). (Not my italics).

> ....In this contact [through contemplation] we are no longer facing God as an "object" of experience or as a concept which we apprehend. We are united to Him in the mystery of love and its transcendant subjectivity, and see Him in ourselves by losing ourselves in Him.[1]

It must be remembered that this knowledge of God is rather experience: "experimental contact with Himself without the medium of sense species."[2] The individuality of the human ceases to be of importance in mystical contemplation. Thus the contemplative does not seek a precise self-identification with God, as the poet does with material things. His act, if thus motivated, would be futile and based on human pride. The "self" of the contemplative must not be his consideration, but his flight from self does not imply that the human loses his individuality in God. Such a conclusion is as erroneous as its opposite touched upon immediately above.

To "lose ourselves" in God, then, must mean the stilling of all of the faculties of man by this experimental knowledge of God. The root of "self," the substance of the soul, is absorbed in its contact with God. The result is that the self is not self-conscious, but utterly God-conscious, in a manner incomprehensible through a rational concept, because "object," by nature necessary to a conceptual grasping, is not present in this experience. "The mystery of love and

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1 Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," 90.

2 Idem.

its transcendent subjectivity", which is God Himself, is the Subject which can have no objectivity for the mystical contemplative. Subject remains; "self," in a sense "object," is mute. Treating of this nature of contemplation itself, Maritain discusses the respective doctrines of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross and finds them in "strict accord."

> ....charity, as it increases, transforms us in God, whom it attains immediately and in Himself, and since this increasingly perfect spiritualisation cannot be achieved without its repercussions in knowledge, because spirit is interior to itself, the Holy Spirit uses this very loving transformation in God, this supernatural connaturality, as the proper means to delectable and penetrating knowledge, which, in turn, renders the love of charity as possessive and fruitful as is possible here below.[1]

In short, (and in inadvertent oversimplification), mystical union is, first of all, a pure gift of God; it is knowledge of God, but a knowledge completely beyond the familiar knower-known framework. It is a knowledge in which man loses his self-consciousness, and becomes conscious only of God, by means of a spiritual experience. God is never the object of man's knowledge--He is the Subject, the Knower. Man, in other words, partially experiences God as He is, "the mystery of love and its transcendent subjectivity." Charity is basic to mystical contemplation. This charity is also manifested in a purification of the senses and a withdrawal of the spirit, touched upon in Chapter Three. As Maritain

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1 Maritain, Distinguish to Unite or the Degrees of Knowledge, trans. G.B.Phelan et al. (New York, 1959), p. 338.

states in the above quotation, this charity in man is reciprocated by a corresponding infusion of knowledge by the Holy Spirit, which, in turn, brings about an increase of charity in the soul, and thus yet further spiritualization. "To know God is to love Him; to love God is to know Him."

What was said above about the self in its relation to poetry and contemplation can be applied to the difference between illumination and union, though with a distinction instead of a dichotomy. The natural self is rightfully the prime consideration in Art; it cannot be so in mystical contemplation, as has been shown. However, on the supernatural levels of illumination and union, the difference consists in a change of emphasis: it is taken for granted that consciousness of self will ultimately disappear once the unitive level has been reached. The illuminated soul considers itself insofar as it is the stage, the "theater" of the act of union. In this regard it was remarked in Chapter Three that the illuminated soul is soul-oriented, in that it is concerned with itself as the instrument of union. In actual union, then, all consideration of self disappears; it is God-oriented.

The disappearance of self in God is the dominant impression conveyed by the poem now under analysis, "A Psalm," the third and final poem to be treated in this thesis. Through the gradual disappearance of self, an ever-widening

thread of spirit is produced. The fact that, in poetry, this thread can widen only so far becomes evident. The poet's creative self is vital to poetry; hence, poetry must stop short of the total absence of self-consciousness, which, when elevated by God's grace, becomes union. If the creative self disappears in the height of mystical experience, poetry is rendered impossible--unless God wills otherwise. The will of God is the heart of the resolution of the poetry-contemplation conflict discussed in Chapter One.

"A Psalm" is a lyric poem of 29 irregular lines and seven unbalanced stanzas. It follows:

> When psalms surprise me with their music
> And antiphons turn to rum
> The Spirit sings: the bottom drops out of my soul
>
> And from the center of my cellar, Love, louder
> than thunder
> Opens a heaven of naked air.
>
> New eyes awaken.
> I send Love's name into the world with wings
> And songs grow up around me like a jungle.
> Choirs of all creatures sing the tunes
> Your Spirit played in Eden.
> Zebras and antelopes and birds of paradise
> Shine on the face of the abyss
> And I am drunk with the great wilderness
> Of the sixth day in Genesis.
>
> But sound is never half so fair
> As when that music turns to air
> And the universe dies of excellence.
>
> Sun, moon and stars
> Fall from their heavenly towers.
> Joys walk no longer down the blue world's shore.

Though fires loiter, lights still fly on the air
of the gulf,
All fear another wind, another thunder:
Then one more voice
Snuffs all their flares in one gust.

And I go forth with no more wine and no more stars
And no more buds and no more Eden
And no more animals and no more sea:
While God sings by Himself in acres of night
And walls fall down, that guarded Paradise.[1]

The composition of "A Psalm" can be placed between the years 1946-1948 with some certainty. It has been noted that A Man in the Divided Sea appeared in 1946, and Figures For an Apocalypse in 1948. "A Psalm" was printed in The Commonweal for May 14, 1948, so it seems reasonable to assume that it was written during the same period that the poems collected in Figures For an Apocalypse were composed.

Heretofore, the writer has been utilizing the passage of time in his demonstration of the widening of the spirit in examples of Merton's poetry; not, as he has emphasized, to prove that Thomas Merton had been graced with a particular degree of the Spirit, but merely to demonstrate that the possibility for the attainment of such a degree would be more likely after a certain amount of time had been spent in Gethsemani. With "A Psalm," however, this chronological device, if it can be so called, breaks down. "A Psalm" appears in the same volume of verse as "Song", The Tears of the Blind

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1 Merton, The Tears of the Blind Lions, pp. 30-31.

Lions. Thus it must be placed in the same period as "Song," namely 1946-1949, since it also did not appear in Figures for an Apocalypse. The fact that "A Psalm" can be centered in the 1946-1948 period is a stronger indication of the failure of chronology here. If "A Psalm" had first appeared in 1953, for example, the writer could posit a further growth in the spirit with the passage of time. What should now be obvious is that the passage of time has little to do with the spiritual life in the primary sense; its growth is strictly dependent on the grace of God, which knows no time. To demonstrate that "A Psalm" manifests the unitive way, at the last outpost of Christian poetry, self and God, is the next task of the writer.

All of the conventional metrical feet can be recognized in a rudimentary scanning of "A Psalm". Spondees by far predominate in the medley of metrical forms. As in "Song," there are several instances of dangling syllables. Coupled with the fact that scarcely two of the lines possess the same number of feet, the heavy use of spondees and the presence of the dangling syllables again points to a sense-stress rhythm. "A Psalm" seems to be an example of free verse, in that it utilizes imagery sans definite form. The name of the poem is an indication that it was inspired by the choir-singing of the Gethsemani monks. The two opening

stanzas are the imagic description of what lies before the eyes of the illuminated soul. The rapture, the sudden seizure of the soul by the infusion of grace is expressed in the entire poem by the use of stressed syllables, assonance, alliteration and here and there direct rhyme. Accordingly, in the first line of the poem, the two stresses "psalms surprise" are alliterative and convey the sudden force and the simple beauty that is Gregorian chant. "Antiphons turn to run" is a colorful image. Through the chanting of the antiphons the spirit of the poet is intoxicated, it is removed, as it were, from self, and it is enabled to hear the singing voice of the Spirit. The colon following "sings:" is of importance. It means that what follows, the remainder of the first stanza and the equally brief second stanza (actually a logical part of the first) is the direct result of the singing of the Spirit.

The rapidity and the suddenness of the infusion of grace is like the springing of a trap-door: "the bottom drops out of my soul" and the poet enters "the center of my cellar", which is the center of himself, the substance of his soul. The alliterative "center" and "cellar" emphasize the penetration to the core of self. The first half of "A Psalm" stresses this approach to the soul's essence, and the resulting chords struck in the soul by God's creation through the medium

of the "new eyes" opened by grace. "Love, louder than thunder," reveals an entire heaven of Spirit to the poet. "Love" is Subjectivity, the Spirit, God; and "air" seems to develop an image which comes as close as the poet can approach to the immensity, majesty and infinitude of Who is God.

The tone of the third stanza, the longest of the poem, is musical and Eden-like. All is prolific, herbiferous, as in the first days of creation. The psalms sung by the poet manifest the Subject, Love, and they are carried into the world by the permeating rise and fall of the chant. The next line, "And songs grow up...." begins a train of thought which concludes deep in metaphysics. The poet implies that his surroundings sprout hymns of praise to God. "Like a jungle" conveys lush greenery, abundant life. The line is symbolistic, almost an echo of the poems from the "cold forest" of "Song." The imagery of Genesis, which is a birth and a beginning, is apt for the effect of the proximity of Love on the illuminated soul, because here the soul begins a new phase of its supernatural life. The tune the Spirit played in Eden was the harmony of the Divine Essence, likened to creatures and imaged in man. There are many connotations in the two lines beginning "Choirs of all creatures....", and principal among them is the fact that the being and the individuality of all God's creatures is one of the most vociferous signs

that they are of God. Just by being, then, creatures give praise to the Creator. Their being is intimately connected to their natures and it is through this ordering of means to ends that every creature achieves its perfection. It is man alone whose ultimate perfection is not of this world: here the two lines bear upon the illuminated soul. By its proximity to grace, the recollected soul is granted sharp realization of its true nature--that of an immortal being, properly destined to live with God in eternity. This realization brings about the preoccupation with Genesis in the poem, for it was at the time of Genesis that natures were ordered to ends, and man was made in God's image and likeness. Perhaps it is a flash of Hopkins' inscape that weaves itself through these lines and the two lines following

> Zebras and antelopes and birds of paradise
> Shine on the face of the abyss

because the beauties of creation, the economy and the reasonableness of the overflow of divine Love show the poet's preoccupation with the individual. "The face of the abyss" is the earth. "And now God said, Let the waters below the vault collect in one place to make dry land appear."[1] Prior to this, all had been the primordial deep, the abyss of the Hebrew cosmogony. The creatures here, weird in comparison to the deep,

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1 Gen. 1:9.

bring their graceful beauty to a dark land.

The line ending with "abyss" rhymes with the two concluding lines of the stanza. These two final lines, by means of a contrasted use of pyhrric and spondaic feet, give the true erratic effect of drunkenness, and again express the poet's actual intoxication with creation. Moses tells of the "sixth day in Genesis:"

> And God said, Let us make man, wearing our own image and likeness; let us put him in command of the fishes in the sea, and all that flies through the air, and the cattle, and the whole earth, and all the creeping things that move on the earth. So God made man in his own image, made him in the image of God. Man and woman both, he created them. And God pronounced his blessing on them, Increase and multiply and fill the earth, and make it yours; take command of the fishes in the sea, and all that flies through the air, and all the living things that move on the earth. Here are all the herbs, God told them, that seed on earth, and all the trees, that carry in them the seeds of their own life, to be your food; food for all the beasts on the earth, all that flies in the air, all that creeps along the ground; here all that lives shall find its nourishment.[1]

The next short stanza is a statement of the theme of the poem and characterizes the abrupt transition which occurs when the illuminated soul receives the grace of union. "Music turns to air"--the sounds of man vanish and are replaced by the "cyclonic" silence of the grace of God. As a result, all that is matter is left far below; there is too much spirit here for it to survive, and it "dies," it is forgotten.

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1 Gen. 1:26-30.

On the external level of the three final stanzas of "A Psalm," the poet demonstrates the true sublimity of the psalms themselves. It was their purpose to make the "universe die of excellence." Substantially, however, these lines are an attempt to depict just what occurs when the soul approaches actual union.

The burden of the three stanzas is the classic "Dark Night of the Soul," which is the primary effect of the act of union upon the soul. The concept was treated by St. John of the Cross in his Dark Night of the Soul. It may be easier to grasp the significance of the "Dark Night" in the light of the three final stanzas of "A Psalm." Maritain says that

> ....contemplation is a night wherein the soul foregoes the use of distinct ideas and all formulated knowledge, passes beyond and above the human mode of concepts to undergo divine things in the infused light of faith by means of love and all the effects God produces in the soul united to Him by love. And this is, as Dionysius says, like a ray of darkness for the intellect.[1]

By "ray of darkness" Maritain means that the infused light of faith is absolutely unintelligible to the intellect. The intellect is frustrated and sometimes filled with feelings bordering on despair at its inadequacy to grasp the new knowledge which fills the soul. Since intellect and will work so closely together, it can be seen that the unitive

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1 Maritain, The Degrees of Knowledge, p. 339.

way can bring great distress of the mind, which is capable of considering itself thwarted of its due knowledge of the truth. The lives of all true mystics have this chapter of great tribulation: the battle waged by the natural intellect against the influx of the spirit. The human is positive that he cannot perceive the new mystical knowledge because his intellect is incapable of grasping it. The direct result in many minds is despair, which apparently can be overcome only by continued prayer and perseverance.

Proceeding with the analysis of "A Psalm," then, the first stanza of the final trilogy is a simple statement. "Sun, moon and stars" refer to the material creation, and also include the intellectual activity of man. There can be no joy in the "blue world," it is material, and because of this materiality, it does not satisfy even the intellect of man. To carry the train of thought to the individual seeking God, the natural intellect is incapable of alleviating man's thirst for the "mystery of love and its transcendent subjectivity." The final two stanzas of the poem are reminiscent of some of Rimbaud's fragmentary prose poems. The language is simple, and the symbol common, but like Rimbaud's work, it is here the sense derangement and the juxtaposition of usually disparate terms which delivers the impact of the poetic insight. In the first of the final pair of stanzas,

men are gathered upon a shore which borders a vast gulf of darkness, an image of the soul poised at its center. The storm imagery expresses the suddenness of the soul's seizure by the infusion of grace. The loitering fires are the vestiges of men's selves, their material lives, their intellectual activities. At the lightning on the "air" of the gulf, which is the grace of God, men fear that their last cherished bits of self will be lost. Their feeble clingings and protests are not enough; the voice, the Word, Love itself overpowers them. The storm imagery, "snuff," "flares," "gust," imply that a great silence falls as self disappears. This impression is continued in the concluding stanza of "A Psalm." The first three lines, with the iteration of "no more," give emphasis to the reality that man now sets forth without himself. The vast universe, the perfections of material creation that properly give joy to man, the satisfaction of creative activity, all have vanished.

In their place is God, Who sings as he loves and loves as he exists--by Himself, in Himself, unintelligible to the mind of man. Only a phrase like "acres of night" can begin to convey the immensity of the Subject of union. Likened to the walls of Jericho and Josue's trumpets, the wall that blocks the soul's center from union is breached by grace. A portion of Paradise becomes the soul's to experience.

Three examples of the poetry of Thomas Merton have been analysed in Chapters Three and Four of this thesis. Merton's own description of Christian poetry as "contemplative" poetry has been used in establishing these poems as Christian poems. It was shown that "contemplation" is closely related to the spirit, and that any "contemplative" poetry must needs be centered in the spirit, and give its symbols foundation in a reality beyond the material. It has been noted that in each poem the emphasis on spirit has become progressively greater, while the emphasis on the material has been proportionately lessened. As far as Merton's poetry is concerned, the widening of the spirit has been illustrative of the so-called "three degrees" of the mystical progression: purgation, illumination, and union. This illustration has been caused by the fact that Merton seeks the gift of mystical contemplation, a factor that has already been pointed out. Merton's poetry is Christian because the revelation of Christ regarding Himself, His Father and the Holy Spirit is the focal point which is the reason for his life as a poet and as a monk.

If contemplation in the general sense, meaning a spiritual withdrawal from worldly things and a determination to perform the will of God above all else, is at the heart of Christianity, then it must logically be at the heart of

Christian poetry. Another manner of expressing "spiritual withdrawal from worldly things" is to say that the Christian poet must become more and more concerned with the spirit--meaning the immateriality of his own soul in all its implications. This concern will result in the egoism of Rimbaud unless it is Christ who is recognised as the foundation of any immateriality, and its logical conclusion. If the spirit is placed in its proper light, the light of the Holy Spirit, the poet's work will gradually become centered in the spirit, though material things will rightfully remain as the building blocks of the poems. Because the poet deals with particulars, he can never divorce himself completely from the world. He must be a symbolist, a seer and a creator--an active worker in the apostolate of the intuition.

The assumption here is that the Christian poet must desire to communicate. This desire need not be, and should not be, primary to the act of creation which produces the work of beauty, the poem. But men have souls, and they have the intuitive faculty, if it can be so called, at the root of their souls, even though, as Merton says, it can become "atrophied.... through neglect and misuse." The poet goes a long step beyond the philosopher and two long steps beyond the scientist: his grasp is not of dimensions or concepts, but of <u>particular wholes</u>. He is as concerned with being as

is the metaphysician, but for the poet being is not a concept, it is a totality, and a particular totality. He works at the "apex" of the soul, and his tool is the whole soul, "blood and spirit together."

The Christian poet will be unable to consider his grasp of a particular whole as beautiful in relation to anything but some vague ideal Beauty unless Christ is, as Merton says, at the center of his life and his inspiration. The beautiful particulars which he creates are beautiful because they are reflections of the Divine Essence which he also perceives within himself. He strives to create this relationship in a poem. His work is beautiful because it cannot be otherwise; the integrity and the proportion of created things are highlights of the core of the beautiful: the _splendor formae_, the intangible shining forth of the latent perfection of the thing, which stamps it as being of God. Unless the poet is in the Christian tradition, he will miss these factors. The soul, instead of an immortal creature destined for union with God, can become the center of the created universe, and thus be as narrow as itself.

Very few poets, of course, write mystical poetry as Merton does, or did (again, whether or not he has given up his art is open to speculation). However, the emphasis on mystical poetry in this thesis is illustrative of the most

important fact for the Christian poet: that Christ in the Holy Spirit must be the goal and the lifeblood of Christian poetry. It was mentioned above that the Christian poet has an apostolate to glorify God throughhis art and intuition. In a world in which society has lost contact with the reality behind symbols, the Christian poet, who works in symbols, must furnish the adhesive to once more attach material symbol to spiritual reality. This he can do if he sets out to revivify the dead esthetic faculty of society with a poetry leavened and inspired by Christ in the Holy Spirit. In concrete terms, this simply means that the poet must live as a true Christian if he is to write true Christian poetry.

Christian poetry utilizes man's instinct for the beautiful to present the whole Christ to the whole man. The essence of the position a Christian poetry should hold in the Church may well be delivered in the words of Charles Baudelaire: "it is that immortal instinct for the beautiful which makes us consider the world and its pageants as a glimpse of, a correspondence with, Heaven. The insatiable thirst for everything beyond, which life reveals, is the liveliest proof of our immortality. It is at once by poetry and through poetry, by music and through music, that the soul perceives what splendours shine behind the tomb...."[1]

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1 Charles Baudelaire, L'art romantique, quoted by Maritain in Art and Scholasticism, p. 26

APPENDIX

MERTON'S POETRY — SOME CRITICAL EVALUATION

Much critical comment followed the appearance of all of Merton's volumes of poetry. It was difficult, however, for the writer of this thesis to find critical remarks on the three poems analyzed in Chapters Three and Four. It will be remembered that the poem "The Sponge Full of Vinegar" appeared originally in Thirty Poems and then in A Man in the Divided Sea; both "Song" and "A Psalm" appeared in The Tears of the Blind Lions."

By and large, the weight of critical opinion seems to have been in Merton's favor. The consensus seemed to follow Robert Lowell's lead:

> Merton is a modest, not altogether satisfactory minor writer. But he is, also, as far as my experience goes, easily the most promising of our American Catholic poets and, possibly, the most consequential Catholic poet to write in English since the death of Francis Thompson.[1]

John Frederick Nims, reviewing A Man in the Divided Sea, said of Merton's so-called "religious" poetry:

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1 Robert Lowell, "The Verses of Thomas Merton, "The Commonweal, XLII (June 22, 1945), 240 (Lowell was reviewing Thirty Poems).

> the direct statement of these poems has been achieved at the expense of poetic quality: technically, everything is too bland and easy....perhaps his poetic shortcomings (there is no doubt of his spiritual success) are due to the rarefied ether of his love: the ineffability of much religious experience makes it poor matter for poetry ....Nevertheless, Merton's admirers are almost right in asserting him the best Catholic poet since Francis Thompson (himself no giant amount English poets).... his mild but genuine talent is of importance: like his favorite saint his is a precursor, a voice crying in what has been too long a wilderness.[1]

Robert Gorham Davis, in a review of The Tears of the Blind Lions, says that

> the poems are all religious, and joyously so, but not mystical....there is not much lyric melody or thoughtful and self-concerned contemplation....it is far different, for instance, in tone and shifts of mood from Eliot's "Ash Wednesday"--but there is a tremendous vigor and great pictorial beauty.[2]

The writer does not agree with this review, as far as Davis' denial of anything "mystical" or "contemplative" is concerned. It is the writer's opinion that the two poems from "The Tears of the Blind Lions" analyzed in this thesis are on their ultimate levels nothing short of "mystical" or "contemplative." Davis apparently considers Merton to be another nature poet in the vein of Rimbaud, which he certainly is. But Merton as a poet-monk is striving for something more than Rimbaud's

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1 John Frederick Nims, "A Poet of Genuine Talent," Saturday Review, XXIX (October 26, 1946), 36.

2 Robert Gorham Davis, "Where Silence Is a Ministry," Saturday Review, XXXIII (February 11, 1950), 31.

vague goal—and Merton's way to his goal is through the mystic progression.

A New Yorker review of The Tears of the Blind Lions had this to say:

> Religious feeling expressed, as it is here, in images that combine the extravagance of Surrealism with that of the baroque requires a strong underlying sincerity. That sincerity exists, but the verse often becomes dangerously strained and overcharged.[1]

Again speaking of A Man in the Divided Sea, John Berber remarked:

> It is not until Merton has entered fully into Catholicism as a direct spiritual experience, until, in fact, he has felt its tradition in terms of his own mystic necessities, that his poetry changes its character. The baroque element disappears to a great extent....principally, he has gained in passion, in spiritual insight, and in lyric presentation....[2]

The only remarks available which were directed at one of the poems of this thesis were Lowell's, who was not too impressed with the final line of "The Sponge Full of Vinegar," "Reeks of the death-thirst manlife found in the forbidden apple." He considered this to be carrying Hopkins too far. However, he thought the opening line, "When Romans gambled in the clash of lancelight," to be a very effective use of a Hopkins device.[3]

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1 The New Yorker, XXVI (March 11, 1950), 93.

2 John Berber, Poetry, LXIX (December, 1946), 165.

3 Lowell, "The Verses of Thomas Merton," 242.

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