

THIRTY POEMS AFTER FIFTY YEARS

by **Patrick F. O'Connell**

In his recent book on Thomas Merton's Christology, George Kilcourse has renewed his call for greater attention to Merton's poetry¹ Despite the book length study of Sr. Therese Lentfoehr, and helpful contributions by Victor Kramer, Ross Labrie, Michael Mott, Anthony Padovano, George Woodcock, Kilcourse himself and others, it is true that the poems have been relatively neglected by Merton readers and scholars.² The reasons are not difficult to find: the sheer bulk of Merton's output in verse, as represented by the 1,030 pages of **The Collected Poems**; the greater accessibility of the prose works, both more widely available and more readily comprehended; the uneven quality of the material; the fact that poetry in general appeals to a more restricted audience than prose. Nevertheless, the poetry is an important part of Merton's oeuvre, both as a resource for understanding significant aspects of his thought, some of which do not find extensive development in the prose writings, and in the case of the best of his poems, as literary works well worth reading in their own right. The increased attention paid in recent years to the long, difficult poems from the final period of Merton's life, **Cables to the Ace** and **The Geography of Lograire**, evidence a growing awareness of both these factors, but it has not generally been matched by comparable notice of most of the shorter lyrics which make up the major portion of Merton's poetic corpus.

Approaching the poetry on a book-by-book basis rather than *in toto* might pose a less daunting challenge for the reader who would like to become more familiar with the poems but is unsure of the best way to do so. November, 1994 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the appearance of **Thirty Poems**, the first of Merton's published books.³ Perhaps this milestone will provide an incentive to become better acquainted with these "first fruits" of Merton's poetry, not only on the principle of starting at the beginning, but because Merton himself continued to regard it as a quite successful work, rating it "better" (the highest rank any volumes were given) on his 1967 graph evaluating his books.⁴ What follows is an attempt to provide some general orientation to **Thirty Poems**, for those coming to the book for the first time or returning for a closer look.

An appropriate starting point for understanding and appreciating **Thirty Poems** is the awareness that it is rightly attributed to the authorship of Thomas Merton, rather than M. Louis Merton, OCSO (thus setting a precedent which would be followed for the dozens of books to come). The vast majority of the poems included in the volume were composed before Merton became a Cistercian; though the best known and arguably the best, poem in the collection, the elegy on his brother, was of course written in the monastery, most of the poems date from his time at St. Bonaventure College in upstate New York.⁵ Even the one explicitly monastic piece, "The



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Trappist Abbey: Matins,” was written shortly after his initial visit there during Holy Week, 1941, not after his entrance into Gethsemani.⁶ Therefore the poems offer insight into Merton’s preoccupations during the period leading up to his decision to become a monk. They provide a good index of Merton’s interests and attitudes at this crucial time, and suggest both continuities and changes between the premonastic and monastic years. In some cases the themes and ideas even seem closer to those of the mature Merton in the last decade of his life than to the more restricted focus of the early monastic years.

A cautionary note needs to be included here, however, as to the contents of **Thirty Poems**. They represent a selection of Merton’s early verse, made principally not by Merton himself but by his Columbia mentor, Mark Van Doren.⁷ For a complete picture of Merton as poet in this period, one needs to examine as well the first half, roughly, of his next volume, **A Man in the Divided Sea**, which contains poems from the same time which were not included in **Thirty Poems**,⁸ the generally less religious verse of **Early Poems, 1940-42**, which did not appear until 1971,⁹ and even the remaining early poetry included in the alphabetically arranged “Uncollected Poems” section of **The Collected Poems**.¹⁰ Thus **Thirty Poems** gives us a view, but not the definitive view, of the early Merton as poet. But it can be safely said that Van Doren chose wisely and perceptively, resulting in a volume which does provide a representative if incomplete picture of Merton’s central concerns, as poet and as Christian, during the months which led up to his decision to become a Trappist and during his early days in the novitiate.

What are the principal themes which emerge from a careful reading of **Thirty Poems**? We do not find much evidence, to use George Woodcock’s terms,¹¹ either of “The Poetry of the Choir” (verse with a monastic focus) or of “The Poetry of the Desert” (except for “The Flight into Egypt” and “Prophet”); nor does the “via negativa,” the way of emptiness and silence, play a major role in this collection (only the frame verse of “The Holy Child’s Song,” beginning “When midnight occupied the porches of the poet’s reason,” and perhaps the refrain of The Communion” [“O sweet escape! O smiling flight!], with its echo of St. John of the Cross, suggest this more “mystical approach).

Perhaps the predominant impression of the volume as a whole is of a poet vividly aware of the spiritual dimensions of the natural world: it is a collection saturated with an awareness of nature as sacrament, as epiphany of the divine. Thus the cycle of the seasons is repeatedly aligned with the patterns of the liturgical year: in “The Messenger” the coming of spring is juxtaposed to and implicitly aligned with the coming of the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary. In “The Vine,” the pruning process and eventual flowering are recognized as analogues of the passion and resurrection of Christ. In “The Evening of the Visitation,” the “evening journey” of the “Full moon, wise queen” parallels the journey of Mary to “the house of Zachary.” In a number of the poems, reference is made specifically to the eucharistic elements in their natural setting, as in “the shining vineyards” and “hills of wheat” of “The Communion,” the “growing wheat” and “sweet and wounded vine” of “Aubade: Lake Erie,” the “gay wheatfields” and “glances . . . as good as wine” of “The Holy Child’s Song.”

Frequently this sacramental vision is associated specifically with the innocence of children. In “Aubade: Lake Erie,” it is the “innocent children” who recognize “the hay-colored sun” as “our morning cousin,” while the adult tramps, “A hundred dusty Lutherans,” are unheeding of the inner meaning of the landscape. In “The Winter’s Night,” the children’s expectation of a revelation is satisfied at the poem’s conclusion as the moon and stars are perceived as heavenly visitors. In “Evening,” the children are able to respond with a simplicity and wonder to the beauty of the twilight world in a way adults cannot.

There is also apparent a kind of “spiritual geography” in many of the poems, a sense of cosmic unity represented by the compass points, as in “In Memory of the Spanish Poet Federico Garcia Lorca”: “In the four quarters of the world, the wind is still”; in “The Evening of the Visitation”: “Go, roads, to the four quarters of our quiet distance”; In “St. Agnes: A Responsory”: “Her charity is flown to four horizons. . . .” Another pattern is that of contrast between sacred and profane landscapes, as most memorably in “The Trappist Abbey:

Matins," where the orderly departure of the "pilgrim moon" up the "long avenue of trees" leading from the monastery is juxtaposed with the train which "runs, lost, . . . Where fire flares, somewhere, over a sink of cities." A similar contrast structures "The Flight into Egypt" where the deadly threats of "The wintry city" are contrasted with the safety of the "singing desert." In "Holy Communion: The City," "the jungles of our waterpipes and iron ladders: are countered by the interior landscapes in which mass bells transform the "sounds" of "our dry and fearful spirit" into "vineyards."

Another major theme of these poems is the interpenetration of biblical and contemporary events. Sometimes this is indirect, as in "The Flight into Egypt" where the implications for the present are only suggested by such details as "the dark steps of the tenements" which "Herod's police / Make shudder" as they search for the Christ Child. More frequently the connections are explicit, as with the application of the passage on the wise and foolish virgins (part of Merton's broader fascination with images of light), which is present in no less than three of the poems: "The Winter's Night," where the expectant children are compared to "sleepy virgins" who "stir, and trim their lamps"; "The Trappist Abbey: Matins," in which the soul awakened by the bells summoning the monks to prayer is told, "Burn in the country night / Your wise and sleepless lamp"; and "The Holy Sacrament of the Altar," where the intellect is commanded, "Be kindled" even though "your strongest lamps are night-lights" before the radiance of the Lamb, the Church's Bridegroom. It is, of course, the events of the Passion which evoke the most strongly this sense of participation in the scriptural drama: at times the identification with the oppressors of Christ, as in "Lent in a Year of War," where the figures ask, "What if it was our thumbs put out the sun / When the Lance and Cross made their mistake?"; more directly, the speaker in "An Argument: Of the Passion of Christ" recognizes in Christ's sufferings "the work my hands had made," while in "The Sponge Full of Vinegar" the speaker pictures his offering of prayer, like the drink given to the crucified Jesus, as soured, "Reek[ing] of the death-thirst manlife found in the forbidden apple." In "The Trappist Abbey: Matins," the soul is offered two alternatives, to identify either with the wise virgins carrying their lamps or with the mob bringing smoky torches to seize Christ in the garden. This pattern of involvement in the Passion is most crucial in the two elegies, for Garcia Lorca and John Paul Merton, whose deaths are identified with the redemptive death of Christ, and so offer the hope of resurrection.

These last two poems are also part of a broader group which confronts the issue of war, particularly the war currently raging in Europe: this topic is found in the opening poem, "Lent in a Year of War," which concludes with the apocalyptic vision of "the north-south horizon parting like a string!" It is evident in "The Dark Morning," which finds evil not just in the external enemy but in the inner self of "the prisoner," presumably imprisoned by his own selfish desires, "Whose heart is his Germany / Favored with anger." "The Night Train" laments "the deaths of the cathedrals" in wartime France. "Iphigenia: Politics" seems to refer to the Fall of France in 1940 in particular (cf. the line about "Our minds . . . bleaker than the hall of mirrors," an allusion to Versailles, where the surrender took place), but has a more universal application to the sacrifice of innocence and truth, symbolized by the figure of the daughter of Agamemnon, in pursuit of political ends, with its dire conclusions, "And the world has become a museum."

These prominent themes, the revelatory power of nature, the innocent vision of the child, the geography of the spirit, participation in the events of the Gospels, particularly the Passion, the religious dimensions of political and social issues, are all concerns which will continue, or reemerge, in Merton's later writings, both prose and poetry, sometimes in quite different form or with a new focus, but not without elements of similarity as well. They suggest that to ignore the poetry is to miss or minimize the process of development which takes place in Merton's thought and in his writings, to have a perception of Merton which is less than complete, less than balanced.

Such an oversight is also to miss some satisfying, even exhilarating, literary experiences. It cannot be denied that there are some problematic elements in Merton's early poems (as in his later ones). The figures of

speech, especially the similes, are at times rather banal and commonplace, at other times straining for originality. Some of the poems need a tighter structure. At times the conclusions are weak, as in the line “O gentle Mary! Our lovely Mother in Heaven!” (“The Evening of the Visitation”), or in returning once too often to the technique of ending the poem with the opening line(s) (“Prophet”; “Poem: Watching, among the rifled branches”; “The Holy Child’s Song”). Some seem a bit too enamored of a quasi-surrealistic approach which doesn’t quite work.

But the collection as a whole seems to me a considerable achievement, and at least a handful of poems are quite successful, memorable and well crafted. In addition to “For My Brother,” which I have discussed elsewhere,¹² the poems from this first collection which I consider particularly impressive include:

— “The Flight into Egypt”: the pattern of flight from the evils of the city to the purity and simplicity of the desert, which nevertheless leaves open for the future a return to the city to confront and redeem the forces of evil, serves as a paradigm for much of the polarity of Merton’s own subsequent life and thought, while maintaining a consistent scriptural focus;

— “Song for Our Lady of Cobre”: this famous poem is successful not only due to the delicate balance of opposites which structures its first three sections, but because of the poignance of the final lines, “And all the pieces of the mosaic, earth, / Get up and fly away like birds,” which suggest how fleeting the vision of authentic unity and complementarity often is;

— “The Regret”: this poem reverses the dominant pattern of the volume and presents a failure of vision, a missed epiphany, a lack of correspondence between the seasonal cycle and the movements of the spirit; it includes the most complex use of the imagery of prisons and captivity which is pervasive throughout the collection;

— “Aubade: Lake Erie”: how can someone who can walk to the shore of Lake Erie on his lunch hour not like the poem? definitely pre-ecumenical, but a lovely evocation of Merton’s Franciscan sensibility, in which the voices of the children are an invitation to wholeness which is unheeded by the busy but aimless world of adults who miss the signs of salvation all around them;

— “Evening”: this quiet, unpretentious poem is perhaps the most perfect expression of Merton’s “Songs of Innocence,” the Edenic vision of the child, previous to “Grace’s House”; an easily overlooked gem;

— “The Trappist Abbey: Matins”: a strong candidate for the best poem in the volume: its use of contrast between the peace of the monastic landscape and the chaos of the city is both scripturalized and personalized by the parallel opposition between the lamps of the virgins and the torches of the betrayers, all tied together by the final allusion to Gethsemani, both garden and abbey, where the challenge of Christ is definitely posed to the soul, which like the apostles who fled is invited to repent and be restored;

— “An Argument: Of the Passion of Christ”: the only poem consistently to use rhyme and meter, its tetrameter quatrains and couplets inevitably recall Merton’s model here, Andrew Marvell, and the “argument” itself is in the metaphysical tradition, with more than a dash of Dylan Thomas as well; a strong poem, both in form and content, suggesting what Merton might have accomplished had he worked more often (as perhaps he should have) in more traditional and restricted forms;

— “The Sponge Full of Vinegar”: an almost Protestant look at the inadequacies of even our good deeds, closest in tone to John Donne of all the poems in the volume; a strange choice, given its somber, even dour tone, for the final poem in the volume, which is, in its most characteristic pieces at least, strongly celebratory, but perhaps it owes its position to its final line, with its echoes of Hopkins, which has a claim to being the finest

single line in the whole collection, and certainly brings it to a powerful conclusion.

This brief overview of **Thirty Poems** has been able to provide no more than a general orientation to its contents. There are certainly other candidates for favorite poems and no doubt for significant themes as well. Celebrating its half-century of existence by reading or re-reading its poems is not only an appropriate way of honoring its author, but an occasion to receive some unanticipated anniversary gift oneself. I hope there will be many who will take advantage of the opportunity.

NOTES

1. George Kilcourse, **Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ** (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), pp. 42-43; the author uses the poems extensively in this work as sources for his analysis of Merton's Christological thought. For an earlier statement of his position on the importance of the poetry, see "Pieces of the Mosaic, Earth: Thomas Merton and the Christ," in Timothy Mulhearn, ed., **Getting It All Together: The Heritage of Thomas Merton** (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1982), pp. 102-103, and "A Shy Wild Deer: The True Self in Thomas Merton's Poetry," **The Merton Annual** 4 (New York: AMS Press, 1991), p. 100.
2. Sr. Therese Lentfoehr, **Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton** (New York: New Directions, 1979); Victor A. Kramer, **Thomas Merton: Monk and Artist** (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1987); Ross Labrie, **The Art of Thomas Merton** (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1979); Michael Mott, **The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984); Anthony T. Padovano, **The Human Journey: Thomas Merton, Symbol of a Century** (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1982); George Woodcock, **Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet** (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978). A helpful survey of early critical studies of the poetry is found in Bonnie B. Thurston's "Review of Criticism of Thomas Merton's Poetry," **The Merton Seasonal** 9: 2 (Spring 1984), pp. 6-10.
3. Thomas Merton, **Thirty Poems** (New York: New Directions, 1944). This volume is reprinted completely in Merton's next collection, **A Man in the Divided Sea** (New York: New Directions, 1946), pp. 112-155, and in **The Collected Poems** (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 25-51. Sixteen of the poems were included in **The Selected Poems of Thomas Merton** (New York: New Directions, 1959; expanded edition, 1967), and fifteen in the earlier, completely different British edition, **Selected Poems** (London: Hollis & Carter, 1950); nine of the poems also appear in **A Thomas Merton Reader**; ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt Brace World, 1962; revised edition: Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image, 1974).
4. Reproduced as Appendix 2 of Thomas Merton, **Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work**; ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989), pp. 150-151.
5. Typed versions of many of these early poems are in the archives at the Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University, Olean, New York. Ross Labrie provides information on their composition in "The Ordering of Thomas Merton's Early Poems," **Sources for American Literary Study** 8 (1979), pp. 115-117.
6. See Lentfoehr, p. 8.
7. See Merton's letter to Van Doren of 26 December 1944, thanking him for the "fine job of selecting"; in Thomas Merton, **The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends**; ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), p. 18. This conflicts with Merton's account in **The Seven Storey Mountain** that he had made the selection himself ([New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948], pp. 409-410), but this perhaps refers to a larger group of poems from which the thirty included in the first collection were selected. It may include all or most of those appearing in **A Man in the Divided Seas** as well, which would accord with Merton's statement that "Half of them had been written since I entered the novitiate" (p. 409).
8. In his introductory note to **A Man in the Divided Sea** (p. 11), Merton says that the new poems in that collection are arranged in roughly chronological order. Since the monastic poems presumably begin with "A Letter to My Friends," dated in the manuscript 13 December 1941 (see Lentfoehr, pp. 9-10), evidently the thirty (out of a total of fifty-six) poems preceding this piece are premonastic.
9. Thomas Merton, **Early Poems, 1940-42** (Lexington, Kentucky: Anvil Press, 1971); reprinted in **The Collected Poems**, pp. 1-24.
10. Most but not all of the poems in this section are dated; six are assigned to the premonastic period, all from 1939.
11. See Woodcock, pp. 55 ff. and 74 ff., respectively.
12. See "Grief Transfigured: Merton's Elegy on His Brother," **The Merton Seasonal** 18:1 (Winter 1993), pp. 10-15.