Transformative Solitudes: Merton and Rilke at the Pivot of Silence

By **Susan McCaslin**

Introduction

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) and contemplative monk and poet Thomas Merton (1915-1968) shared a voracious appetite for solitude and silence. Next to Blake and Hopkins, Rilke was one of Merton's favorite poets and lifelong literary companions, certainly his most beloved twentieth-century poet. He began reading him as early as 1940, quotes him in his journals throughout his life, takes copious notes on him in his notebooks, teaches him to his novices as novice master, and continues to refer to him in his final years. Rilke himself required oceans of solitude in order to enter a state where he could receive his poems, while Merton pursued silence and solitude as the essential condition of his contemplative life at the monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky. In *Raids on the Unspeakable*, Merton distinguishes solitude from mere loneliness: "The solitary, far from enclosing himself in himself, becomes every man. He dwells in the solitude, the poverty, the indigence of every man."[1] In a similar vein, Rilke writes to his young correspondent Franz Xaver Kappus on December 23, 1903:

> What is necessary, after all, is only this: solitude, vast inner solitude. To walk inside yourself and meet no one for hours – that is what you must be able to attain. To be solitary as you were when you were a child, when the grownups walked around involved with matters that seemed large and important because they looked so busy and because you didn't understand a thing about what they were doing.[2]

By engaging with a poem that arises out of such contemplative silences, one may access timeless reality through the poem's nexus of imagery, music, and meaning. A poem that sustains a contemplative space can be spiritually transformative; that is, it can evoke a more integral awareness in the one who participates in it. For both Rilke and Merton, poetry is a contemplative art that has the capacity to create peace in the heart of the responsive individual, which is a precondition for peace in the world.

Merton and Rilke as Spiritual Cohorts

Despite Merton's commitment to Christian spirituality in the form of monastic life and Rilke's apparent secularism, Merton embraced Rilke as a cohort in the spiritual journey. In a journal entry dated October 18, 1965, Merton writes: "I read Rilke, then sing the poems aloud, making

Susan McCaslin

Susan McCaslin is a prize-winning poet and a Merton scholar who has published twelve volumes of poetry and taught English and Creative Writing at Douglas College in New Westminster, BC for twenty-three years. Her most recent volumes include *Lifting the Stone* (Seraphim Editions, 2007) and *Persephone Tours the Underground* (Alfred Gustav Press, 2009). She has a new volume of poetry forthcoming from The University of Alberta Press in 2011.

up *Leider*. They are very moving. I keep notes on them. The world of spiritual senses in Rilke!"[3] Rilke is what Merton called a "lay monk" and Merton what could be called a monk of the high imagination. Both create poems filled with pauses, lacunae and gaps in which spirit (the unifying power of love and compassion that transcends and includes body, mind, and feelings) speaks from the depths of the inner self. Both achieve a finely nuanced dialogue between words and silence in their art.

Rilke eschewed organized religion in response to his times at the start of the twentieth century, and his rather negative experiences of Catholicism as a child, while Merton embraced Catholic Christianity and chose to live out his life in a monastic order, working from within the institution, as his journey to the East and pioneering work in "inter-spirituality" at the end of his life indicate. In his earlier reflections on Rilke, Merton struggles with Rilke's rejection of organized religion and distinguishes religious solitudes from the possibly more narcissistic ones of the artist. Yet Rilke speaks without irony of his own deep religiosity: "Religion is something infinitely simple, ingenuous. It is not knowledge, not content of feeling (for all content is admitted from the start, where a man comes to terms with life), it is not duty and not renunciation, it is not restriction: but in the infinite extent of the universe it is a direction of the heart."[4]

In his later writings Merton completely accepts Rilke's spirituality and poetic solitudes as authentic and in many ways parallel to his own. On February 1, 1966 he writes:

> For subjective reasons beyond his control (his mother) R. [Rilke] simply could not be at peace with conventional Christian language and even with the idea of Christ as Mediator. . . . R. was also struggling with a false religious problem imposed on him by 19th-century Christianity. The problem of finding *wholeness* (ultimate truth etc.) in God by *denying and excluding the world*. The holy is non-secular. Feeling himself called upon to *deny* and exclude what he saw to be in reality necessary for "wholeness," holiness," "openness," he finally refused this denial, and chose his "open world." In a sense he does come up with a cosmology that seems a parody of Christianity – but *is it* really . . . a "secularization" in the sense of a degradation? Is he not really reaching for the kind of Pleroma revealed in Colossians?[5]

In a letter to poet Clayton Eshleman in March 1966 Merton adds, "I think of him [Rilke] as validly religious, and his reaction against a sick Catholicism is perfectly understandable."[6] Like Rilke, Merton's lifelong quest was to discover a ground of "hidden wholeness"[7] that would embrace the world and resist the dichotomy between the secular and the sacred. The central themes in both poets' work are praise, gratitude, and the holiness of the temporal and the everyday.

Some Striking Affinities between Rilke and Merton

In addition to these spiritual affinities between Rilke and Merton, scholar Paul Pearson points out some striking commonalities in their lives as well as their central preoccupations. Both poets lived just into their early fifties; were "wanderers and explorers," both physically and mentally; came from "unstable family backgrounds"; had a lifelong sense of homelessness; were prolific writers of poetry, autobiography, and prose; carried on a lively and varied correspondence; engaged

in lifelong reading and study; and struggled with an apparent inability to sustain an intimate relation with the opposite sex.[8] According to Pearson, the fear of personal intimacy ended for Merton with his relation with the nurse M., through whom he was able to experience, however briefly, what biographer Michael Mott calls “love with an awful completeness” (Pearson 12).

Merton was attracted to Rilke not only because of the striking biographical parallels, but because of their shared sense of solitude; their religious imagination as expressed in Rilke’s depictions of saints, biblical figures, an angelic cosmology; and their sense of the poet as prophet. Finally, Merton would have been drawn to Rilke’s notion of what Pearson calls “inseeing,” a contemplative way of looking at things in the world not just as objects, but at their innermost core, their “thusness” or intrinsic value (Pearson 14).

This sort of poetic seeing is exemplified in Merton’s talks to the community on Rilke in the mid-1960s. When analyzing Rilke’s poem “The Panther,” for instance, Merton asserts that the European poet, though not conventionally religious, had much to teach the novices about poetic experience and the interior life. Merton explains how the sculptor Rodin urged Rilke to go out and simply look at ordinary things, giving them his complete attention. Merton points out that what Rilke was able to achieve in these little “thing poems” from his middle period was the creation of an intermediate dimension between the objective reality of the object of one’s attention, in this case, the panther as a real animal, and the poet’s subjective perception of it. The poem, Merton notes, is not simply a record of how one feels about an animal numbed into unresponsiveness because trapped in a cage at the zoo, and not just an objective description of the panther, but a “new creation” that “reflects the vital encounter of the poet and the panther.”[9] The poem transcends the dichotomy of subjective and objective awareness, becoming an interactive participation in the essence of the panther mediated through language. Giving another being our full attention becomes an act of deference and respect to that which we might otherwise seek to objectify and control. It is a first step toward a contemplative relationship with the world.

Besides being poets of interior experience, Merton and Rilke both share a keen interest in eastern spirituality, as evidenced in their prose and poetry. When studying Rilke in the ’60s, Merton refers constantly in his notebooks to eastern ideas and concepts, and identifies an eastern flavor in Rilke. In “Buddha in Glory,” Rilke celebrates the transcendent core within the Buddha and all beings, a consciousness that survives death, time, and change: “But *in* you is the presence that / will be, when all the stars are dead.”[10] Merton likewise explores this timeless, deathless center of the true self in his final journey to the East when gazing at the massive stone figures of the Buddhas at Polonnaruwa in Ceylon: “I don’t know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination.”[11] It is significant that in Merton’s final mystical epiphany, he, like Rilke, does not separate the aesthetic from the spiritual, but treats them as an indivisible whole.

Two Apophatic Poets

Merton encountered the mystery of formless unknowing in his final eastern journey, but had explored similar forms of breakthrough within his own monastic tradition, the legacy of the desert fathers and mothers, and the early Medieval mystical theology of the Christian mystics. The deepest thing Rilke and Merton share is that they are *apophatic* in their approach to the divine

and to language. *Apophasis* is a Greek term used by mystical theologians like the sixth-century Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite to address the inherent limitations of language when it comes to approaching God, ultimate reality, or the divine. The realm of its contrary, *cataphasis,* is the way that accesses the divine through ideas, images, and concepts. The phrase "apophatic poet" (meaning something like, a "poet of unknowing," or "no language" poet) may sound like an oxymoron, and in a sense it is, since apophatic poets use language to cancel out or undo language. They embrace poetic symbols and metaphors as the most direct way to pierce through to the divine, and in the same breath relinquish them. They recognize that in the event or living experience of the poem, sounds and silence, words and the spaces around words, enter into dialogue. The images and ideas of a contemplative poem stand poised at the very pivot of silence. For Merton, God is not an object of thought, and all images and concepts about the ultimate can only hint at what cannot be thought, imagined, said, or known.

Merton and Rilke's poetics rest on a recognition that all too often, humans have used language to label, control and manipulate the world around them. We think if we can give something a name, we "have it" in some way, but often what we "have" is only the concept, and reality slips from our grasp. Yet when we step lightly with language, as monkish poets like Merton and Rilke do, we allow language to carry us beyond itself to the very source of words and ideas and images. Merton called this place when accessed through individual consciousness the "point vierge" or "nothingness" at our center that belongs entirely to God, the interior ground of being erupting from within where divine and human consciousness converge.[12] Mystic theologian Meister Eckhart names it the "ground" beyond being and becoming and all dualities, where we recognize our oneness with the flowing Godhead. Though apophatic poets like Rilke and Merton love images and words, they recognize that the best of words issue from a place of silence, the deep silence from which all things proceed. Merton explains this delicate balance between knowing and unknowing, saying and unsaying, in *Contemplative Prayer*: "in mystical literature, which obviously implies communication through images, symbols and ideas, we find that contemplation in 'unknowing' is generally accompanied by unusual poetic and theological gifts, whenever the fruit of contemplation is to be shared with others."[13]

Rilke ends his exploration of beauty that is mortal, evanescent and fleeting in his *Sonnets to Orpheus* with an apophatic gesture of relinquishment, suggesting one way to stay connected with the unknowable ground is through the enduring inner self or "I am" of pure permeable being that holds onto nothing:

> And if the earthly no longer knows your name,
> Whisper to the silent earth: I'm flowing.
> To the flashing water say: I am. (Rilke, *Selected Poetry* 255)

Often, the great mystics move back and forth between the poles of silence and speech, emptiness and imagery. The sixteenth-century Spanish mystics Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, for instance, were contemplatives as well as fine poetic writers. For the non-dual mystics, the unconditioned or timeless world and the temporal manifest world are ultimately one, or part of a single rhythm, and art may re-enact this inward to outward flow. The mystics suggest that the deep interiority and the external world are of a piece where our verbal and conceptual constructs bow before silence. In essence, the *apophatic* way or way of negation, and *cataphatic* way or way of affirmation through images, ideas, actions, are one, as Merton writes: "the true vocation of the monks . . . is not to

fight for contemplation against action, but to restore the ancient, harmonious and organic balance between the two. Both are necessary. Mary and Martha [symbols the contemplative and active life respectively] are sisters" (*CPr* 81).

Poets and Contemplatives

Throughout his life, Merton struggled with the question of whether there was an inherent conflict between the way of the creative artist or poet and the way of the contemplative. In his early ruminations on Rilke, Merton is somewhat ambiguous about Rilke as one who is on a merely aesthetic path, and distinguishes aesthetic from higher contemplative silences. Sometimes he questions Rilke's silences as self-absorbed or egocentric ones. He suggests in his early writings that the life of a monk is a higher calling than that of one serving the Muse or one's art. As scholar Ross Labrie points out, for Merton the appreciation of poems bore no risk, but in writing a poem there is a risk "that the fruits of contemplative experience [namely love, compassion, service] would be turned over to the production of a work of art, thus short-circuiting the contemplative journey."[14]

Yet as Merton matures, he moves away from such a sharp distinction between the creative and the contemplative life, action and contemplation. He comes to see art as analogous to contemplation, though bound to a physical medium, such as clay, paint, or in the case of a poem, words. As Merton explores sacred art as one manifestation or expression of the contemplative life, his original concern about becoming too attached to the creative process, the production of books, or his identity as a poet, diminishes. In his earlier writings, Merton believed he had set up an "implied conflict between 'contemplation' as rest and poetic creation as activity."[15] Yet by the time he writes "Poetry and Contemplation: a Reappraisal" in 1958, he comes to see the earlier conflict as "largely, an illusion, created by this division of life into formally separate compartments" (*LE* 339). In this essay, he sees art, worship and love as interrelated paths to union.

Yet even here, however, Merton distinguishes various contemplative states, namely, the "infused" states in which the soul sinks so deeply into the divine as to become one with its source, and others in which individual consciousness is still active and apart from that which it contemplates.

> Now when we speak of a possible conflict between poetry and contemplation, it is clearly only contemplation in the last, most perfect sense that is intended [that of *infused* contemplation]. For when we speak of contemplation in the more broad and improper sense [natural, active], we find it uniting itself with art, with worship, and with love. It is not only compatible with poetic creation, but is stimulated by it, and in its turn inspires poetry. (*LE* 341-42)

Merton here draws on what Thomas Aquinas, John of the Cross, Bonaventure, and other Medieval theologians called "infused contemplation" as distinct from contemplation in which the lower self has disappeared. Whatever its name, this highest form of contemplation is in the Christian tradition an opening into the formless, non-dual realm of the "Godhead," the unknown, unknowable source with which we are unconsciously and ultimately one. The Godhead is invisible, unutterable and beyond all human categories and constructions. It can be entered only through the humility of unknowing and is not attainable by any effort of the false self. Merton argues that "A genuine aesthetic experience is something which transcends not only the sensible order . . . but also that of reason itself. It is a suprarational intuition of the latent perfection of things. . . . [I]t is an analogue of the mystical experience which it resembles

and imitates from afar" (*LE* 347). It is clear that for Merton a person cannot be completely united with the ground of being while contemplating it at the same time; so poetic awareness intersects with but is distinguishable from the highest ranges of imageless union with the formless divine.

Yet for Merton aesthetic contemplation and formless contemplation are on a continuum. He, in fact, goes on to add that many of the mystics, like John of the Cross, who write of having experienced full mystical union or marriage, are also poets who use the language of paradox to point to ineffability. At the end of this essay, Merton adds that the mystic who happens to be an artist may run the risk of "objectiviz[ing] his own experience and seek[ing] to exploit and employ it for its own sake" (*LE* 351). Yet despite this danger at particular times in his life, Merton insists there is no need to construct an either/or choice between poetry and contemplation. In fact, he states, it may well be the will of God that a person "should remain *at the same time a mystic and a poet* and ascend to the greatest heights of poetic creation and of mystical prayer without any evident contradiction between them" (*LE* 353). Therefore, despite his distinction between the poetic and infused types of contemplation, Merton asserts that God often resolves this apparent dichotomy in the life of the artist.

It is evident that Merton and Rilke conjoin the mystic and the poet in unique ways in their work. Rilke, of course, did not intentionally and mindfully submit to a spiritual discipline of work and prayer like Merton. His spiritual practice was the practice of poetry itself. Yet he was not a mere esthete in the sense of one who proclaims "art for art's sake." By uncompromisingly dedicating himself to poetry as that which opens one to a larger interior order of things, by remaining open to the more esoteric side of Christianity as well as to other spiritual traditions like Buddhism and Islam, his life and work also enact a contemplative trajectory. Merton's solitude was formed in his hermitage and monastic enclosure at Gethsemani, while Rilke's through his retreats at places like Duino and during his European wanderings. Both writers had mystical-contemplative inclinations and were true to them in different but parallel ways.

Applying *Lectio Divina* to the Reading of Sacred Poetry

Lectio divina is a Latin term meaning divine or holy reading and a meditative practice Merton used daily at the monastery. Developed by Alexandrian Christians in the early centuries and imported into monastic orders in Medieval Europe, *lectio divina* was generally divided into four "moments" or stages of "feasting on the Word." Guigo II, a Carthusian monk, laid out four phases: reading (*lectio*), reflection (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*), and contemplation (*contemplatio*).[16] *Lectio* is like taking a bite; *meditatio* is like chewing or ruminating on the word; *oratio* is savoring the essence of the passage; and *contemplatio* consists in becoming one with its wisdom. That is, one reads the passage slowly and attentively; meditates on it by examining perhaps a word or phrase or insight in the context of the whole; opens the heart and enters into a dialogue or conversation with the divine; and, finally, contemplates or enters into oneness with the insights or illumination of the poem. This last phase is a silent resting in the divine where the experience of the poem sinks into the heart.

Originally, *lectio divina* was used only with Biblical and sacred texts; yet the practice can be extended to poems by poets of the sacred like Rilke and Merton. This method of meditation, or modifications thereof, can be employed not just by Christians, but by people of diverse faith traditions in reading sacred texts – whether the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Torah, the *Qur'an* or others.

As Merton points out, poetry is not only a form of contemplation for the artist or creator in the creative process, but a re-creative act for the reader who participates contemplatively in a poem. The poem creates and sustains a sacred space, opening the recipient to a more expansive, less egoistic perspective. States of attentiveness, centering on the present moment, gratitude, praise, and wonder, arise in the space the poem creates. These silences to which the poem gives rise can be the basis for inner peace and spill over to bring peace to the world. In the act of creating a poem, and in reading it contemplatively (recreating), neither the poet nor the reader is attached to any product or end, but to the creative process itself. Merton's apt description of the fruits of contemplation applies to the work of sacred poems which can be like icons or other forms of sacred art in awakening the higher self. His remarks remind us that true "peace" is more than simple calm or equanimity but an enhanced creativity and freedom: "The important thing in contemplation is not enjoyment, not pleasure, not happiness, not peace, but the transcendent experience of reality and truth in the act of a supreme and liberated spiritual love. The important thing in contemplation is not gratification and rest, but awareness, life, creativity, and freedom."[17]

Doing *Lectio Divina* with Rilke

In working with a poem from Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (Part Two, 1), I decided, as a sort of experiment, to approach it from a meditative rather than a merely analytical or academic perspective. This is the way I normally approach poetry anyway, bringing more discursive critical analysis to bear at a later stage. Of course, poems generally demand a contemplative reading, as the rich interplay of musicality, imagery, and thought requires a slower pace. In this instance, I chose to work with a recent translation by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy.[18] With *lectio divina,* it is best in a given session to stay with the continuity of a single translation, since a translation has its own integrity as a poem. Though I do not read German, except for a few words and phrases, I have studied Rilke over the years in a variety of translations, often comparing them and moving back and forth from one to the other. When Merton taught Rilke to the novices, however, he would indicate this translation or that to be more or less effective in capturing the nuances of the line under discussion. And, of course, Merton knew German, so could go to the original.

From the first line – "Breath, you invisible poem!" – I feel the sensation of breathing, the rise and fall of the air as it moves in and out of my lungs. I am struck by the rhythmic movement of the imageless images of breath and air juxtaposed to those heavier ones of water, waves, and sea, which creates a rolling motion. In fact, the poem is an extended meditation on the act of breathing:

> Breath, you invisible poem!
> Pure, continuous exchange
> with all that is, flow and counterflow
> where rhythmically I come to be. (ll. 1-4)

The circulating air that moves within me, out and back, connects me with "all that is." That which I experience as "I" is in "continuous exchange" with the environment. I am interconnected to a larger whole and defined by this flow. I "come to be" in the sacred moment of this poem, just as a babe comes to new life by breathing the air.

Next I am washed by the image of a wave and become identified with the dance of wave and ocean:

Each time a wave that occurs just once
in a sea I discover I am.
You, innermost of oceans,
you, infinitude of space. (ll. 5-8)

My breath is like rising and falling waves. I notice that the poem is suddenly speaking to a "you" who is both the breath, a poem, and the "innermost of oceans." This elusive you, this Thou, is something like Spirit, that which contains and encompasses everything, flowing in and out of everything, including me. It is moving through me and I am in it as wave in ocean and ocean in wave. However, each wave is unique because it occurs just once, as do I in this unrepeatable life.

Next, I am proffered a question:

How many far places were once
within me? Some winds
are like my own child. (ll. 9-11)

I sit stunned for a moment with the recognition that what I call "myself" is so capacious as to be able to hold or encompass all the far places of the earth where my breath might have gone after it left my mouth. Right now I am breathing someone else's air and they mine and we are all held in a great unity because of that which sustains us – for breath is life. The winds are "like my own child" because they have been inside me as breath and will someday return.

Then, the poem deposits a further question:

When I breathe them [the winds] now, do they know me again?
Air, you silken surround,
Completion and seed of my words. (ll. 12-14)

My breath has returned like the winds, but because they have circulated throughout the whole, infinite universe, they are quite different, transformed, as am I. I feel held close in the "silken surround" of the air – safe, stroked, loved. My words come forth as breath, air, something so seemingly fragile and insubstantial and invisible, but the breath within me is part of something much larger, a divine spirit that is in everyone and circulates throughout the cosmos. This larger breath is the end and origin of all my small words. I pause and rest for a moment in the sensation of being held in and holding, releasing, the life of the universe. Somehow I am a small part of so large a mystery.

Doing *Lectio Divina* with Merton

Merton's apophatic meditation on silence and unknowing, "Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing" (*CP* 353)[19] is, like Rilke's sonnet, a series of apostrophes where the speaker heralds the elements – forests in winter, fire, and the more abstract presences of peace and silence. Merton and Rilke are poets of the great unabashed apostrophes, the long O's and Ah's and invocations to natural things. So the poem begins in what Merton calls "natural contemplation" or meditation on the natural world:

O little forests, meekly
Touch the snow with low branches!
O covered stones
Hide the house of growth! (ll. 1-4)

On entering the sacred space of this poem, I become a winter landscape where snow-laden branches

bend “meekly” over whitened stones. Yet a “house of growth” stirs under the blank white surface. Spring is absent, silent; all hope hidden.

Secret
Vegetal words,
Unlettered water,
Daily zero. (ll. 5-8)

Short bursts of words ensue – only a word or two to a line. Winter abbreviates. Nothing much seems to be happening. Yet mortal, impermanent “vegetal words” hint at vegetation and growth. The water is “unlettered,” almost illiterate, not knowing or speaking any syllables or words, simple, untutored in sophistication. Give us this day our “daily zero” – nothingness, no expectation or promise. Yet “zero” is food – our daily bread.

Pray undistracted
Curled tree
Carved in steel –
Buried zenith! (ll. 9-12)

The kneeling tree prays in this wintry void where there are no distractions. It bends over, weighted, curled like a child. The dark tree stands out startlingly in the snow as if “carved in steel,” sharply defined. The zenith or highest point on the horizon lies buried. I have somehow crested the peak of winter and its slow turning but know nothing about it.

Fire, turn inward
To your weak fort,
To a burly infant spot,
A house of nothing. (ll. 13-16)

Something shifts under the snow – fire! The buried sun of winter is underneath, burning. The house of myself seems frail, nothing, a “weak fort” or fortress, but there is a spot within that contains a “burly infant,” some incipient strength that is always a beginner.

O peace, bless this mad place:
Silence, love this growth.

O silence, golden zero
Unsetting sun

Love winter when the plant says nothing. (ll. 17-21)

Everything rushes to this final line, which is the poem. Everything that seemed bleak, empty, and static moves to it, just as the whole long winter has been a silent preparation for spring. The “daily zero” of apparent nothingness and unknowing is also the “golden zero” of all possibility. Todo y nada. Infinity and zero. The mad emptiness becomes the good emptiness that is miraculously a fullness. All that long time I thought I was being unproductive, something with purposes vaster than my own was doing its work. This is why I love winter and the plant’s silence and pause in it.

In such poems as the above, Rilke and Merton bridge East and West, the western longing for union with the divine as other and the eastern sense of the divine realized within the self. The translation of Rilke by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy draws out glimpses of non-dual consciousness

where the boundaries of self and the divine break down. Rilke's and Merton's poems on silence invite us to enter a non-dual or unitive awareness.

Contemplation and Action: The Continuum

Merton argues in *Contemplation in a World of Action* that the contemplative life leads to renewed engagement with the world: "In the contemplative life, action exists for the sake of contemplation and vice versa."[20] Rilke, though not so directly engaged with the topical issues of his day as was Merton in his more overtly political poems, evokes a fluidity between inner and outer, them and us, self and other. And Rilke's poems on the "machine," mechanization, and the dehumanizing effects of World War I on Europe, together with his personal resistance to war, make his work political in the deepest sense. Both poets' transcendence of dualistic thinking and exploration of the interconnection of all things has everything to do with peace and peace-making. Both artists, whether explicitly or implicitly, contribute to peacemaking in the broadest sense.

Conclusion

For Merton and Rilke, the act of poem-making is a form of sacred activism, and the poem one of the fruits of contemplation. Sacred poems can shift radically a person's perception and way of being in the world. When a poem mirrors the creativity of the cosmos, entering into its space or *templum* can invoke an act of responsive re-creation on the part of the reader. If the poem impels one from a dualistic, limited perspective to one that is unitive, expansive, ecological, and compassionate, that awareness will spill over into everyday life. Authentic peace is not a passive thing – not merely an absence of conflict. When poets in love with reality make poems, they create palaces of interior transformation within the human psyche. Poems are energy units made of words, artifacts – productions of time that can momentarily annihilate time. Therefore, poetry that quickens spiritual insight, holistic being and knowing, can change us in a positive sense. Since sacred poems can be catalysts to spiritual growth, contemplative poets, then, are not mere navel gazers. Poetic contemplation gently removes us from and returns us to the world, its social obligations and struggles for justice, revitalized, recharged, renewed. Rilke and Merton's most contemplative works are testaments that poetry, both the making and reception of it by readers, is a contemplative act. Poetry is not a substitution for higher stages of mystical union where one dwells without doing or effort in the formless, imageless realm, but poetry can escort us up to the very brink of presence, deposit us there, then lead us gently back into the world. As Rilke puts it at the end of his poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo," great art tells us: "You must change your life" (Rilke, *Selected Poetry* 61).

1. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 18.
2. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage Books, 1986) 54-55.
3. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 305.
4. Letter to Ilse Blumenthal-Weiss [Dec. 28, 1921], in *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke: Volume Two, 1910-1926*, trans. Jane Bannard Greene and M. D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton, 1948) 277.
5. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 20.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 260.

7. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 363; subsequent references will be cited as "*CP*" parenthetically in the text.
8. Paul M. Pearson, "Inseeing and Outgazing: The Shared Vision of Thomas Merton and Rainer Maria Rilke," *The Merton Seasonal* 24.2 (Summer 1999) 10-17; subsequent references will be cited as "Pearson" parenthetically in the text.
9. Thomas Merton, "Poetry and Imagination," Gethsemani Recording #158 [Nov. 14, 1965], Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.
10. Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1989) 69; subsequent references will be cited as "Rilke, *Selected Poetry*" parenthetically in the text. Note that Merton generally prefers the C. F. MacIntyre translation (Rainer Maria Rilke, *Fifty Selected Poems*, trans. C. F. MacIntyre [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1940]). Merton has a good working knowledge of German and is constantly comparing translations and translating his own passages.
11. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 23.
12. See Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 142.
13. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) 107; subsequent references will be cited as "*CPr*" parenthetically in the text.
14. Ross Labrie, email correspondence with Susan McCaslin, September 8, 2007.
15. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 339; subsequent references will be cited as "*LE*" parenthetically in the text.
16. See Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 3, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008) 332-40 for Merton's discussion of Guigo and his work.
17. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003) 34.
18. Rainer Maria Rilke, *In Praise of Mortality: Selections from Rainer Maria Rilke's Duino Elegies and Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005) 107; for the purposes of this paper, I have chosen the Barrows/Macy translation as it reflects an "eastern or Buddhist" slant on western spirituality that might be seen as compatible with Merton's integration of eastern spirituality into his Christian vision at the end of his life.
19. The poem was originally published in Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 51; it can also be found in Thomas Merton, *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems*, ed. Lynn R. Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005) 99.
20. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 41.