

**“With the World in My Bloodstream”:
Thomas Merton’s Wisdom of Love
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Abstract

This article is a meditation on one of the most significant poems by the American Trappist contemplative Thomas Merton (1915-1968). Making use of a rich variety of metaphors and symbols taken from both Western and Eastern literary-religious traditions, in this piece of lyrics the poet recreates a political and poetical space wherein humanity could dream of new forms of consciousness and communal experience that might speak against the falsity of today’s sinful economies based on fear, hatred and ignorance. Within the context of a society ruled by giants or “spectres” without a centre, where truth is permanently being crucified on behalf of economic globalization, technological progress and particular interests, Merton writes this love letter to the world so as to make people realize that beyond the restrictions of a desiring and self-centered self, the Spirit of Love is always breathing to heal the brokenness of division, warfare, and collective illusion and to show the path to unbounded Life and authentic communion.

One thing has suddenly hit me—that nothing counts except love and that a solitude that is not simply the wide-openness of love and freedom is nothing [...] True solitude embraces everything, for it is the fullness of love that rejects nothing and no one, is open to All in All.

Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love*, April 1966.

“With the World in my Bloodstream” is a poem written by a mature monk who by the end of his life had somehow managed to solve his inner conflict between solitude and solidarity, contemplation

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and action, silence and writing. His name was Thomas Merton, one of the greatest mystics, poets and social critics of the United States, author of an extensive work in prose and verse whose relevance for modern reflection and thought is still to be discovered and understood within the field of American Studies.¹

Born in 1915, in the middle of a World War, Merton's life became a fierce struggle against the violent irrationality and social injustice pervading his time, something which might have influenced his decision to give up his job as teacher of English at St. Bonaventure University and become a Trappist monk at the Abbey of Getsemani (Kentucky) in 1941. From then on, he would engage in speaking against the false ideas and conceptions which conform our Western culture, ending his days as a hermit in the woods surrounding the monastery. However, this elected solitude did not mean an absolute isolation from the rest of the world. On the contrary, it enabled him to gain a compassionate look, a contemplative gaze which mirrored and was conducive to the experience of universal love.

This sacred and unifying perception of life is in fact the underlying theme not only of this poem but of his whole poetic production. Needless to say that the unity alluded by Merton differs greatly from any of the notions fostered by the advocates of economic globalization viewed as the current process of marketization of the world and the set of pseudo-theological arguments which seek to legitimate it. In many of his writings, instead, Merton stoutly criticized this Western "unmitigated arrogance towards the rest of the human race" (Merton, 1977: 380). He firmly denounced the apparently inherent drive of human beings to subject the "other".

Strongly opposing this xenophobic inclination to wipe out all that is unfamiliar or interferes with our clear rationalizations, Merton saw the urge to re-create a political and poetical space wherein humanity could imagine new forms of consciousness and communal

¹ Thomas Merton (Prades, 1915– Bangkok, 1968). One of the greatest contemplatives of the United States, author of works such as *The Seven Storey Mountains*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Faith and Violence*, *Disputed Questions*, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, *No Man is Island*, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* or *The Asian Journal* among many others (see www.thomasmertonbooks.com). In his writings he advocated a spiritual revolution to stop warfare and the disintegration of our world; his transformative metaphors always bring forth the most regenerative radiance from deep inside the heart of contemplation.

experience. He envisioned the transformation of a world metaphorically built upon “empires” into one thought of and felt as a “dwelling” place and he charted a sacred geography where there would be no need to artfully justify any sort of personal or structural violence for the sake of power or gain over others.

“With the world in my Bloodstream” (Merton, 1977: 615) is a good example of Merton’s search for a global and transcendental vision of reality beyond illusory divisions, beyond nasty nationalisms or egocentrisms, beyond harmful individualisms. This lyrical fragment was written in April 1966, after surgery to his spine, and it is dedicated to Margy, a nurse from St. Joseph’s Hospital (Louisville) with whom Merton fell in love passionately.² It stands as a profound and solitary meditation on the authentic meaning of life by a poet who had transcended his own solitude and was capable of embracing all cultural and religious differences in God’s “palace of nowhere”.³ Moreover, it shows some of the characteristics of Merton’s latest poetry, rich with imagery, allusions, and synaesthesias. It begins with a stream of musical metaphors which voice the poet’s desolate situation after the surgical operation:⁴

² This is the first poem he composed for her, inspired by the loneliness he felt when the student nurse abandoned the hospital for the Easter holiday and flew to Chicago: “I was so terribly lonely, and lay awake half the night, tormented by the gradual realization that we were in love and I did not know how to live without her” (Mott, 1984: 437). According to Jim Forest’s biography, she received the lines during a meeting they had at a restaurant in Louisville, on the 26th of April, when the monk confessed his love for her (Forest, 1991: 174). Merton would compose more poems for Margie. They have been collected in *Eighteen Poems*, New York: New Directions, 1986 (Limited edition-250 copies). Three of them (“With the World in my Blood Stream”, “The Harmonies of Excess” and “Never Call a Babysitter in a Thunderstorm”) appear in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, New York, New Directions, 1977, pp. 615; 447; 801. Thirteen of them have recently been published in the volume *In the Dark before Dawn, New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*, edited by Lynn R. Szabo, New York: New Directions, 2005, pp. 79-101.

³ After the metaphor of James Finley in his fine resumé of Merton’s message, *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God through Awareness of the True Self*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave María Press, 1978.

⁴ The poet was very fond of melodic images. He even entitled one of the poems in his book *The Strange Islands* “Elias-Variations on a Theme”, as if it were a musical piece divided into different variations. It should also be remembered that Merton loved listening to music, especially jazz and blues.

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I lie on my hospital bed
Water runs inside the walls
And the musical machinery
All around overhead
Plays upon my metal system
My invented back bone
Lends to the universal tone
A flat impersonal song
All the planes in my mind
Sing to my worried blood
To my jet streams
I swim in the world's genius
The spring's plasm
I wonder who the hell I am.

In these very first lines we already find a *continuum* between the physical condition of the individual narrator and a cosmic perspective. Thus, from the very beginning we encounter a monk who has gone beyond his individual consciousness and dwells in the realm of a greater awareness.

And it is here when, as readers, we may attune to Merton's feelings as he confronts the nuclear question of his entire life: "Who the hell am I?" Having reached a stage of spiritual maturity, he is still trying to grasp the mystery of his true self, which is not constituted by images, ideas, or symbols, but overcomes them and lives in the pure "isness" or what the Buddhists call "suchness" (Merton, 1985: 364).

The second stanza persists in Merton's inquiry as to his true nature and origin. Life is medically preserved, as it should be, and the world goes on, and yet the quest for identity remains for now Merton's religious dialectics provides him with a kind of double citizenship, both as a member of a cell of "this" particular city, Louisville which keeps him "functioning", and as the inhabitant of an eschatological Kingdom and a member of a Mystical Body:⁵

The world's machinery

⁵ Merton did not completely overcome his rejection of big artificial and inhuman cities, which are portrayed in poems like "So, goodbye to cities" or "Hymn of not much Praise for the city of Miami" (Merton, 1977: 19-20).

Expands in the walls
Of the hot musical building
Made in maybe twenty-four
And my lost childhood remains
One of the city's living cells
Thanks to this city
I am still living
But whose life lies here
And whose invented music sings?

In these lines, the poet has a strong intuition that the rhythmic life which breathes within himself is not his own, that he belongs to a much wider scheme for which he is just an instrument, a channel, an expression, even an invention. Again, there is evidence of a double binding or belonging. As part of the world's musical machinery, the poet's life follows its tune, whereas as part of God's self-gift, his life celebrates the song of Creation and has a share in it through his own creativity as conveyed in a life devoted to art and prayer. This is Life so abundant and yet so simple that it can really live in us and through us, as we also freely move in it on condition that it is not interfered with by the noises of the ego. According to Merton, very much influenced by the Benedictine rule exhorting monks to listen ("obsculta oh, filii", RB, Pról 1), this life is a subtle music which can be heard everywhere if we only develop our capacity to listen intently, as the Lord would have us do: "Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live" (Isaiah, 55, 3).

The next stanza ties this Life in with the figure of Christ:

All the freights in the night
Swing my dark technical bed
All around overhead
And wake the questions in my blood
My jet streams fly far above
But my low gash is no good
Here below earth and bone
Bleeding in a numbered bed
Though all my veins run
With Christ and with the stars' plasm.

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This is the Christ he discovered in Rome looking at the frescos in the old run-down chapels beside the Palatine, “the One Person I decided to serve as My God and my King” (Merton, 1976: 109). It is also the Christ depicted in the recondite Byzantine chapels of the Italian city: St. Cosmas, St. Damian, or St. Mary Major. Overall, it is the Christ who was obscurely revealed to him during that trip he made to Italy as he was a student at Cambridge (England), and who was to become the center of his life.

His search for Truth and his longing for home continue throughout the whole poem. In the fourth stanza, the healing presence of masters and saints from different times and traditions is made manifest.⁶ Thus, “recovery” and “home” hold the same metaphorical rank in one of these lines to the extent that they are interchangeable. This particular lexical choice is most meaningful as it broadly suggests redemptive policies for our society, lost and wounded. The Buddhist narrative of the world has people become sick because they are blind and thus ignore their true nature. Consequently, the prescription is awakening and seeing. In the Christian story the leading metaphors revolve around the images of loss and belonging, exile and return, separation and union.⁷ Be it under the grand Buddhist cosmology or within the Christian metaphorical system of belief, the human task can be said to be a trinitarian enterprise, one rooted in and aiming towards the Mystery of Love, its Incarnation in the world and our spiritual fulfilment by partaking, as image and likeness, in the very Self of the Living God: “The recovery of Paradise is the discovery of the ‘kingdom

⁶ As a committed contemplative, Merton was conversant with both Western and Eastern religious expressions. “Only the Catholics who are still convinced of the importance of Christian mysticism –he wrote– are also aware that much is to be learned from a study of the techniques and experiences of Oriental religions” (Merton, 1968: 21). In his dialogue with the Zen master D.T. Suzuki, he discovered that there was a great similarity between the Christian concept of innocence or purity of heart and the Buddhist vacuity or *Sunyata*, between knowledge or moral and metaphysical differentiation and the ignorance which obscures the original light of the void.

⁷ However, a careful reading of the two narratives and a meeting of Jesus and Buddha, love and wisdom, is being proposed by representatives of both religions as necessary to heal our common world. Suffice it to mention here two seminal books out of a growing body of literature along the same lines: Thich Nhat Hanh (1999). *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*. New York: Riverhead Books, and Aloysius Pieris, S.J. (1988). *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*. New York, Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

of God within us' [...] it is the recovery of man's lost likeness to God, in pure, undivided simplicity" (Merton, 1968a: 102).

However, the recovery of our initial simplicity is not as easy as it may seem. It requires a process of complete unlearning, a getting rid of the "double garment", "the overlying layer of duplicity that is not ourselves" (Merton, 1970: 119), a leaving of everything behind, even our warm and comfortable house. As the poem says: "I have no more sweet home / I doubt the bed here and the road there".

And like Jesus himself, Merton has no place to lay his head. He has become very sceptical and can no longer bear the hectic, oppressive and superficial life of the urban society. Now, lying on a hospital bed, he tries to rid himself of any false relief or self-deception, and adopts a questioning attitude:

Here below stars and light
And the Chicago plane
Slides up the rainy straits of night
While in my maze I walk and sweat
Wandering in the low bone system
Or searching the impossible ceiling
For the question and the meaning
Till the machine rolls in again

The quest for his true identity becomes more and more pressing. Merton feels expelled from paradise, because his beloved is flying on the Chicago plane, and her absence makes him feel lost in a labyrinth. She seemed to be the answer to his search, his resting place, but without her he begins to hunger for "invented air", "community of men", "Zen breathing", "unmarried fancy", "wild gift" and "compromising answers".⁸

Meanwhile the prophet poet keeps depicting the oppression of technical society, the endless want of men, and the logic which runs the world as much as his blood system. According to Merton, it is precisely the desire, craving, appetite or thirst of our own isolated individual ego,

⁸ Just after meeting Margie for the first time, he remembers some lines of his favourite poet, Rilke: "[...] Were you not always/distracted by expectation, as though all this/were announcing someone to love? [...]" (Mott, 1984: 435).

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which poses the main obstacle for the discovery of our real, non-illusory nature: “Ego desire can never culminate in happiness, fulfilment and peace, because it is a fracture which cuts us off from the ground of reality in which truth and peace are found” (Merton, 1968a: 85-86). Therefore, by our unrest, as creatures, we remain cut off from the loving wisdom in which we should be grounded and live in a condition of brokenness and error. In sharp contrast to this selfishness and avidity, Merton refers to Christ’s behaviour, when he abandoned everything and even gave his life for us:

Nameless, bloodless and alone
The Cross comes and Eckhart’s scandal
The Holy Supper and the precise wrong
And the accurate little spark
In emptiness in the jet stream
Only the spark can understand
All that burns flies upward
Where the rainy jets have gone
A sign of needs and possible homes
And invented back bone
A dull song of oxygen
A lost spark in Eckhart’s Castle
World’s plasm and world’s cell
I bleed myself awake and well.

The emphasis is now on the need to die in order to live, like Jesus did. The Cross becomes an engaging symbol for the death and resurrection of men in Christ as well as the door to a new life of love “in the Spirit”.

Moreover, the poet borrowed Meister Eckhart’s image of the “spark of the soul” or “scintilla animae” which the German mystic himself described as “free of all names, bare of all forms, [...] empty and free” (Paguio, 1992: 256), “something in the soul so closely akin to God that is already one with him and need never be united to him” (Merton, 1968a: 11).⁹ This mystical spark, this divine likeness in us is

⁹ As John Howard Griffin has pointed out, in the hospital Merton plunged into a study of Eckhart (Griffin, 1983: 79). He was impressed by his sermons and his way of penetrating the core of inner life. Michael Mott has also pointed out: “Merton was

the core of our being and is in God even more than it is in us. It is a basic unity within ourselves at the summit of our being where we are, in Eckhart's words, "one with God". Merton rephrased it as "His Name written in us; as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship" (Merton, 1968b: 140).

Finally, at the end of the poem Merton considers this spark or living flame of love as our true identity in God, the everlasting birth of Christ within us:

Only the spark is now true
Dancing in the empty room
All around overhead
While the frail body of Christ
Sweats in a technical bed
I am Christ's lost cell
His childhood and desert age
His descent into hell

Merton's spark of the soul is "dancing in the empty room" because, as he pointed out in his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*, "the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness" (Merton, 1972: 297). In these verses, there is an association on the part of the poet between Eckhart's divine spark, the Buddhist experience of emptiness and the Christian search for innocence or selflessness as Paradise. All seems to indicate that in that difficult situation in hospital, Merton had an experience of true void, solitude, poverty, or desert, and he lived the within and the beyond of this nothingness as a source of rich inexhaustible possibilities. He followed Christ's path into death, left everything behind and gave up all, descending into hell only to find himself infused with light and blessed by union with the divinity. By overcoming his alienation from the inmost ground of his identity, he reached a fresh awareness of his true self, as hidden in the ground of Love. A self who is no-self:

making notes on Eckhart in his reading notebooks when yet another student nurse came in to announce she had just been appointed to this floor of the hospital" (Mott, 1984: 435).

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Love without need and without name
Bleeds in the empty problem
And the spark without identity
Circles the empty ceiling.

By the end of his life Merton achieved the wisdom of universal love, grounded in Christ, shining through everything: an “absolute emptiness” and yet, paradoxically, the womb of “absolute fullness”. Through his human and divine love for a woman, thus, Merton reached a deeper awareness of the Trinitarian economy of Being which is infinite Giving, Spirit and Life. According to him,

this realization is not simply the awareness of a loving subject that he has love in himself, but the awareness of the Spirit of love as the source of all that is and of all love. Such love is beyond desire, and beyond all restrictions of a desiring and self-centered self [...] It seeks to realize oneness with the other ‘in Christ’, to heal the brokenness of division and illusion and to find wholeness not in an abstract metaphysical ‘one’, [...] but [...] in the Spirit of Absolute Love. (Merton, 1968a: 86)

It is in this unlimited Love that Merton sees authentic unity possible rather than in an abstract, idealized “globalization” which is but the mask of a new imperialism and implies the domination of the giants or “spectres” and the oppression of the weakest. The poet denounced the distortion of looking at the other as enemy and considered it a “subjective abstraction” based on particular interests. He writes:

A society that kills real men in order to deliver itself from the phantasm of a paranoid delusion is already possessed by the demon of destructiveness because it has made itself incapable of love. It refuses, a priori, to love. It is dedicated not to concrete relations of man with man, but only to abstractions about politics, economics, psychology, and even,

sometimes, religion. (Merton, 1977: 375)

However, the unity that Merton advocates is neither abstraction nor mere communication or virtual connection at the level of ideas but a communion of hearts that share the same love for the living truth, the living Word. In his poetry, he dreamt of a promised land, or, as Michael Higgins has pointed out, a “spiritual locus” and “rootedness” (Higgins, 1990: 175). A place where there can be a coincidence of all in all, a final integration or “ingathering”. In an atomic age, when western religion and philosophy are in a state of crisis, and human consciousness is threatened by the deepest alienation, he tried to awaken us to a new awareness beyond the illusion of separatedness and show us the path to unbounded life. For, as he wrote in his last journal, “the deepest level of communication is not communication but communion [...] We are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are” (Merton, 1975: 308).

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