

Pax Intransigentibus: The Search for Peace in the Poetry of Thomas Merton

By Frederick Smock

The night artillery range at Fort Knox was one of the familiar sounds of my childhood. Except, for the longest time, I did not know what those soft pliosive thuds might be. Lying on my bed at night, with my window propped open to the sounds of traffic on Barret Avenue, the bells of St. Therese tolling the quarter-hours, dogs barking blocks away – through it all, underneath it all, came the soft thuddings of something I could not identify. They dropped in among the other sounds of the night, as soft as commas, punctuating the darkness. Some nights I couldn't hear them. The winds had shifted, or I was not paying attention; I was thinking of other things, or intent upon dreams. I could not hear them, it seems to me now, unless I had assumed the attitude of prayer.

Thirty miles away, lying on his cot at the Abbey of Gethsemani, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton was listening to the same sounds, and he knew full well what they were. He wrote about them in his poem "The Guns of Fort Knox":

Guns at the camp (I hear them suddenly)
Guns make the little houses jump. I feel
Explosions in my feet, through boards.
Wars work under the floor. Wars
Dance in the foundations. (ll. 1-5)¹

The subterranean, hellish aspect of these shells falling is mere conceit in this poem. Those sounds actually came up through the floorboards, not through the air, where one might have expected. Strong enough to wake the dead. But this would not be the right resurrection. "Let them sleep on, / O guns" (ll. 27-28), he wrote, thinking not only of the dead but also, perhaps, of the living, the sleeping children, like me. I grew up, moved away, and did not think about them much. Not until years later, when I read Merton's poem, did I understand what those sounds were. Those were shells falling, I saw. And I understood too the power of words to name the nameless.

That was just practice shelling we heard. Many children around the world go to sleep with the sound of real



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shells in their ears. They go to sleep, or do not go to sleep, knowing that the guns are aimed at them, and the shells are real. I was lucky. But the shells that I heard, that Merton heard, are an allegory of the real violence that exists in so much of the world.

The casual visitor to Merton's hermitage at Gethsemani can come away, after even a brief spell, with a feeling of serenity. Meditating at his hearth, browsing at his bookshelves, walking barefoot up and down in the soft pint needles. . . . But Merton was not about serenity. His search for peace – personal, political, spiritual – pushed him to the ends of the earth. His interior life careened between restlessness and paradox: he was a voluble man who observed monastic silence. He was a lover of women who took a vow of chastity. He was a best-selling author who renounced worldly goods.

He came to believe that a monk in the twentieth century cannot wall himself off from the world. The Vatican tried to silence him. He tried to silence himself. But he could not keep silent. Despite his hermit ways, he became a prominent voice of dissent in a power-mad nation. He became, almost against his will, a monk of social and political engagement. He openly deplored the mentality of the Cold War – the Russians did not need to build so many bombs, he said; we Americans are busy destroying ourselves – and he loudly criticized the undeclared U.S. war in Vietnam.

Like the desert fathers, those fourth-century Christian ascetics, Merton felt he had the duty to pull the world to safety. But sometimes, he confessed, he felt like opting out of the movement. "I am rather tired of being a human," he wrote in a 1962 letter to James Roy Newman, "and would enjoy being a nice quiet civilized fish, without political affiliations."² A fish, we can only imagine, floating in the eternal element of its own being, immersed in mystery. A fish that would not be civilized by our human standards. A fish, perhaps, like the one in this poem by Chuang Tzu, a fourth-century B.C. Chinese Taoist, which Merton translated:

Fishes are born in water.
 Man is born in Tao.
 If fishes, born in water,
 Seek the deep shadow
 Of pond and pool,
 All their needs
 Are satisfied.
 If man, born in Tao,
 Sinks into the deep shadow
 Of non-action
 To forget aggression and concern,
 He lacks nothing,
 His life is secure.³

Merton came to God through the poetry of William Blake. "As Blake worked himself into my system," he wrote in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "I became more and more conscious of the necessity of a vital faith, and the total unreality and unsubstantiality of the dead, selfish rationalism which had been freezing my mind and will. . . . I [became] conscious of the fact that the only way to live was to live in a world that was charged with the presence and reality of God."⁴ Blake had seen the prophet Elias standing beside a tree in the south of London, and he believed the Catholic Church

alone taught the love of God. The vision he extended to Merton led him toward a mystical spirituality, and one highly charged by the Word. By the time he came to write his master's thesis on Blake at Columbia, Merton acknowledged, "the groundwork of conversion was more or less complete" (*SSM* 204).

Merton's conversion (from paganism, he claimed) came on the eve of World War II, upon an experience in Cuba. At the church of St. Francis in Havana, he sat listening to a children's choir singing in round pure notes, *Yo creo, yo creo*, and he suddenly felt overwhelmed with "the unshakeable certainty, the clear and immediate knowledge that heaven was right in front of me,"⁵ he wrote in his journal. He traveled by bus out to Our Lady of Cobre, where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared to three slave girls in 1687. He found the basilica empty but for one old lady dressed all in black who would not leave him to pray in peace. Thus spied upon, he knelt before La Caridad, the black Virgin, and made his prayer. Then he returned, somewhat disappointed, to Santiago. But there, sitting on the terrace of his hotel, La Caridad handed him a poem. Written in a kind of rapture, "Song for Our Lady of Cobre," he would later say, was the first real poem he had ever written –

The white girls lift their heads like trees,
The black girls go
Reflected like flamingoes in the street.

The white girls sing as shrill as water,
The black girls talk as quiet as clay (ll. 1-5).

Poetry and spirituality were now bound up together for Merton in a real way. He had not been able to write true poems, he said later, until becoming a Catholic.

Merton's experience of the Word – in the pure lyrical voices of children, in the ethereal whisper of La Caridad – led him straight to his God. What peace he found there, in the humblest of circumstances, became a peace that he would try to extend, through his prayers and poems, to a war-crazed world. Working for peace gave a definite shape to his spiritual life. And in his poetry, he achieved a kind of literary grace, balancing his artistic and devotional sensibilities.

All of the great thinkers of our age have been brought round to the question, how are we to prevent war. Virginia Woolf, in her book *Three Guineas*, makes the argument (though she admits it might be doomed) that education offers the best hope.⁶ Woolf's single teaching experience was not a positive one – she found herself staring across a gulf of wealth and privilege at a classroom filled with factory girls, to whom she had surprisingly little to say. Pope John XXIII, in his Christmas address of 1961, urged the world's leaders to shun all thought of force (see *WF* 33). But is this possible for the martial masculine mind?

Merton concluded that the cause of all wars is sin. And because we all bear a responsibility for the world, through grace, he blamed himself no less than Hitler for World War II. A Trappist lives a life of penance and prayer. One can do only as much as one can do; one lives the way one ought to live, and thereby influences the world. Merton complained in his journal that "The country is full of madness" (*IM* 214), and then he went off to join a monastery – not to escape from the world and its problems, but to join it to God through prayerful intercession. "My vocation," he wrote in his journal, "is prayer" (*IM* 62).

He became absorbed in “the ideas of the mythical and poetic expression of the doctrine of the ‘fall’ of man and original sin,” he wrote to Rachel Carson, after reading her *Silent Spring*. (His fellow monks had been trying to exterminate bagworms at the monastery, but Carson’s book persuaded them to give it up.) Man has “built into himself a tendency to destroy and negate himself when everything is at its best. . . . It is just when things are paradisiacal that he uses this power” (WF 71).

The twentieth century is not the most violent in our history, but our technical prowess has allowed us to extend the violence to unprecedented lengths. At this writing, one-third of all nations in the world are involved in armed conflict. Terrorism is on the rise, and nuclear weaponry proliferates. The world is more dangerous now than at any other time in history. Ironically, militias and paramilitaries, which have been formed to work for peace, usually just create more chaos and death. We cannot, as Huxley warned, use evil means to attain a good end. Why, with all of our progress, are we not growing more peaceful? Why do our new technologies operate only with the old fears and paranoias? Why do we seem incapable of profound change?

The Roman poet Virgil spoke of the “iron sleep” of death. In the *Aeneid*, the Trojans solemnize the death of Anchises, saying, “Dire dreams to thee, and iron sleep, he bears” (in John Dryden’s translation). Later, of a Trojan who lies slain, Virgil writes, “An iron sleep his stupid eyes oppressed.” Iron, that inhuman element of warfare, echoes with the sound of woe.

Merton’s early poem “The Flight into Egypt,” about the cruel governor of Galilee, invokes Virgil’s metaphor –

Through every precinct of the wintry city
Squadroned iron resounds upon the streets;
Herod’s police
Make shudder the dark steps of the tenements (ll. 1-4).

In the cadenced stomp of booted metal reverberate the thuddings of our own hearts in fear. Iron ringing underfoot – like the bombing practice at Fort Knox – terrifies as it goes about its hellish business. And, in another poem, a woman’s song mourning the death of the Spanish poet Garcia Lorca, assassinated by Franco’s fascists, “has turned to iron in the naked air, / More loud and more despairing than a ruined tower” (ll. 23-24).

But notice the lovely inversion he achieves, when the iron is turned inside out – as supple, in the language of poetry, as a lady’s handkerchief. How different is the thrilling sound of the ringing iron of church bells, whose essence is the airy tingling between peals. The metal has been hollowed out, and hallowed, and a kind of silence calms our thudding hearts, like the silence Merton describes at the end of his poem “For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943”:

For in the wreckage of your April Christ lies slain
And Christ weeps in the ruins of my spring: . . .
The silence of Whose tears shall fall
Like bells upon your alien tomb.
Hear them and come: they call you home (ll. 21-22, 26-28).

Poetry itself begins and ends in silence. Like contemplation. Like prayer. And poetry is composed of many silences, like the silences between notes in a symphony. A poem is made of words, but take away the words, and poetry remains, as Yang Wan-li said a thousand years ago.

The temple bell stops –
but the sound keeps coming
out of the flowers.

(Robert Bly, trans.)

Early in this century, when everybody else was sporting straw boaters, the Kaiser Wilhelm went about wearing a metal-spiked helmet with an eagle on a blue background, in not so subtle homage to Attila the Hun, and the Imperial Post Office issued a stamp bearing a profile of comely Germania corseted in an iron bosom! “When anger comes,” Merton wrote, in his poem “The Peril,” “the sky is the color of armor” (ll.1-2).

Merton’s poem about the Nazi death camps, “Chant to Be Use in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces,” refuses to allow any of us to escape responsibility for the world. The poem is written in first person, so that even the casual reader becomes the speaker, the commandant of the camp: “I was the commander I made improvements and installed a guaranteed system taking account of human weakness I purified and I remained decent.” Stylistically, the poem abandons lyrical shape for undifferentiated blocks of prose. Thematically, he implicates not only the Nazis; we are all part of that deadly circle, which widens treacherously over time. Notice how eerily he anticipates the clinical warfare of such attacks as the computer-guided U.S. war against Iraq, and how he refuses to allow any of us absolution: “Do not think yourself better because you burn up friends and enemies with long-range missiles without ever seeing what you have done.” Upon learning that comic Lenny Bruce performed “Chant” in his nightclub act, Merton said, “People like Lenny Bruce are really monks in reverse.”⁷

Denise Levertov, in her poem “Contraband,” suggests that the “tree of knowledge was the tree of reason,” but is “toxic in large quantities.”⁸ Reason, in excess and the hubris that comes simply with knowing a lot, can become a tyranny of the mind, like a “dense cloud that harden[s] to steel.” Or, as Gertrude Stein put it, in her 1959 essay “Reflections on the Atomic Bomb,” “Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense.” (And this was before the internet.) Reason, and knowledge, can wall us off from God, the poet says; theology alone will not enable us to leap that wall. Merton wrote, in his poem “A Psalm”:

When psalms surprise me with their music
And antiphons turn to rum
The Spirit sings (ll. 1-3).

How did he put it in his poem “Spring Storm”? That “intellects go mumbling in the snow” (l. 7). What is needed is a letting-go – of knowledge, of striving, of old ways.

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 ("A Psalm," ll. 25-29).

In the last year of his life, Merton wrote, in his journal, "I regret less some of the recent poetry, especially *Cables* and *Lograire*. I wish I had done more creative work and less of this trivial, sanctimonious editorializing" (*IM* 335). The title of his last book, his highest achievement in poetry, *The Geography of Lograire*, references the pine forests around his hermitage; he was Thomas of the Woods, as surely as Villon was François des Loges. And, in the kingdom of Lograire, every boy is called Francis.

Pushing for an absolute freedom of mentality, the poet-monk bursts the bonds of liturgy in *The Geography of Lograire*, and exults in a language both fantastic and tragic. Merton's peace-work here is not merely agitation in verse; rather it is a whole way of being – his cosmic eye roves over the world, cycling back in time then forward to the present moment. It is a prophetic book. In the poem "At This Precise Moment of History," he writes, "We are testing supersonic engines / To keep God safe in the cherry tree,"⁹ and do we not see this happening even now in the U.S., as I am writing, as you are reading? (It is perhaps sad that I have such confidence in asking that question.) He also evidences a brave ecumenism, itself prophetic, though we, here in the new twenty-first century, have yet to enact it. Of the Muslims in the Maldives, he writes –

These natives wear no pants
 Only aprons
 Bathe twice a day
 Use sandalwood and do not fight
 Their armor is prayer (*GL* 88).

Merton's poetical argument against war goes deeper than a mere protest against violence. He understood that war-mongering attitudes proceed from grave moral and ethical illness; they are a kind of insanity of the soul. "What concerns me, perhaps this is pride, is the ghastly feeling that we are all on the brink of a spiritual defection and betrayal of Christ," he had written, in a 1961 letter to Josiah Chatham, "which would consist in the complete acceptance of the values and decisions of the callous men of war who think only in terms of megacorpuses and megatons, and have not the slightest thought for man, the image of God" (*WF* 25).

And he worried about his own participation in that sort of misguided thinking. His grandfather had left him an inheritance that included stocks in heavy industry, but the young Merton scarcely tapped it. "Wherever you have oil tanks or factories or railroads or any of the comforts of home and manifestations of progress in this country, you are sure to get bombers, sooner or later," he wrote in his journal. Imagine his relief, upon signing over his inheritance to Gethsemani when he walked through its doors! Over the gates, of course, is the inscription *Pax Intransibus*: "Peace to all who enter." "I am scared," he continued, in that same entry, "to own anything, even a name, let alone a coin or shares in oil, the munitions, the airplane factories. I am scared to take a proprietary interest in anything for fear that my love of what I own may be killing somebody somewhere" (*IM* 18).

Why is warfare wrong? I think Merton might have said: man is made in the image of God; thus, killing man kills God. A monk practices humility. Humility means trying not to offend God. Warfare is wrong because it offends God.

1 Thomas Merton, *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1967); unless otherwise noted, all poems quoted in this article will be taken from this volume.

2 Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994) 35; subsequent references will be cited as "WF" parenthetically in the text.

3 Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965) 65.

4 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948) 190-91; subsequent references will be cited as "SSM" parenthetically in the text.

5 Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999) 16; subsequent references will be cited as "IM" parenthetically in the text.

6 Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1966) 29.

7 John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (Fort Worth, TX: Latitudes Press, 1983) 191.

8 Denise Levertov, "Contraband," in *Live Coals* (New York: New Directions, 1964) 29.

9 Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969) 127; subsequent references will be cited as "GL" parenthetically in the text.