

focusing on Merton's evolving art and persistent struggles as a writer voluntarily constrained by religious discipline. 'Before reading Merton's journals I had never encountered such an articulate and extended examination of these grueling and insoluble problems, and this ... was the subject I felt called upon to examine' (p.5).

Of Merton's other writings, Gordon considers Merton's poetry and literary criticism to be unremarkable (p.6). She refers to 'the excessive abstraction that dehydrates much of his spiritual writing' (p.80). By way of criteria for evaluating his literary legacy, Gordon is surely right to cite Merton's late assessment of his writing as poor when 'it implies a lack of love, good insofar as there may yet have been some love in it. The best stuff has been more straight confession and witness.' (p.38, citing a journal entry of April 14, 1966).

I found Gordon's book a pleasure to read, and would include it amongst a top dozen recommended introductions to Merton. This is an astute evaluation, and a celebration, of the 'greatness of Thomas Merton: ardent, heartfelt, headlong. Life lived in all its imperfectability, reaching toward it in exaltation, pulling back in fear, in anguish, but insisting on the primacy of his praise as a man of God.' (p.133)

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Thomas Merton's Poetics of Self-dissolution

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Sonia Petisco is a Merton scholar and a gifted translator of Merton's poetry into her native Spanish. Her collection of eight previously published critical essays, along with the transcript of two interviews, presents the reader with a scholarly, stimulating and sometimes provocative analysis of Thomas Merton's poetic corpus. As Peter Ellis states in the foreword, the author's new and distinctive interpretation in these chapters go beyond scholarly enquiry, beyond even the discussion of self and gender, to expose, in Petisco's words, Merton's concern with 'the collective illusions of our separateness in our societies and languages' (p. 14).

In her introduction, the author offers us an overall theme to these papers, which aim to show 'how the quest for self-detachment and mystical

communion is indeed at the center of Merton's spirituality and political concerns' (p.18). Her rationale, which illuminates the title of her book, is that Merton's entire poetic corpus can be interpreted as a 'poetics of dissolution' which refers to 'the dissolution of the old corrupt world ... in favour of an apocalyptic vision of a new world' (p. 18). Further, she invites the reader to accompany Merton 'in this endless path towards real communion with the divine' (p. 21).

Chapter 1, 'Thomas Merton's Poetic Evolution from World's Denial to an Experience of Universal Love', traces a chronological account of Merton's poetry over a period of thirty years, reflecting his changing relationship with the world. He emphasises the sharp distinctions between the profanity of the secular world, which he views as a 'womb of collective illusion' (p. 28), and where false *divertissement* is described in Pascalian terms as 'the greatest of our miseries' (p. 28), comparing this unfavourably with the *paradisus claustralis* of Gethsemani. Although Merton's tireless search for complete union with Christ is a main theme of his early poetry, in his volume *The Tears of the Blind Lion* (1949), he continues to highlight the Augustinian dualism observed between the earthly city and the city of God. This dualism is partially overcome in *The Strange Islands* (1957), which seeks a radical transformation of humankind from '*contemptus mundi* to universal love' (p. 27). It also marks a transition to his poetry of the 1960s, which culminates in his criticism of a world of alienation and destruction in his epic poems, *Cables to the Ace* (1968) and *The Geography of Lograire* (1968), as he devises a new form of anti-poetry.

Chapter 2, 'O Sweet Escape! O Smiling Flight! Commentaries on a Selection of Poems by Thomas Merton', gives us an insight into Merton's 'poetics of dissolution', and although they depict his progressive abandonment of the secular world and of his own (false) self, they are nevertheless offered as a source of inspiration and discovery. Ultimately Merton recognises, in his fluctuating contemplative development, that 'the battle against the falseness of his own self is the only battle worth fighting' (p. 53). By the end of the 1950s, in 'The Sting of Conscience', Merton wishes to transcend the attitude of a mere bystander and he adopts a harsh critical attitude against inactivity in his monastery.

Chapter 3, 'Thomas Merton's Antipoetry: A Revolution in Language and Thought', provides an overview and linguistic analysis of his two epic anti-poems, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, which reflect on the crisis of human language and the failure to communicate. In *Cables*, Merton parodies our capitalistic culture, 'for money is blood' (p. 60), as he seeks to reject any obstacle to true *sapientia*. His 'unitary vision' (p. 61) reaches its maturity in *The Geography of Lograire*, which Petisco calls a 'surrealist

meditation' (p. 62) and she provides a useful explanation of the title, linking 'Lograire' with 'Logos'. The new geography of Merton is the geography of the air, symbol of the highest freedom and happiness. With some conviction and passion, the author claims that Merton's anti-poetry brings us to a new love, a new vision, a new fire that purifies our language of lies and hatred' (p. 64).

Chapter 4, 'Silence as a Path to Joy in the Poetry of Thomas Merton and T.S. Eliot', offers a perceptive, detailed discussion on the influence of Eliot's poetry on Merton and the similarity of their purpose: an intimate desire for a 'mystical union with God through contemplative silence and prayer' (p. 66). Petisco sheds light on the significant recurrence of themes, symbols and images that clarify both poets' understanding of silence as a path to joy. Merton's mature poetic works, *The Strange Islands*, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963) and *Cables to the Ace*, are juxtaposed with Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday' and *Four Quartets* (1943), the latter described by Merton as 'the greatest spiritual poem of the twentieth century' (p. 67). The author claims that her methodology, based on a close reading and interpretation of Merton's significant poems is 'not in order to "understand" them, but to "experience" them' (p. 67).

Chapter 5, 'Recovering Our Innocence: The Influence of William Blake on the Poetry of Thomas Merton', addresses the texts of the two poets as 'inseparable from their mystical experiences' (p. 91), both poets understanding religion as 'the experience of the transcendent' (p. 92). Merton was deeply influenced by reading Blake's poetry with its sapiential and transcendental vision of reality ... his search for unity, and his interest in the East and Zen Buddhism' (p. 93). Both Merton and Blake are perceived by the author as poets of 'self-dissolution' who promote the recovery of freedom and innocence, evident in Blake's *Songs of Innocence* where he extols the happiness of the innocent child, and Merton's poem 'Grace's House', the house of Innocence, 'where everything is blessed, where everything is sacramental' (p. 100).

Chapter 6, 'Thomas Merton's World Discourse: Economic Globalization vs Religious Universality', is a joint essay by Petisco and Fernando Beltrán Llavador which seeks to articulate, through Merton's discourse on universality, how Trinitarian relatedness and contemplative awareness can shed light on the inflated guise of globalization. In an insightful and stimulating analysis of Merton's poem 'With the World in My Bloodstream', the first of *Eighteen Poems* written for M in 1966, Petisco claims that we now encounter a spiritually mature monk 'who has gone beyond his individual consciousness and dwells in the realm of a greater, global awareness' (p. 119). Petisco affirms that Merton's unified perception of life in this love poem is not just 'a new global politics of sharing' (p. 128), but 'a

communion of hearts that share the same love for the living truth' (p. 127).

Chapter 7, 'Translation as Recreation', demonstrates Petisco's considerable linguistic skills as she reflects on her own translating process and the underlying linguistic theories she has employed when translating Merton's love poems from English to Spanish. For effective translation she encourages the process of attentive reading, opposing Nabokov's theory of 'absolute fidelity' (p. 132) to the text, with the conviction that the problems of semantics demand the use of Spanish words that are more in harmony with the original meaning. Petisco claims that even the original English version could be said to be a 'translation' from a non-verbal world. Ultimately she wishes 'to transcend the level of textual interpretation and reach the level of transgression ... to break the limits and definitions ... of the different languages of Babel and bring us into the presence of the unsayable' (p. 149).

Chapter 8, 'Sophia the Unknown, the Dark, the Nameless ... : Questioning the Male-Female Dichotomy through Thomas Merton's Poetry', is a challenging, provocative discussion in which Petisco presents an exegetical analysis of Merton's prose-poem 'Hagia Sophia', addressing the deep division, 'that incurable wound' (151) between male and female. The author praises Merton's meditation on Sophia 'where the *sexus* or separation between male and female sides is transcended, and where true love and communion become possible *utopias*' (pp. 152-53). But she also charges Merton with inconsistency as she audaciously questions the parts of the poem where Merton's language 'fails to escape from the theological discourse he as a Christian has inherited' (p. 161). She invites him to 'revise and reformulate his own theology in the poem' to 'free himself from imposing Wisdom from 'any kind of human division' (p. 163), so that it is beyond any limitations imposed by language. She concludes, with Merton's voice: 'She smiles, for though they have bound her, she cannot be a prisoner.' (p. 164)

The book ends with 2 brief interviews about Merton's poetry. The first is with Dr George Kilcourse who acknowledges Merton's 'faith in the poetic word considered as the living experience of the ineffable' (p. 168). The second is with Br Paul Quenon. Of Merton's oeuvre he observes that: 'In his prose he may discuss an experience, but in the poetry he is presenting you with the experience' (p. 172).

Sonia Petisco's illuminating and original analysis of Merton's poetry reminds us of the depth and breadth of the treasure of his poetics of dissolution, which reach to the heart of his contemplative path.

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