

THE LOVE POEMS OF THOMAS MERTON: On Being a Hermit in Love

by **Bill Koch**

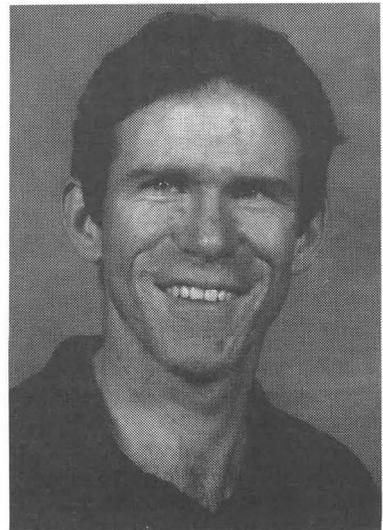
I can't recall when I first heard of Thomas Merton's "love affair." It must not have startled me. Perhaps I had learned of it while I was in a religious order and so knew first hand that vows don't turn off human emotions or needs. This aspect of Merton's life did shock an undergraduate student I met while I was in graduate school at St. Louis University. She had just written a lengthy paper on some aspect of Merton's spirituality and seemed unprepared to face this human side of the monk. I could tell that she considered the matter a little unseemly.

That Thomas Merton's relationship with "M" (or "S") was highly irregular must not detract from the fact that it was also a profound and enriching experience for the both of them. This fact comes through in *Eighteen Poems*, Merton's verse inspired by his love of "M," and in Doug Burton-Christie's lucid and appreciative analysis of these poems in the Spring 1989 issue of *Cross Currents*.¹ Burton-Christie approaches these poems as expressions of Merton's new understanding of himself as a monk and a human being and as a contribution to a "spirituality of ecstatic love" that doesn't minimize the physical aspects of mystical love. Both Merton and his spirituality, one might say, became more humanized because he gained a wiser understanding of love.

Before examining major themes of the poetry,

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1. Doug Burton-Christie, "Rediscovering Love's World: Thomas Merton's Love Poems and the Language of Ecstasy," *Cross Currents* 39 (Spring 1989).



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Burton-Christie does outstanding work tracing the anti-materialistic dimensions of Merton's mysticism, a centuries-old denigration of the physical in one's quest for union with God. Burton-Christie shows that Merton's acquaintance with "M" occurred during the critical time when Merton had come to understand that "certain desires and certain pleasures are willed for us by God. We cannot live in the truth if we automatically suspect all desires and all pleasures. It is humility to accept our humanity, pride to reject it."² Equipped with this insight (which, by the way, is a very Catholic one), Merton was courageous to deal openly and honestly with his feelings about "M" and not retreat to horror and guilt. This insight also represents, Burton-Christie feels, Merton's new sense of his own humanity: rather than seeing need as a sign of imperfect love, or of a lack of detachment, he now saw neediness as a source of life.

The poems themselves, Burton-Christie notes, abound with the theme of neediness and woundedness, that being vulnerable to love is the human condition that even monks must not deny. This young nurse awoke in Merton the awareness that he had cut himself off from life behind walls of religious certitude and dogma. He had security, but neither wisdom nor life. Those few months when they saw each other made the monk vulnerable to many human emotions, temptations and psychic wounds, yet it was within this chaos that he experienced the healing and renewing power of "love's world."

Another important theme that Burton-Christie astutely outlines is the creative function of Merton's and "M"'s love. Notwithstanding the impropriety of being a hermit in love, Merton spoke of their love in highly charged religious and theological terms. His poems, not being idealized, sentimental verse, but very personal communications to his beloved, as Burton-Christie stresses, reveal the sacramental nature by which Merton cherished this woman. Ironically, any married couple sensitive to the sacramental dimension of their relationship can benefit from this Cistercian's experience of human love. Here are a couple of quotations from my own reading:

Why has God created you to be in the center of my
being? You are utterly holy to me, you have become a
focus of inaccessible light.³

Sun will shine
From our two bodies
When we walk in paradise wood
Looking and inventing
One may love

We bring glad life
To all white-waving fields
To our handsome earth
And we go worshipping together
All over the world's heaven⁴

2. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), p. 20; quoted by Burton-Christie, p. 69.

3. Thomas Merton, "Certain Proverbs Arise Out of Dreams" in *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985), unpaginated.

4. Thomas Merton, "Six Night Letters, No. II" in *Eighteen Poems*.

Due to this very human love, Merton gained a new understanding of mystical love. As Burton-Christie says, “He came to discover that the experience of being ‘rapt’ in ecstatic love could occur, not only as a private, spiritual experience, shared by God and himself, but also in physical, intimate relationship with a lover” (p. 65). By 1966, having been a monk for twenty-five years, Thomas Merton was demonstrating through his writing on social issues, literary criticism, religious ecumenism and dialogue that he had achieved a significant degree of intellectual depth and maturity. Now (providentially, one might say), he was getting there on an emotional level.

Burton-Christie sketches out this “new man” Thomas Merton by looking at several other themes in *Eighteen Poems*, but perhaps none is so poignant as that inevitable theme (for Merton and “M”) of the pain of separation. In reading these poems, I myself was struck by the frequency of the image of the love-smitten hermit bravely facing, alone in his silent hermitage, the ache of separation:

I am waiting now pacing up and down
 In this uneasy lonely place
 Waiting once again to live
 And at war with my own heart
 Because I cannot be there
 To see your eyes reveal you
 Opening not only to the light of my day
 But to my own eyes and waiting heart ⁵

Burton-Christie points out that though the separation was frustrating, it was also creative. It is again laudable that Merton did not wail in romantic self-pity, nor did he stoically stem the tide of tears. Rather, he used the separation to explore the depths of the union that their love had created. Merton found solace in the fact that the copper wire of the telephone gave them an “instantaneous/ loving charge,” that though in different places they both could watch the moonrise together, and that in his early morning vigil she awakens not alone, but “within him.”

Burton-Christie suggests that “the tension between their separation and enduring union is nowhere more eloquently expressed than in the poem “Aubade on a Cloudy Morning” (p. 80). I do not challenge his judgment of the poem, but only take friendly issue with him to suggest that “For M. on a Cold Grey Morning” (which he misidentifies on p. 75 as “For M. in October”) is just as eloquent and offers a strikingly personal image for uniting the separated lovers.

Remember that in December of 1965, Merton had learned from John Wu that his name in Chinese, Mei Teng, meant “silent lamp.” I do not know if, ten months later, he consciously used this image of himself as a symbol of their plight, but its poignancy is dramatic, heart-rending, and brilliant.

A grey good morning and rain
 And melting snow
 Far from any help
 Or love, I am warmer
 At least wanting you.

Sorry in the grey
 Weather without lights
 Far from any other center

5. Thomas Merton, “Aubade on a Cloudy Morning” in *Eighteen Poems*.

I nurse one inner lamp
 Our common need
 Which is our common presence

It burns alone
 And still
 In the wet dark and for us,
 Lighting a dry place in me
 I do not know
 Because it is myself
 Love's inner cell
 Where I am glad to be a prisoner
 Since I am prisoner with you.

While you come back to life in distant rain
 Looking perhaps at the dark river
 With blurred eyes
 Still full of dreams
 And think of me in my hills,
 You wake in me, darling.

We are nearer than we know
 Love has another
 Place of its own
 Nearer to you than hill or city:
 Nearer than your own mirror
 You wake in another room
 And the bed where you slept
 Is a nest in my heart.⁶

By taking a very personal symbol of himself (perhaps unconsciously) and making it a symbol of the two of them, he reversed the image of the "two shall become one." Now, in a sense, he was whole, though totally alone. Now he had personified the integration of the feminine (Sophia/ Wisdom) into his personality that had come through the fire of a flesh-and-blood relationship.

Perhaps the most important legacy of this episode in Merton's life was that a theological truth had become concretized in his life. The Church has consistently proclaimed that life is an epiphany of the Father Who is love. I'm sure Merton has said as much in his writing. Now the epiphany had occurred through a relationship. This ecstasy was human-bound, but it too was full of divine, cosmic love. Burton-Christie is correct, I would submit, when he writes that Merton's love and its poetry can contribute to a fruitful "spirituality of ecstatic love" that is meaningful for the twenty-first century. Surely the hermit of Gethsemani was on shaky ground: the tremors of love's world were breaking into his own.

6. Thomas Merton, "For M. on a Cold Grey Morning" in *Eighteen Poems*.