

## Why Thomas Merton Still Matters: Thoughts on a Man for All Times

By Lynn R. Szabo

My interest in Thomas Merton's writing has focused primarily on his poetry. As with other significant poets, Merton's best poems resonate in their intention, significance and mediation with metaphor that is powerful and direct in its influences, allowing his readers accessibility to his evolving theological and spiritual prophecies. For Merton, silence, its presences and absences, forms a language of its own, endowing one's experiences of the mysteries of God with the power of speech. In my view, the fundamental insights offered by his poetry and its account of Merton's journey through silence into solitude is one of the reasons that his work deserves to be studied alongside his contemporaries in the mid-twentieth century. That he became a spiritual and literary master is not surprising given his genius and its obedience to the elected silence of his Cistercian vocation, at times, in spite of his own best and worst intentions.

The prescience of the commentary represented in Merton's poetry is astonishing. He realizes and addresses, from his monastic margins, the enormous attack on language predicated by its devolvement into rhetoric in traditional power structures in the West and its colonization by modernism's crises of meaning. His ontology gives genesis to his understanding of silence as a speech act rupturing language and its perceived meaninglessness by the present absence of a God who resides within it as the Logos-Christ-Word. Seeking further definition of this, Merton's poetry attests his fuller understanding of the intimate dance partnered by silence and sound in the symbols that are called language: "Words are in [their] feet as [they] walk without them," "Speechless pavements" are "printed with [their] secrets."<sup>1</sup> This *sapientia* is one of the most significant contributions that Merton's poetics offers to the postmodern literary landscape and its theorists. He will not allow his use of poetic form and structure to be sucked into the vortex of the spiritual and cultural degradation which he is observing. He refuses to abandon the Incarnationality of language itself. It seems to me that all of his poetry is written in this refusal with its experiments and artistry.

When Merton spoke in Calcutta on his final Asian journey, he stated that "True communication on the deepest level is more than a simple sharing of ideas, of conceptual knowledge, or formulated truth." It is a "'communion' beyond the level of words, a communion in authentic experience which is shared not only on a 'preverbal' level but also on a 'postverbal' level,"<sup>2</sup> dependent, after all, on intellectual/spiritual contemplations which lead one to the mystery of the Unknowable, present in all things, the *Logos/Christ*. In his essay, "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude," he wrote that the "inner 'I,' who is always alone,



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is always universal: for in this inmost ‘I’ my own solitude meets the solitude of every other man and the solitude of God. . . . It is only this inmost and solitary ‘I’ that truly loves with the love and the spirit of Christ.”<sup>3</sup> In this light, mystery rather than meaninglessness is the transcendent possibility of all language and communication. His influence on his reading audience grew in great proportion to his articulation of this iconoclastic *theopoiesis* in both his poetry and prose.

In the decade prior to his death, Merton had reached far into and beyond his own humanity and spirituality only to renew his exploration of and commitment to oneness with all humanity and God. In studying his ontology, one realizes that he embraced his understanding that personhood is simultaneous with the freedom to ascend to truth; that the truth of humanity is found in God – “the Ground of Being”; that this Ground of Being is found in solitude; that solitude is appropriated in silence, the language of a Living God. His account of these realizations articulates the mystic’s experience of transcending the self. Ultimately, Merton has discovered and portrayed in his poetry, along with much else, the geography whose directions are mapped by Christ, the Lord of Life, the Truth and the Way.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire*. (New York: New Directions, 1969) 41; Thomas Merton, *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems*, ed. Lynn R. Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005) 162.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 315.
3. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 207.

## Icon and/or Metaphor

By **Bonnie Thurston**

In its rootlessness, privilege and conversion, if not an icon, Thomas Merton’s life was an apt metaphor for the twentieth century. Born in France (1915) and transported to the United States due to World War I (1916), when his mother died (1920) he was taken by his father to Bermuda (1922) and back to France (1925) and then enrolled in school in England (1928). When his father died (1931), he returned to the United States. He was a man without a country and without a family, a man in search of roots, grounding and belonging.

Merton was also a person of privilege, exposed early in life to the fine arts by gifted and artistic parents. He was given an excellent education on the continent, in England and the USA and well provided for financially by his maternal grandparents and father. He travelled widely and, to say the very least, was an “experienced” young man who, much to the surprise of some of his contemporaries, found the stability and family he lacked in Christianity, specifically, the Roman Catholic Church (1938) and

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