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*The Shaping of an Alternative Language for Theology in the Work of Thomas Merton through
a Poetics of Place*

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**Setting Theology Free:
The Shaping of an Alternative Language for Theology
in the Work of Thomas Merton
through a Poetics of Place**

Elizabeth Mary Rainsford-McMahon

A dissertation submitted to the
University of Bristol
in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of PhD
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Abstract

In this thesis, I show how Thomas Merton creates an alternative language for theology, that is shaped by the aspirations for language of the mid-20th century *ressourcement* theologians, and further deepened through the distinctive quality of his engagement with place. I outline the character of the *ressourcement* movement in its concern for revitalising theological expression and provide a parallel survey of mid-20th century interrogation of the theme of place. Through this dual focus on language and place, I identify a paradigm, in which language, place and intimations of divine presence form a tripartite nexus. I name this paradigm a poetics of place.

The thesis considers the evolution of this poetics of place in Merton's work, through four chapters of analysis of primary texts. I then reflect on Merton's poetics to suggest that he not only provides an alternative language for theology to the scholasticism of his time, but that his work also provides a model which responds to ongoing self-critique within the discipline of theology, concerning theological genre and the side-lining of place as a theological category.

The title 'setting theology free' signals in part the freedom which emerges when place, as a shaper of theological understanding, is prioritised. If theology is not only rooted in the traditions of respective faiths but also, in spatial context, it is forced to evolve and engage with that context. Place thus takes on the role of partner to theological enquiry, as a focus which is multiple and subject to constant evolution. This 'setting free' also refers to the release of theology from unanalysed stylistic conventions and emphases within scholastic methodology, sought for by the *ressourcement* theologians. Both *ressourcement* endeavours and later interrogations of language and place generate a more capacious and, I suggest, a more theologically shaped field for the discipline of theology, than is evident in scholastic methodology. I shall argue that it is within such wider and theologically determined parameters, that Merton's theological genre is located.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

I read *The Seven Storey Mountain* beneath a sun-umbrella, in a rainstorm in the foothills of the Pyrenees, the corner of France where Merton was born, a book handed to me by one of my brothers, Martin. I had returned to the mountain valley after a morning in Lourdes where the paintings in the basilica had left me full of disconnection. As I read and listened to the sound the rain makes, it became the starting point of a poetics of place.

Work took me to Nepal. Looking out on monsoon rain in Kathmandu, I dipped into world faiths and met a theology of welcome, with Hindu chants filling the air, silent faces gathered round the candlelight in the stupas, and a Christian NGO giving me a job, filtered water, and checking my cupboard was filled with lentils and rice: Amy, Ginger, Binayak, Sushi, Rachana, Sushim, Mhendo, also Mhendo's mother, (RIP) who prepared a solo feast for me to enjoy in the shadow of her single room brick home, with its gap near the roof, smilingly called air-conditioning, with corn cobs and chillis drying at my feet.

A year's contract in Corsica led me to a mountain village alongside neighbours who lent us their car after I crashed, lent us a coastal flat so we could swim in the Med beneath November skies and wonder at the strange carvings of Filitosa, and who feasted us on oranges and clementines from their garden. They also told me to get my thesis done! Jeannot, Nicole, Jérôme and Lucia. To and from Corsica, we broke the long journey south in the Corrèze, where Béatrice and Ian showed us what it is to fall in love with a windowless barn.

Then for two years the flat plains of Lorraine beckoned with the baroque beauty of Nancy, miles of cycling along canals, storks' nests on lampposts and our city centre garden-house, the Hermitage, where we sampled the local *spécialités* of *madeleines* and *macarons* as well as *kugelhupf* served by our land-lady to become friend, Anne. The second year took us to the pink and yellow stone of Metz where Marie-Reine played Brahms and gave us recordings of her family singing *Messine* chant, the precursor of Gregorian. Chagall and Cocteau stained-glass rainbowed the often-grey skies. My students in all these places taught me about the nature of a sacred place: Camille, Pauline, Chloé, Edwige, Henri, Saliha.

In between times, back in England, relinquishing screen and words, Nick and I ran, walked, swam and wild-camped on Dartmoor. We were feasted in the ancient oak woodland that falls to their care by Lorna and John. We trekked the southern length of the South West coast path. Once out of lockdown, we shall reach Land's End as I hand in this work!

One day, googling geopoetics and Merton, I was led to the poetry of Elizabeth Rimmer *We Live Now*, (2011) *The Territory of Rain* (2015) and most recently *Haggards* (2018). Elizabeth had written on Merton and the Cistercian tradition and was also associated with 'The Scottish Centre for Geopoetics'. Her father had been a second-hand book shop owner. When he heard of her interest in Merton, he sought to find every book he had written. I drove to meet Elizabeth in Stirling and she generously lent me her entire Merton library.

Through, with, and in all these places, my children have coloured in the space between reading and writing. Genevieve gave me Edinburgh city life and Scottish munros to become another home for a while. Philip showed me Bristol, Strasbourg, London, took me to my first

ever gig and listened to my chapter outlines whilst leading me down a scree slope in the snow. Susannah and Ben took us trekking in the Drakensberg mountains and to a safari where a lion emerged from the scrub and a family of elephants took a walk whilst we drank tea at sunrise. Lucy gave me Cambridge to enjoy, the Botanic Garden, pressing apples and making honey, borrowing books now found in this bibliography and showed me the language of dance, bringing the women in the windows of Kings College Chapel alive. In the background, friends, Alison who gave me multiple short cuts to navigate through Word, Sylvie, Susie, Carol, Annie, my brothers and one sister, their families, and our parents: now stuck in lockdown, with Dad regularly reminding me as I say I'm still writing: you're not getting any younger!

Finally, when tentatively you ask a question, is there a chance you might supervise this research project, crazily wide, and muddled, when someone: Professor Gavin D'Costa kindly says yes, a once unknown name at the end of an email becomes a constant companion as a conversation begins. Dr Hester Jones and Dr Caroline Tee also kindly listened, shared, and opened up new directions. A travel bursary from Bristol University led me to a gathering of Merton scholars at St Anselm's in Rome, where each morning I marvelled at the turtles in the cloister pools and each evening closed with Gregorian chant. Without such a kind response, this work would not have been set in motion and knocked into shape. A huge thanks to ALL mentioned here and I am looking forward to continuing our conversations and our wanderings when the space devoted to this study no longer usurps our time together.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: Elizabeth Rainsford-McMahon DATE: 25/06/2020

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to show how Franco-American Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, creates a distinctive form for theological expression, which is derived from the aspirations for language of the mid-century *ressourcement* theologians and further shaped by the particular character of his engagement with place. The interpretation of place is multi-layered, encompassing location or geography, locale or setting, and the sense of place, or how physical surroundings are experienced and understood. I address both the use of language and the role of place as a partner to theological expression, thus establishing a three-way dialogue between theology, place, and language. I name this dialogue a poetics of place and I claim that it is the key paradigm shaping Merton's theological expression. I consider the evolution of this poetics of place in Merton's work, through four chapters of analysis of primary texts, balancing the prose and poetry of the 1940s with a parallel study of prose and poetry of the mid-60s. I then reflect on Merton's poetics to suggest that he not only provides an alternative language for theology to the scholasticism of his time, but also offers a prism through which to view ongoing critique of the discipline, voiced both by Catholic theologians, and by a wider Judaeo-Christian context. The thesis thus provides a critical enquiry into the use of language for theological expression, and the side-lining of place as a theological category.

My title 'setting theology free' signals in part the freedom which emerges when place as a shaper of theological understanding is a key focus.¹ If theology is rooted not only in the sacred traditions of respective faiths but also in spatial context, it is forced to evolve. Place thus takes on the role of partner to theological enquiry, as a focus which is multiple and subject to constant evolution. This 'setting free' also refers to the release of theology from unchallenged stylistic conventions. Both *ressourcement* endeavours and later interrogations of language and place generate a more capacious and, I suggest, a more theologically shaped field for the discipline of theology, than is evident in scholastic methodology. I argue that it is within such wider and theologically determined parameters that Merton's theological genre is located.

¹ This title is taken from one of the most recent studies in a key related field of enquiry to this study: 'Theologies of Place', Sigurd Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2016), p. 369.

I

Themes: *Ressourcement* Theology, Language and Place

There are several fresh emphases for Merton studies within this thesis. Firstly, by locating Merton in the *ressourcement* context, I offset the neglect of Merton in this field of enquiry, highlighted by Ron Dart as in need of correction.² Merton is thus recognised as a theologian, alongside a group of highly influential Catholic theologians of the mid-20th century. Secondly, by analysing Merton's poetic works, I question the too ready dismissal of his poetry.³ In so doing, I also address the need to underline the complementarity of the prose and poetry in the light of Patrick O'Connell's assertion:

The poetry needs to be recognized as an integral part and not a peripheral dimension of his work. The poetry reinforces and extends themes and ideas found in the prose and provides insights on some topics available nowhere else.⁴

My focus on mapping Merton's engagement with place, responds to a further claim by O'Connell, that place is 'the most important point of access to Merton's work'.⁵ Finally, by analysing Merton's work in the light of a poetics of place, I counter the imbalance in Merton studies which has tended to prioritise theological content or present Merton the man, over the discussion of his theological style.⁶

² Ron Dart who has explored the link between Merton and the Beat poetry of 20th century counter-culture in *Thomas Merton and the Counterculture: A Golden String* (Abbotsford, Canada: St Macrina Press, 2016) claimed in 2011 that this silence concerning Merton's role as a *ressourcement* theologian, needs correcting. In his view, Merton is 'writing on the same page as the renowned thinkers and shapers of Catholic theology of the mid-20th century'. Ron Dart, 'Thomas Merton and Nouvelle Theologie', *Clarion: Journal of Spirituality and Justice* <https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2011/07/thomas-merton-and-nouvelle-theologie-by-ron-dart.html> [accessed 26 /12/2019].

³ Patrick F. O'Connell, "'The Surest Home Is Pointless": A Pathless Path through Merton's Poetic Corpus', *CrossCurrents*, 58.4 (2008), 522–44 (p. 2) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-3881.2009.00044.x>> O'Connell outlines the rich distinctive character of Merton's attentiveness to place: 'His extraordinary attentiveness to the spatial dimension, to place, not just as setting but as subject (..) as sacramental revelation of divine creativity; as symbolic manifestation of religious vision; as concrete representation of moral and spiritual alternatives; as 'objective correlative' for interior states of mind and soul (..) is a central aspect of many of his most fully realized poems, from all phases of his career, and provides an important, perhaps the most important, point of access for appreciating the foundation and evaluating the results of Merton's vast poetic enterprise'.

⁴ Patrick F. O'Connell, "'The Surest Home Is Pointless": A Pathless Path through Merton's Poetic Corpus', *CrossCurrents* 58, no. 4 (1 December 2008): 2, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-3881.2009.00044.2>>, p.1.

⁵ Patrick F. O'Connell, "'The Surest Home Is Pointless": A Pathless Path through Merton's Poetic Corpus', *CrossCurrents* 58, no. 4 (1 December 2008): p.2.

⁶ Philip Seal, 'Towards a Formalist Theological Poetics: Practising What You Preach in the Prose Writings of Thomas Merton' (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2015), p. 37 <<https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:be5480fc-2edf-464a-b37c-a28d2c25fd1f>>.

Accompanying this endeavour to address key areas of neglect or imbalance in Merton studies, I demonstrate within the evolution of my thesis that these gaps in Merton discourse do not arise so much from neglect by critics of Merton's work. Rather, it is a prevailing compartmentalising tendency within the discipline of theology, that marginalises thinkers whose theological writing does not conform to the norms of rigorous analysis. Merton, for example, despite being instrumental in the retrieval of early sources of church tradition⁷, does not share the renown as a theologian held by the *ressourcement* thinkers. Instead, in the multiple studies on Merton's work,⁸ he is called by many names: poet and monk,⁹ rebel,¹⁰ peace-maker,¹¹ mystic,¹² visionary,¹³ contemplative,¹⁴ child-mind,¹⁵ prophet,¹⁶ quintessential American,¹⁷ and radical

Philip Seal's thesis identifies the extent of this imbalance. He refers to David Cooper's summary of Merton critique as a 'virtual tsunami of biographical studies, character sketches, [and] reminiscences', rather than according to Seal 'the heavyweight analysis that such an important figure might seem to warrant', David D. Cooper, 'Confession and Catharsis: Review of The Hidden Ground of Love', in *The Merton Seasonal of Bellarmine College*, Vol. 10, No. 3, Summer 1985, pp. 7-11, (p. 7). He also refers to Kilcourse's deduction that the Trappist himself is 'the final locus of study'. (George Kilcourse, 'Introduction', in *The Merton Annual: Studies in Culture, Spirituality & Social Concerns*, ed. by George A. Kilcourse, Vol. 15, 2002 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), pp. 2-18, (p. 13).

⁷ Merton's sounding out of early church sources is extensive: *What is Contemplation?* (1948), *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949), *The Ascent to Truth* (1951), *Bread in the Wilderness* (1953), *The Last of the Fathers: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and the Encyclical Letter* (1953), *The Living Bread* (1956), *Praying the Psalms* (1956), *Thoughts in Solitude* (1958), *What Ought I to Do? Sayings of the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (1959) and *The Wisdom of the Desert* (1960).

⁸ The extent of critique on the work of Merton has led to three publications on bibliography alone: 1986, 2002 and 2008. These studies seek to organise and take stock of a constantly growing field of research: Marquita E. Breit and Robert E. Daggy, *Thomas Merton: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (New York: Garland Pub., 1986); Marquita E. Breit, Patricia A. Burton and Paul M. Pearson, 'About Merton': *Secondary Sources 1945-2000: A Bibliographic Workbook* (Louisville, KY: The Thomas Merton Center Foundation, 2002); Burton, Patricia A. *More Than Silence: A Bibliography of Thomas Merton* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2008). The Thomas Merton Center focusing on new books released in electronic format in 2015 alone lists 16 publications.

⁹ George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1978).

¹⁰ William Henry Shannon, 'Something of a Rebel': *Thomas Merton, His Life and Works: An Introduction* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1997).

¹¹ John Dear, *Thomas Merton, Peacemaker: Meditations on Merton, Peacemaking, and the Spiritual Life* (New York: Orbis Books, 2015).

¹² Susan Rakoczy IHM, *Great Mystics and Social Justice: Walking on the Two Feet of Love* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

¹³ Michael W. Higgins, *Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2014).

¹⁴ William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987).

¹⁵ Fiona Gardner, *The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

¹⁶ John Eudes Bamberger, *Thomas Merton: Prophet of Renewal* (Indiana: Cistercian Publications, 2005).

¹⁷ Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

humanist.¹⁸ Rarely is he named a theologian,¹⁹ and in fact is identified by Lawrence Cunningham as being ‘not a theologian in the conventional sense’.²⁰ I shall concur with Christopher Pramuk, who argues that this hesitation to name Merton a theologian arises from his theological genre, which by avoiding a systematic mode, and by being rooted in accounts of experience, leads to the underrating of Merton by the academy.²¹

It is the same marginalisation of non-analytical forms that can be singled out for generating the relative neglect of Merton’s poetry and for the prioritisation of his prose. This tendency is equally instrumental in the side-lining of place as theologically significant. The task of addressing poetic or concrete terms of reference challenges a predominantly abstract and analytical mode. It is therefore an underlying claim of this thesis that the prioritisation of an analytical approach to theology needs challenging.²² I thus provide a rationale against the exclusion, marginalisation, or indeed denigration of non-normative modes of theological expression.

II

Methodology: Wide Lens and Detail

In order to contextualise these claims, the structure of this thesis begins with a wide frame, in which I outline key figures within the history of Catholic theology, who demonstrate a

¹⁸ David D. Cooper, *Thomas Merton’s Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

¹⁹ Whilst it is not necessary to have theology in a title for theology to be the focus, it is significant that in a list of 180+ studies on Merton, only 4 refer to theology or of Merton as a theologian: Higgins, John J. *Merton’s Theology of Prayer*. (Indiana: Cistercian Publications, 1971); O’Hara, Dennis Patrick *Merton, Berry, & Eco-theology* (American Teilhard Association for the Future of Man, 1999); Carr, Anne E. *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton’s Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); Grayston, Donald *Merton as a Spiritual Theologian*: (New York: E.Mellen Press 1985).

²⁰ Lawrence S Cunningham, ‘Thomas Merton as Theologian, an appreciation’, *The Kentucky Review*, Vol 7. No. 2. Summer 1987, <<https://uknowledge.uky.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1162&context=kentucky-review>>, pp. 90-97, (p. 90) [accessed 13/06/2020].

²¹ Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009), p. 24.

²² This claim, of course, is not new as my analysis itself will demonstrate. I open my study in Chapter One by exploring a stance, evident in the history of Catholic theology, which rejects an exclusive focus on analysis and reason. I continue with an exploration of the *ressourcement* ‘lament’ concerning the predominance of a rational and analytical approach to theology. In my final chapter, I provide an outline of various critiques of analytical modes of writing theology and a discussion of ‘theologies of place’ which prioritise concrete terms of reference for theology. The intervening textual analysis and accompanying exploration of key related fields refer to monastic traditions, spatial and linguistic considerations, and strategies for mystical writing. All such fields share a stance which is prepared to play down the importance of an analytical approach to the discipline. By such emphases, and by identifying Merton as a model for theological expression, I thus challenge the prioritisation of analytical forms.

creative fidelity in their approach to how theology is done, and whose stance, I suggest, is representative of Merton and of the *ressourcement* movement. Given the extensive character of theology, language, and place as accompanying themes, I separate out exposition of key terms. In Chapter One, I address the key term ‘theology’ within ‘the shaping of an alternative language for theology’ and ‘setting theology free’ of the title, by building a discussion on the creatively faithful thinking of four key figures in Catholic theological history, who launch Chapter One. I then explore mid-century *ressourcement* aspirations for an alternative to the prevailing model for theology, provided by the scholastic manual tradition. At this stage, I do not define place or poetics. I simply signal how they both emerge as components within *ressourcement* aspirations and Merton’s directives for theological genre.

Chapter Two then provides a clear definition of ‘a poetics of place’, in conjunction with an interrogation of place in socio-cultural and literary contexts, contemporaneous with Merton, which demonstrates a kinship with this paradigm. Chapter Three introduces further nuance to the theme of place, by exploring spatially defined elements in Merton’s pre-Trappist life, and the very particular character of monastic space. It is, hence, throughout the three chapters of Part One, ‘Towards a Theological Poetics of Place’, that I establish key emphases and present the theoretical framework from which my analysis of primary texts in Part Two will spring. I close this section by outlining my approach to the theme of place in the light of secondary critique.

Part Two contains four chapters of primary text analysis. I explore selected prose and poetry of Merton’s earliest writing in Chapters Four and Five and continue in Chapters Six and Seven with selected prose and poetry of Merton’s later years.²³

In the concluding section, Part Three, I address the relevance of Merton’s style of writing theology to the ongoing interrogation of theological genre, emerging in the decades after his death and on into the 21st century. I then explore its relevance further to key-related fields of this enquiry: ‘theologies of place’ and ‘geo-poetics’.

This trajectory, starting wide, narrowing progressively to the detail of textual analysis, then projecting wide again, helps address the dual elements within my claim. On the one hand, it

²³ I outline the rationale behind my selection of texts in Chapter Three, ‘Towards Part Two’, pp. 98-100.

is necessary to explore the detail of Merton's theological genre. On the other, the notion of an alternative language and the setting free of theology demands an engagement with the wider discipline. There is hence a symmetry within the structure of the thesis. The funnelling inwards of the opening chapters is mirrored in the projecting outwards of the final chapter, as I explore interrogations of theological genre and of the significance of place for theology. This juxtaposition of detail with a wider contextualisation establishes the contribution of this study to the more contentious debate concerning theological genre. By offering Merton's mode of writing theology as a model for the discipline, I show how Merton applies key aspirations within the debate, and I provide a prism through which to view continuing interrogation of theological genre. Through this trajectory, I seek to demonstrate that Merton creates a capacious, theologically shaped medium for the discipline of theology, freed from unanalysed conventions and emphases, thus, setting theology free.

PART ONE:
TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL POETICS OF PLACE

Chapter One:

Beyond the ‘Bulwark’¹: Merton as a *Ressourcement* Theologian

The period during which Thomas Merton wrote works for publication, from the early 1940s to his death in 1968, was within Catholic theology a time of considerable ferment, driven largely by the endeavours and aspirations of *ressourcement* theologians.² In a collection of essays on the ‘*Ressourcement*’, Gabriel Flynn describes them as a ‘renowned generation’, who ‘inspired a renaissance in 20th century Catholic theology and initiated a movement for renewal that made a decisive contribution to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965)’.³ The aim of this chapter is to outline the characteristics of the *ressourcement* movement in their concern for a renewal of Catholic theology, with specific reference to the use of language, and to demonstrate that the shaping of Merton’s theological expression was firmly rooted in this endeavour.

I initially locate Merton and the *ressourcement* movement in a wide frame through a sketched outline of key historical figures, who demonstrate creative fidelity in their approach to Catholic theology. I discuss the locus of theology which emerges from this outline, then present the characteristics of the *ressourcement*, which are most appropriate for this study. In so doing, I focus on their lament concerning contemporaneous scholastic methodology and their subsequent endeavour to retrieve patristic and medieval texts from neglect. I indicate how patristic texts highlighted an understanding of sacrament, which fostered an aspiration to re-instate within the discipline of theology a greater emphasis on mystery, and on a more embodied representation. I refer in brief to certain pronouncements in Vatican II, which emerged from *ressourcement*

¹ Pope Leo XIII, ‘Aeterni Patris: On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy’, 1879 <http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html> [accessed 24/12/2019] par. 24. The term used to describe scholasticism in the papal encyclical is ‘a bulwark’ for the faith.

² Jesuits : Jean Daniélou (1905-1974), Henri de Lubac (1896-1991), Karl Rahner (1904-1984), Henri Bouillard (1908-1981) and Hans Urs Von Balthasar (1905-1988); Dominicans: Marie-Dominique Chenu (1895-1990), Louis Bouyer (1913-2004), Dominique Dubarle (1907-1987), Henri-Marie Féret (1904-1992) and Yves Congar (1904-1995); Benedictine Jean Leclercq (1911-1993); philosophers : Etienne Gilson (1884-1978), Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) and Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973); the poet-theologians : Charles Péguy (1873-1914) and Raïssa Maritain. (1883-1960). Other: Italian born German priest, Romano Guardini (1885-1968).

³ Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 1.

endeavours. In the final part of this presentation of the *ressourcement*, I explore directives, specific to the language of theology, by four key *ressourcement* thinkers, which I suggest, signal towards a *ressourcement* manifesto for theological genre.

After this detailed exposition of the character of the *ressourcement*, the chapter will then address my claim that Merton is a *ressourcement* theologian. I begin by identifying how Merton does not figure in secondary literature specifically on the *ressourcement*, and I highlight a corresponding call to correct this neglect. I continue by exploring examples in Merton studies where a connection is made between Merton and one of the *ressourcement* thinkers. I then present a rationale for naming Merton a *ressourcement* theologian, with evidence drawn from primary texts, from his research on patristic texts and from his own directives concerning theological genre. I conclude by firmly aligning Merton with the *ressourcement* theologians. In my conclusion, I begin to signal how the *ressourcement* concern to find a language, which can both name mystery and engage with temporal and material realities, is translated in Merton's work into the paradigm I am naming 'a poetics of place', to be defined in Chapter Two.

I

Creative Fidelity in Catholic Thought

The *ressourcement* movement builds on a legacy of commitment to orthodoxy within Catholic theology and a parallel questioning of the priorities within the discipline. This stance generated a creative diplomacy in the communication of faith, which tended to acquire an added urgency at pivotal moments in ecclesial development. A broad-stroke outline of four key thinkers helps identify this creatively faithful stance, reflecting I suggest, the *ressourcement* position and that of Merton.

The medieval debate concerning the discipline of theology is quintessentially represented by the conflict between Peter Abelard, and appropriately for Merton as a Cistercian, Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153), the founder of the Abbey of Clairvaux, and the principal influence behind the early expansion of the Cistercian order throughout Europe.⁴ The debate was centred

⁴ 1054 was a year of crisis in Catholic church history. The Schism of 1054 marked the break of communion between what are now the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Churches. Pope Benedict XVI provides a clear outline of this argument in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, 11 November 2009. He describes how Bernard saw pride in the prioritisation

PART ONE: TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL POETICS OF PLACE: Chapter One

around the relative values of monastic and scholastic methods, or in broad terms, experiential, spiritual, or mystical emphases, over rational analysis.⁵ Significantly, when Merton describes his monastic founder, rather than polarising him on one side of the debate, he identifies Bernard as one who can bridge the divide, maintaining an approach to theology which is both mystical and speculative:

Taking a broad, general view of all of Saint Bernard's writings, we find that they give us a definite and coherent doctrine, a theology, embracing not merely one department of Christian life but the whole of that life. In other words, Saint Bernard is not merely to be classified as 'a spiritual writer.' (..) He is spiritual indeed, and a great mystic. But he is a speculative mystic; his mysticism is expressed as a theology.⁶

Four centuries on, during the period of the Reformation (c.1517-1648) and the Council of Trent (1545-1563), there was a need identified for 'an articulate theology' as a response to the Protestant challenge, which led to a restoring and retrenching of scholastic dominance within Catholic theology.⁷ Two figures who attempt to hold the tension of different approaches, like Bernard of Clairvaux, are Dutch theologian, Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) and French Catholic philosopher, Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), both of whom have been identified in secondary texts as kindred thinkers to Merton.⁸ It was amidst the increasing divisiveness, which

of reason over faith, citing Bernard's *Epistola*: 'Human ingenuity takes possession of everything, leaving nothing to faith. It confronts what is above and beyond it, scrutinizes what is superior to it, bursts into the world of God, alters rather than illumines the mysteries of faith; it does not open what is closed and sealed but rather uproots it, and what it does not find viable in itself it considers as nothing and refuses to believe in it'. (*Epistola* CLXXXVIII, 1: PL 182, 1, 353). The Abbot of Clairvaux contested as we have seen the excessively intellectualistic method of Abelard who in his eyes reduced faith to mere opinion'. Pope Benedict XVI, 'EWTN Global Catholic Network St Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter Abelard. Benedict XVI, 'EWTN Global Catholic Network St Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter Abelard', 2009 <<https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/st-bernard-of-clairvaux-and-peter-abelard-6390>> [accessed 29/12/2019].

⁵ Merton himself provides a discussion of the distinction between monastic and systematic in Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Kent: Burns and Oates, 1995), pp. 6–7.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *Last of The Fathers: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux And The Encyclical Letter Doctor Mellifluus* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1981), p. 48.

⁷ Eugene F. Bales, *Philosophy in the West: Men, Women, Religion, Science* (Bloomington, Indiana: Xlibris Corporation, 2008), p. 294.

⁸ Within Merton Studies both Erasmus and Montaigne are presented as companion thinkers to Merton. 1) 'Erasmus and Merton: Soul Friends - Ron Dart', *Clarion: Journal of Spirituality and Justice* <https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2014/11/erasmus-and-merton-soul-friends-ron-dart.html> [accessed 29/12/2019]. Ron Dart provides a detailed survey of the similarities between Merton and Erasmus, describing them as soul friends. He outlines a shared ground for approaching theological genre. 'Merton and Erasmus were suspicious of doing theology in a certain way. Both saw through the limitations of a type of scholastic and propositional theology that tantalized the mind but never, at a deep level, transformed lives.' 'They both lived the tensions, being ever critical yet ever faithful to the church. Both men were convinced that if the church and society were to be reformed and renewed, there had to be a return to the sources. (..) Both Erasmus and Merton were deeply conservative (they sought to conserve and keep clear the ancient paths), but they read the Patristic tradition

characterised the years of the Reformation, that Erasmus became a key figure who succeeded in standing in the gap.⁹ On the one hand, he championed the church fathers and helped to publish works about them, claiming that if there is any theology in Christianity, it is in these texts rather than in those of the medieval scholastics. In the same vein, he defended the new literary Latin of the humanists, demonstrating a greater openness to a less analytical, more literary idiom.¹⁰ On the other hand, Erasmus refused to adopt a position with either the reformers or the more conservative, thus remaining a faithful Catholic, albeit controversial.

A generation later, after the Council of Trent, this idea of a creative fidelity became more problematic.¹¹ Montaigne picked up this thread of simultaneous orthodoxy and controversy by arguing that, contrary to scholastic thinking, all reasoning can come to no conclusion with respect to God.¹² In the face of this inevitable uncertainty, he believed that knowledge had to be constructed, as reflected in his own writing, through both sense experience and reasoning. This stance was perceived as highly disturbing to the theological debate of his time, as it was

in a radical way. This means both men were radical conservatives. (...) There have, in the main, been two ways that theology has been done. Such approaches need not be either-or, but, sadly so, there is a tendency for this to occur. There is the mystical/contemplative way, and there is the rational / scholastic way (...) Erasmus and Merton were literary thinkers who refused to be drawn into either clan. (...) Both men were, therefore, soul friends in their literary approach to knowing and being, and they refused to genuflect to a narrow way of knowing and living the human journey.' Merton will also outline the qualities he likes in Erasmus in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. 'I am halfway through the *Ratio Verae Theologiae* of Erasmus, loving the clarity and balance of his Latin, his taste, his good sense, his evangelical teaching. If there had been no Luther, Erasmus would now be regarded by everyone as one of the great Doctors of the Catholic Church. I like his directness, his simplicity, and his courage'. Referring to Erasmus, Merton himself claims 'how can one be anything but a friend'. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 306. 2) Montaigne and Merton: Mary Murray-McDonald, 'The Fire Watch Epilogue and Life and Holiness: Opposing Rhetorics in the Writings of Thomas Merton', *Merton Annual*, 7 (1994) <https://www.academia.edu/36021375/The_Fire_Watch_Epilogue_and_Life_and_Holiness_Opposing_Rhetorics_in_the_Writings_of_Thomas_Merton> [accessed 29/12/2019], pp. 45-57. It is Montaigne's distinctive choice of genre which is of special relevance to Merton, with essays written in instalments over many years ranging over multiple topics. Montaigne's creative process echoes several of Merton's key works, which are frequently adaptations of years of journal writing, and which also reach into multiple fields of enquiry. In this short study of Merton's rhetoric, Murray-McDonald suggests that like Montaigne, rather than persuading the reader into a shared vision by relying on the power of rational analysis to convince, Merton makes use of 'a rhetoric that is a search for knowledge', p. 45. This kind of rhetoric she describes as demanding 'open speculation and risk of questioning and ambiguity', p. 47.

⁹ The entry on Erasmus in the 2009 Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy points out two key characteristics of Erasmus, which resonate with Merton. Firstly, he wrote guides to theological method and exegesis of the Bible which sought to challenge the centuries long domination of scholastic theology within university faculties. Secondly, like Merton, he kept up a wide correspondence and considered letter writing to be an important literary genre. Although recognised as a philosopher, he wrote no works of philosophy. Charles Nauert, 'Desiderius Erasmus', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2008 <<https://stanford.library.sydney.edu.au/archives/fall2009/entries/erasmus/>> [accessed 29/12/2019].

¹⁰ Nauert *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, section 2 on life and works.

¹¹ Bales, p. 293.

¹² Bales, p. 297.

interpreted as a rejection of a fundamental principal of Western thought, in its discarding of reason as a universal overarching standard.¹³

Two centuries later, at a further pivotal point in Catholic church history, represented by the first Vatican council (1869–1870), there was a reassertion of the centrality of scholasticism, in the face of challenges to church authority by modernism. In this period, John Henry Newman, (1801-1890) reflected the ability to hold the tension of conflict.¹⁴ Like Erasmus before him and the *ressourcement* movement later, Newman strove to highlight the importance of the earliest sources of Christianity. Summing up his achievement, Ian Ker claims that in so doing, he became:

not only a theologian whose theology was based on that of the Fathers, but a theologian who was clear, that theology should not be separated from history, (...) a theologian who emphasised the real and the concrete as opposed to the notional and abstract, the personal and experiential. (...) Newman was not simply conservative or simply liberal (...) he was a highly complex and subtle thinker who refused to see issues in black and white alternatives. He was both radical and conservative, a reformer but also a traditionalist.¹⁵

This broad-stroke outline of endeavours to be orthodox, yet unafraid to be controversial underlines an unease with polarised stances within theology, whether in terms of emphasis or mode of expression. Merton too refuses to choose between a progressive or conservative stance.

¹³ Marc Foglia and Emiliano Ferrari, 'Michel de Montaigne', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2019 (Stanford: Stanford University, 2019) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/montaigne/>> [accessed 29/12/2019].

¹⁴ Michael W Higgins, 'The Cardinal and the Monk: Literary and Theological Convergences in Newman and Merton', *The Merton Annual*, 5 (1992), 215–25 (p. 218). Higgins outlines strong convergences between Newman and Merton. As I have placed Merton in the *ressourcement* context, Higgins will underline how Newman was, a century preceding, a herald of the mid-20th century *ressourcement*, claiming that there were 'none more liberated from the shackles of decadent scholasticism'. Echoing Dart's descriptions concerning the radical approach to the patristics represented by Merton and Erasmus, Higgins will similarly describe Newman as a 'radical' theologian', p. 218. Higgins also refers to the marginalisation of both Newman and Merton, whom, sharing the status of being converts, he describes as being 'charged with being dissidents, renegades, sowers of doubt, Romans of qualified loyalty. Officialdom, the *status quo*, and the whole army of publicists and polemicists who have as their purpose unthinking servitude to the tradition, would have no truck with the likes of the convert innovators, John Henry Newman and Thomas Merton'. In spite of the similarities he identifies, Higgins will also point out that Merton claimed initially to be suspicious of Newman, citing Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.188. 'For a long time, I had no 'resonance' with Newman (because I did not bother to listen for any; I think pictures of him scared me). I was suspicious of letting him in. But now I want all the music and am with difficulty restrained from taking too many books of Newman out of the library when I have more books than I need already'.

¹⁵ Newman, John Henry, *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, xi 101, cited by Ian Turnbull Ker, *Newman on Vatican II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

He sums up his position in relation to the interrogation of theology, set in motion by Vatican II, in a clear echo of those earlier descriptions of Bernard, Erasmus, Montaigne, and Newman:

I would like to think I am what Pope John was - a progressive with a deep respect and love for tradition - in other words a progressive who wants to preserve a very clear and marked *continuity* with the past (..) yet to be *completely open* to the modern world, while retaining the clearly defined, traditionally Catholic position.¹⁶

This unease with a process defined by divisiveness punctuates the history of Catholic theology. It is accompanied by an underlying criticism of their being a normative and correct way of engaging with a discipline, which is not only the focus of academic study but is bound to concepts of fidelity, truth and how to be in the world. The rejection of this norm leads to marginalisation and exacerbates the need to define in opposition, thus bolstering the tendency to polarise. The historical outline implies that the norm is insistent upon clarity and reasoned argument, is intent on a systematised presentation, and it exhibits a readiness to demarcate boundaries. It is also suspicious of experiential narratives, or the imaginative projections of literary language as a fitting medium for the communication of religious truth. The alternative to this norm does the opposite. It places an emphasis on the dismantling of categories, on diluting the hold of reason for being only one means amongst several, and on bridge-building between opposing elements, to find what is common rather than what divides. In addition, it is comfortable with literary and experiential contributions and values examination of how theological theory is reflected in praxis.

The title of this thesis ‘Setting Theology Free’ through ‘an alternative language’ acknowledges a locus of theology and an accompanying language which is confining. By launching the discussion with vignettes of figures who challenge this approach, there is an admission that theology demands alternative tools. In laying claim, moreover, to a theologically shaped poetics, the question posed is whether it is possible to find a form which is theologically determined first and foremost, rather than taking its cue from an approach not uniquely

¹⁶ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 315–16. Merton draws attention to the challenge of polarisation of opinions in the Church: ‘One of the great problems after this Council is certainly going to be the division between progressives and conservatives, and this may prove to be rather ugly in some cases, though it may also be a fruitful source of sacrifice for those who are determined to seek the will of God and not their own. I do not speak here of bishops, but of ordinary priests, theologians, lay people, and all who voice their opinions one way or another. For my own part I consider myself neither conservative nor an extreme progressive’

theological. Is there a medium more conducive to communicating the elusivity of theological truth and the mystery within Christian revelation, or are the conceptual frames provided by philosophical analysis the best means available?

Within this frame of questioning, theology becomes a process for crafting words to represent God and all that pertains to God. Both the norm and the alternative highlight differing fears relating to that representation. On the one hand, anxiety lies in the dilution of theological truth by ambiguity, by the subjectiveness of experience, by the metaphorical imprecision of literary language, or by indifference to the clear delineation of categories. On the other, there is a concern for misrepresentation of God by confinement within the limitations of what reason and systematising thought processes allow. The underlying assumption is that when talk of God is forced into the parameters of human language, the inevitable clash between human and divine demands engagement with ambiguity and paradox, which dismantles the possibility of precise categorisations.

If theology is understood as a quest for language, it is pertinent to defer temporarily from this historically rooted debate and consider the replaying of the questions in the mid-20th century context from which the *ressourcement* agenda and the writings of Merton emerged. The differing approaches resonate directly with the early thinking of Ludwig Wittgenstein in his prioritisation of the pivotal role of language in communicating truth. Wittgenstein appears to favour the normative analytical approach: ‘Anything you can say at all, you can say clearly’¹⁷ and ‘if you have only the unanalysed form you miss the analysis; but if you know the analysed form that gives you everything.’ He continues, however, by acknowledging the limitations of analysis: ‘But can I not say that an aspect of the matter is lost on you in the latter case, as well as the former?’¹⁸ Moreover, in valuing precision, he envisages danger in such precision becoming an end in itself: ‘We eliminate misunderstandings by making our expressions more exact, but now it may look as if we were moving towards a particular state, a state of complete exactness; and as if this were the real goal of our investigation’.¹⁹ Finally, parallel with reflection on the rightful

¹⁷ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by Ogden, Charles Kay, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), pp. 27-29.

¹⁸ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1958), p. 30.

¹⁹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations* p. 43.

form for communication of truth, he acknowledges that there are things which cannot be contained in language, for which he promotes a withdrawal into silence: ‘What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.’²⁰

This latter stance for Wittgenstein particularly pertained to theology, for which he ruled out any possibility of meaningful philosophical discussion, given the limitations of logical boundaries. This made discussion of matters outside those boundaries such as the mystery of God, the elusive nature of religious experience or the action of grace meaningless, for beyond the borders of language there is nothing meaningful that can be said.²¹ Wittgenstein thus offers no clear mandate for either the norm or the alternative in relation to the quest for a language.

Theology as a quest after words, however, shares a forum with Wittgenstein in the spotlight given to language as a channel towards truth. With this emphasis, theology becomes not so much a container for what can be said of God, as a manner of communication. For Wittgenstein, a practice which stays with abstractions, analysis, and systematisation cannot be theology. The alternative approach to the analytical norm, which insists on the uncontainability of theological truth within rational parameters, more fully embraces the specifically theological component, confined by Wittgenstein to silence. To communicate theologically, therefore, is to find modes which extend beyond what is possible through analysis.

The four theologians witness to such alternative modes. Bernard’s theology is described as mystical, spiritual, and encompassing the whole of life. He thus roots theology in experience and advocates the approximations of apophatic language. Erasmus, in favouring literary Latin undermines the dominance of an analytical medium, implying that there are truths better communicated via metaphorical language. His preference for patristic texts illustrates the prioritisation of theological sources less bound to an analytical model. Refusing moreover, to be the subject of polarisation, he rejects divisiveness as a helpful tool. Montaigne is clear that rational thought cannot grasp God and that therefore a language of ongoing speculation and

²⁰ D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Notes on Logic (1913), sentence 7. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wittgenstein/#TracLogiPhil>>, [accessed 10/11/2020].

²¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by Ogden, Charles Kay, p. 27. ‘The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense’, People will only be able to see from what you say where the border lies. Everything beyond that border is simply nonsense.’

ambiguity is more appropriate, assisted by combining reasoning with sense experience. Finally, Newman, like Erasmus, favours the patristic theologians. He also insists that theology has to participate in history. On this basis, he seeks expression through ‘the real, the concrete, the personal and experiential’ as opposed to ‘the notional and the abstract’. The shared stance of the four theologians, echoing Merton’s description of his position, is an expansive orthodoxy, rooted in reverence for past tradition, and accompanied by an energetic commitment both to context and to theological embodiment. Together they seek a means of crafting theology which is fashioned by the mystery of God as manifest in material realities. This creates a dialogue in which the texts of the Bible, the patristics, tradition and liturgy must converse with history. Thus, the model for theology is shaped by an understanding that there can be no theological text without an accompanying context.

The perennial nature within Catholic history of the stance represented by the four figures is evident with a corresponding leap forwards in history to 2017 pronouncements by Pope Francis. Highly resonant of the alternative approach of Bernard, Erasmus, Montaigne and Newman and the necessity for theology to engage with context, Pope Francis describes ‘the task of theology’ as ‘rethink(ing) the great subjects of the Christian faith within a profoundly changed culture’, and ‘It’s in this living faith (...) that every theologian must feel himself immersed’. Theology, therefore, cannot be bound to the abstract. It cannot be disengaged from its application. It is not a separated-out category. Rather, it is dynamic, mobile and all pervasive within human life. Such mobility means that theologians are tasked with a recurring demand for newness: ‘to proclaim the Gospel in a new way, more consonant with a profoundly changed world and culture’. Accordingly, theology is to be constantly re-discovered in an ongoing way, rather than being definitively established. Echoing those very terms beneath which I have placed the four Catholic thinkers, Pope Francis asks for theologians to be implemented in the sign of a ‘creative fidelity’. This entails being faithful and anchored on the one hand and yet fertile with ‘the perennial novelty of the Gospel of Christ’. The bridge-building role of the theologian between ancient truths and the freshness of their unfolding manifestation is emphasised. Finally,

such advocacy derives from his starting point: ‘The Incarnation’, he claims, ‘is the starting point for theological reflection’.²²

It is within the parameters of this interrogation that this thesis unfolds. The key term theology, around which the thesis title pivots, is a quest after words rooted in the biblical understanding of God incarnate. A trajectory identified for setting theology free rejects a focus on first-order proofs and assertions to adopt a second-order interrogation of how theological language functions, to enable communication of religious truth. Accordingly, theology becomes the task of finding a language, which seeks to show where God is manifest and how the divine/human encounter unfolds. It will track the action of grace and how the principles of incarnation or sacrament are embodied in order to be experienced as well as understood. How this challenge was specifically enacted in the mid-20th century context of *ressourcement* thinking is the focal point of the next section. After demonstrating its emergence from the *ressourcement* agenda and its modelling in Merton’s theology, I shall return in Chapter Eight to this definition to consider what demarcates theology from non-theology.

II

The Theologians of the *Ressourcement*

II.i The *Ressourcement* Lament

The leading exponents of the *ressourcement* movement were a diverse group of Jesuits, Dominicans, Benedictines, philosophers, and poet-theologians, from several European countries, including France, Germany, Switzerland, and Belgium. Representing a broad range of theological thinking, their collective experience was a training in scholastic theology. They

²² Pope Francis, *Creative Fidelity in order to confront modern challenges*, original text in Italian, translated by Virginia M. Forrester. ‘Catholic Culture’ *Libreria Editrice Vaticana* 2017, <<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=11755>>, [accessed 10/11/2020]. Although these statements emerge from a specifically Catholic context, the thesis will ultimately locate Merton’s theological genre not only as a product of *ressourcement* thinking, but as a model which responds to the questioning of theological language within a wider Anglo-American Christian context. On this basis, it is interesting to observe a parallel definition of theology, involving creativity and fidelity, in a 2003 essay by Douglas Hall: ‘Theology is the intellectual spiritual capacity that helps the church to remain creatively and faithfully between its own worldly situation and its own particular sources of wisdom and hope, metaphorically speaking between context and text.’ As Pope Francis emphasises the perennial newness of the gospel of Christ, he emphasises the news element within the good news. Hall, Douglas John, ‘What is Theology?’ *CrossCurrents* Vol. 53, No. 2 (SUMMER 2003), pp. 171-184, <<https://www.questia.com/magazine/1G1-109569128/what-is-theology>>, [accessed 04/11/2020].

sought a renewal of Catholic theology, building on the efforts of spiritual and intellectual revival movements launched in the mid-19th century, which in the Liturgical Movement aspired to make the liturgy more attuned to early Christian liturgical understanding, whilst also seeking to highlight its relevance to modern life.²³ This negotiation between the early and the contemporary church is central to the *ressourcement* endeavour. Romano Guardini, a representative voice of the Liturgical Movement, held that the patristic tradition offered a more fertile ground for reaching out to the modern world than textbook Thomism.²⁴ His prioritisation of early church sources was shared by the *ressourcement* theologians, who were intent on offsetting the neglect of these works within the dominant theological tradition of scholasticism.²⁵

Pope Leo XIII in *Aeterni Patris*, 1879, ordered that the neo-scholastic interpretation of the works of Thomas Aquinas would provide the sole basis for Catholic theology and seminarian formation.²⁶ This order was reinforced in 1907 when Pope Pius IX ruled in *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* that scholasticism was ‘ordained’ as the basis of theology.²⁷ The terminology used to describe scholasticism in the papal pronouncements refers to ‘a bulwark’²⁸ for the faith, a

²³ Pecklers, Keith F., ‘Ressourcement and the Renewal of Catholic Liturgy: On Celebrating the New Rite’, Chapter 21, pp. 318-332, in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*, ed. by Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 324. The Liturgical Reform Movement emerged in the mid-19th century. Keith F. Pecklers SJ outlines its connection with the *ressourcement*. He refers to the early 20th century endeavours to research into early liturgical sources by Odo Casel, Cuniber Mohlberg, Franz Dölger, Anton Baumstark and Romano Guardini. In collaboration they launched a three-part series of publications, focused on returning to the liturgical sources. These publications included *Ecclesia Orans*, *Liturgiegeschichtliche Quellen*, (Sources of liturgical history), *Liturgiegeschichtliche Forschungen*. (Research into the history of liturgy), and the periodical *Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft* (The Annual Review of Liturgical Studies). In 1923 Romano Guardini published his important work *Vom Geist der Liturgie* (The Spirit of the Liturgy), which became a classic text in liturgical spirituality.

²⁴ Christopher Shannon, ‘Romano Guardini: Father of the New Evangelization’, *Crisis Magazine*, 17 February 2014 <<https://www.crisismagazine.com/2014/romano-guardini-father-of-the-new-evangelization>> [accessed 04/05/2020].

²⁵ Pecklers, Keith F., ‘Ressourcement and the Renewal of Catholic Liturgy: On Celebrating the New Rite’, Chapter 21, pp. 318-332, in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*, ed. by Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 324. Pecklers describes the common agenda of The Liturgical Movement and the *Ressourcement* Movement as ‘plumbing the depths of the church’s apostolic and patristic origins so as to assist the mystical Body of Christ in its renewal and fresh discovery of its mission’.

²⁶ Pope Leo XIII par. 24. ‘The same thing is true of sacred theology, which, indeed, may be assisted and illustrated by all kinds of erudition, though it is absolutely necessary to approach it in the grave manner of the Scholastics, in order that, the forces of revelation and reason being united in it, it may continue to be ‘the invincible bulwark of the faith’.

²⁷ Pius X, ‘Pascendi Dominici Gregis’, 1907 <http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis.html> [accessed 24/12/2019]: ‘We will ordain that scholastic philosophy be made the basis of the sacred sciences’, par. 45; ‘On this philosophical foundation the theological edifice is to be solidly raised’, par. 46.

²⁸ Pope Leo XIII par.24.

‘theological edifice’, ‘to be solidly raised’,²⁹ which is ‘ordained’.³⁰ The model image for theology suggested by their terminology is an inviolable, consecrated and intimidating authority, closed to external scrutiny. The sense of a defensive and combative construct is almost militaristic in its definition.

The papal declarations determined that training for the Catholic priesthood would prioritise scholastic texts.³¹ Based around a tradition of commentaries on Thomas Aquinas,³² and building on the system of theology taught in medieval European universities, shaped by Aristotelian logic, the method of scholastic theology was characterised by a process of thesis, antithesis, argument and rebuttal, proceeding in deductive fashion, in pursuit of a synthesis or conclusion.³³ Its primary purpose was ‘to find the answer to a question or resolve a contradiction’.³⁴ The process for eliminating contradictions was systematised into a careful drawing of distinctions, which generated a tendency to dispute everything at length and in detail.³⁵

This form of theology as an exclusive source of study generated a profound antagonism amongst the *ressourcement* thinkers. The force of their antagonism relays a challenge and perplexity at the heart of theology, which is forced to negotiate the dual strands of faith and reason, drawing from Anselm’s description of the theological quest as *fides quaerens*

²⁹ Pius X, ‘Pascendi Dominici Gregis’, par.46.

³⁰ Pius X, ‘Pascendi Dominici Gregis’, par. 45.

³¹ Rachel Muers, *Modern Theology*, 1 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 244. ‘In the early decades of the twentieth century, mainstream Catholic teaching was dominated by Scholasticism a training in philosophy and theology centred on textbooks containing a carefully refined version of the teachings of the great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas.’

³² Italian Dominican friar, Catholic priest, theologian, and Doctor of the Church (1224-1274).

³³ Philosophy Basics, ‘Scholasticism - By Movement / School’, 2020

<https://www.philosophybasics.com/movements_scholasticism.html> [accessed 29/12/2019].

³⁴ New World Encyclopedia, ‘Scholasticism’, *New World Encyclopedia*, 2019

<<https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Scholasticism>> [accessed 24/12/2019].

³⁵ The scholasticism of this period was referred to as neo-Thomism. Thomas O’Meara claims that ‘Unlike the thought of Aquinas, neo-Thomism in this period was generally rigid and intolerant, overly concerned with logic and metaphysics and disinterested in the religious depth of Aquinas’s writings. What many scholars and theologians referred to as Thomism or neo-Thomism, therefore, was in fact a generic and rather shallow variant of neo-Scholasticism, a contemporary movement also harkening back to medieval thought but promoting several positions that were contrary to those of Thomas Aquinas.

Thomas O’Meara, *Encyclopaedia Britannica: Scholasticism and Thomism*

<<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scholasticism/Enduring-features>>, [accessed 23/06/2020].

intellectum.³⁶ The neo-scholastic stance drew from centuries of confident affirmation of a partnership which contained within it the danger of over-estimating rationality and confining the mysteries of divine revelation within the parameters of human reason. We can recall how Bernard of Clairvaux provided a counter-poise to the bond of faith and reason. He echoes but reorientates Anselm's conjunction of faith and reason, by describing his own theological quest as *anima quaerens verbum*, a soul seeking the incarnate word.³⁷ His words imply a more dynamic, biblically rooted quest, open to ongoing questioning, due to its focus on the mystery of the incarnation.

The pre-eminence of reason as a theological tool among neo-scholastic theologians established a rational and systematic worldview in which to be faithful was to be oriented to the next world whilst living in this one. Describing the canvas of pre-Vatican II theology, Philip Gleason highlights a dogmatic and polemical approach, underpinned by a form of supernaturalism, which side-stepped an incarnational interpretation of God indwelling the world and instead emphasised 'God as the creator, redeemer and judge of the world'. The Church reflected this role as an authoritative and judgemental 'keeper of this knowledge and guide as to how to live in this world to prepare for the next'.³⁸ The dichotomy within this stance, coupled with a focus on systematisation led to a deeply etched series of polarised dualisms: human and divine; nature and grace; world and church; the created and uncreated; theoretical and physical; reason and faith; time and eternity; profane and sacred; secular and spiritual.

This framework of categories and polarisations together with a systematised hierarchy of value constituted the character of scholastic dualism. Emphasising division through a hierarchical ascendancy where God is understood as above and extrinsic to the world, neo-scholastic theology associated itself with those elements within each polarisation which stood like church, eternity, and grace outside time. God could only be channelled through the eternal and sacred offices of the Church, which had to guard against being tainted by the profane, the

³⁶ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/anselm/> Saint Anselm Williams, Thomas, "Saint Anselm", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/anselm/>>.

³⁷ Pieper, Josef, 'Roots of Scholasticism', <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scholasticism/History-and-issues>> [accessed 10/11/2020].

³⁸ Gleason, Philip, 'Neoscholasticism as Preconciliar Ideology', *U.S. Catholic Historian*, Vol. 7, No. 4, Catholic Higher Education (Fall, 1988), pp. 401-411, (p.405). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25153852?seq=10#metadata_info_tab_contents> [accessed 10/11/2020].

pro-fane, that which is outside the temple. The dualism of church and world, sacred and profane thus created a separate sphere for theologians. Yves Congar defined this neo-scholastic space as ‘the spiritual realm of the clerics, the heaven of the theologians, cut off from the world, going over and over their own problems (..), that had been set once and for all and rendered eternal’.³⁹ Henri de Lubac claimed that such a stance demanded that ‘the supernatural had to be in some way thrust aside, exiled, hemmed in’.⁴⁰ Within this construct theology represented a container for truths which were understood as impervious, self-referential and dogmatically sealed. The accompanying elitism and inaccessibility were necessary adjuncts to this rarefied location on the other side of time. The superiority gained through association with the divine was a mandate for being the sole determiner of the content and communication of divine truths.

The *ressourcement* theologians questioned the subservience to overly rationalist explanations and the stale language of long-established propositions, which outlined multiple categories and divisions. Moreover, believing God to be intrinsic to ordinary humanity, they wished to reaffirm the historical realities of the created order as a sacramental channel leading to eternal mysteries. Their collective unanimous indictments constituted a multi-pronged attack. Firstly, in their view, scholasticism prioritised technique over content, rendering it elitist and inaccessible to many. This would lead the French Dominican, Marie-Dominique Chenu, to describe scholastic manuals as ‘account books’, detached from faith in their excessive focus on form.⁴¹ For fellow Dominican, Yves Congar, the study of theology was no more than ‘a mere academic activity, specialised and closed, of interest to a select few’, ‘written in a different, dead

³⁹ Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie - New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), p. 14. He cites Yves Congar 8 January 1935 ‘Déficit de la théologie’: ‘La théologie est devenue elle-même comme une technique, une chose à part une activité de corps ou de classe, un savoir corporatif un domaine spécial et fermé qui intéresse quelques-uns. Tandis qu’elle est une sagesse, La Sagesse. Tandis qu’elle devrait être vitalemment articulée avec le reste du savoir et de l’activité humaine ce qui donnerait à tout le reste son orientation, sa mesure, son complément, sa fécondité la plus profonde. Avon Dominique, Fourcade Michel, ‘Un nouvel âge de la théologie?’ 1965-1980: Colloque de Montpellier, juin 2007 Collectif. (Theology has become a mere isolated technique, a mere academic and specialist activity only of interest to a few. Yet, theology is Wisdom itself and this needs to be embedded in human knowledge and activity as a compass and means of giving sense to all things. My translation).

⁴⁰ Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Etudes historiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1946), p. 173, cited by Komonchak, Joseph A., ‘Theology and Culture at Mid-Century: The Example of Henri de Lubac’, *Theological Studies*, 51.4 (1990), pp. 579–602, (p. 586), <<https://doi.org/10.1177/004056399005100402>>.

⁴¹ M-D Chenu, ‘Position de La Théologie’, *Revue Des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, 24 (1935), 232–57 (p. 243).

language'.⁴² Secondly, scholasticism was too bound to dogma and formulae. Philosopher and theologian, Jacques Maritain and poet-theologian, Raïssa Maritain together refer to the 'dogmatic legalism', fed by 'the barristers of the Sacred Liturgy'.⁴³ Thirdly, scholasticism was rigid and opaque. Jesuit priest, Jean Daniélou, claimed that scholasticism was 'mired in the immobile world of Greek thought', 'hardened in its scholastic categories', 'incomprehensible to most people', 'incapable of offering spiritual and doctrinal nourishment'.⁴⁴ Fourthly, theology had lost its role in signalling something beyond academic content. For fellow Jesuit, Henri de Lubac, theology had become a mere specialism with nothing to distinguish its students from those of other disciplines, hence losing its transforming potential: 'We are aware of being specialists of knowing what the average Christian does not know, just as the specialist in chemistry or trigonometry knows what the average student does not know'.⁴⁵ Fifthly, scholasticism was arrogant. German Jesuit, Karl Rahner, denounced the method and presumption, which he summarised as 'elaborate gyrations of theological definition with the claim that one knows and has grasped the mystery of God'.⁴⁶ Finally, scholasticism was soul-destroying. The lament of Swiss theologian, Hans Urs Von Balthasar is almost visceral in its dismay, as he related his 'grim struggle with the dreariness of theology, with what men had

⁴² Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie - New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), p. 14. He cites Yves Congar 8 January 1935 'Déficit de la théologie': 'La théologie est devenue elle-même comme une technique, une chose à part une activité de corps ou de classe, un savoir corporatif un domaine spécial et fermé qui intéresse quelques-uns. Tandis qu'elle est une sagesse, La Sagesse. Tandis qu'elle devrait être vitement articulée avec le reste du savoir et de l'activité humaine ce qui donnerait à tout le reste son orientation, sa mesure, son complément, sa fécondité la plus profonde. Avon Dominique, Fourcade Michel, 'Un nouvel âge de la théologie?' 1965-1980: Colloque de Montpellier, juin 2007 Collectif. (Theology has become a mere isolated technique, a mere academic and specialist activity only of interest to a few. Yet, theology is Wisdom itself and this needs to be embedded in human knowledge and activity as a compass and means of giving sense to all things. My translation).

⁴³ Raïssa Maritain, 'Translation of 'Notes Sur Le Pater', (Notes on the Lord's Prayer) (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1962) <<https://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/notlp.htm#preface>> Part III, Chapter I, [accessed 18/08/ 2018].

⁴⁴ Daniélou, Marie-Dominique, *Orientations Présentes de la Pensée religieuse*, Etudes 249, 1946, p. 14. Cited by Marcellino D'Ambrosio, 'Ressourcement Theology, Aggiornamento, and the Hermeneutics of Tradition', Crossroads Initiative, 2017 <<https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/ressourcement-theology-aggiornamentoand-the-hermeneutics-of-tradition/>> [accessed 28/06/2017].

⁴⁵ Henri de Lubac 'Causes internes de l'atténuation et de la disparition du sens du Sacré', in *Théologie dans l'histoire : II Questions disputées et résistance au nazisme* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1990), p.14. Cited by Joseph A. Komonchak, 'Theology and Culture at Mid-Century: The Example of Henri de Lubac', *Theological Studies*, 51.4 (1990), 579–602 (p. 582.) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/004056399005100402>>.

⁴⁶ Karl Rahner and Karl Cardinal Lehmann, *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life*, ed. by Annemarie S. Kidder (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), p. 126.

made out of the glory of revelation'.⁴⁷ The powerful sense of a lament, issuing from such a diverse group of Catholic thinkers, suggests a consensus of opposition within the *ressourcement* movement. The manual tradition of scholastic methodology is collectively deemed to be dreary, mechanical, legalistic, rigid, aloof, presumptuous, and void of any sense of beauty.⁴⁸

In defence of the manual tradition, one work which has weathered such antagonism and the eventual changes in emphasis wrought by Vatican II is Louis Ott's *Outline of Catholic Dogma*.⁴⁹ It is even now considered a remarkable compendium.⁵⁰ It was written during the period of ferment which led up to Vatican II. The German original designates the work as an 'outline', the French translation a *précis*, yet it contains over 700 pages written in the smallest of possible prints, even in the body of the text. It is, therefore, a densely packed study. Ott offers an admirable synthesis of a huge range of material in a format resembling the *Catechism of The Catholic Church*, summarising centuries of Catholic teaching into a systematic presentation.⁵¹ Each section begins with a heading, a sub-heading, and further subdivisions. There is a statement of dogma in italics to clearly distinguish it from the ensuing text. This proceeds into the definition and origin of the dogma, heresies against, further justifications from Scripture,

⁴⁷ Aidan Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide Through Balthasar's Aesthetics* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), p. xii, citing H.U.von Balthasar 'Einleitung' in A. von Speyr, *Erde und Himmel, Ein Tagebuch. Sweiter Teil, II: Die Zeit der grossen Digtate Einsiedeln*, 1975 p. 195. 'I could not endure this presentation of the Word of God! I could have lashed out with the fury of Samson'.

⁴⁸ This opinion of scholastic methodology stretches beyond this period. In a recent address, June 2019, Pope Francis describes his own experience of what he terms 'decadent scholasticism'. Francis, 'Meeting on the Theme 'Theology after Veritatis Gaudium in the Context of the Mediterranean', promoted by the Pontifical Theological Faculty of Southern Italy – San Luigi Section' (Naples, 2019) <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/june/documents/papa-francesco_20190621_tologia-napoli.html> [accessed 24/12/2019]. Pope Francis describes his experience as being 'shut in a manual'. 'I studied in the period of decadent theology, decadent scholasticism, the age of the manuals. We used to joke that all the theses in theology could be proved by the following syllogism. First, things appear this way. Second, Catholicism is always right. Third : Ergo... In other words, a defensive, apologetic theology shut in a manual. We used to joke about it, but that was what we were presented with in that period of decadent scholasticism. It closed down the process of discernment. In its formulaic rigidity, it demanded acceptance on its own terms, rather than engaging and enlivening the critical and faith-driven intellect.'

⁴⁹ *Grundriss der Katholischen dogmatik* (Freiburg, 1952). (Outline of Catholic Dogma). Translated into French as Ludwig Ott, *Précis de théologie dogmatique* (Mulhouse, Tournai, Paris: Salvator, 1955).

⁵⁰ Bishop Athanasius Schneider in the Foreword to the 2018 English edition: '*Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* has been considered as the definitive single volume summary of Catholic dogmatic theology ever since its original publication in German in 1952. This great work by Ludwig Ott presents a comprehensive yet concise outline of the entire system of Catholic doctrine, laying out its sources in Scripture and Tradition as taught by the Magisterium of the Church. The level of authority behind each doctrinal point is indicated and there are frequent references to the teachings of Fathers, Doctors and numerous Saints of the Church.' Dr Ludwig Ott and Dr Patrick Lynch, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (London: Baronius Press, 2018).

⁵¹ John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993) <https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM> [accessed 04/03/2020].

patristic texts, and Tradition and finally, how scholastic theologians have appraised the subject. It hence offers rigorous attention to breadth and detail, with copious bibliographies for every subsection, careful acknowledgement of important sources, concise sentences, and itemised developments. As a reference book it provides a rich source of material, albeit dense and theoretical.

The achievement of Ott's work in synthesising centuries of exchanges and its ongoing appeal, calls into question the extent of *ressourcement* antagonism. Undoubtedly Ott's systematic presentation has a resemblance to those descriptions variously identified: 'account book' format, its closed and self-referential nature; a certain dogmatism; a painstaking adherence to the formula of thesis and antithesis exhibiting the fixity of scholastic method. As an admirable synthesis, however, the depth of lament might seem misplaced.

The *ressourcement* antagonism arose from a fundamental conflict in emphasis which was essentially methodological but also theological. In terms of method, the format in its exclusive focus on reasoned investigation was considered to be too limiting. For *ressourcement* thinkers, faith could not be limited to solid proofs or compelling arguments.⁵² Reason was simply one tool amongst others for understanding and communicating faith. The manual tradition had made of reason a monochromatic tool, which side-stepped the non-rational understanding of the beauty and the mystery of faith. In a similar vein, the attention given to countering ancient heresies, and demonstrating technical aptitude in all the right answers was inconducive to engaging a wider non-specialist audience. It appeared to be fixated with its own self-referential theorising. On this basis Lubac refers to a 'disembodied mysticism',⁵³ whilst Congar, in a similar vein, highlights theology's inability to 'incarnate itself', or be applied to life.⁵⁴

⁵² A helpful way of understanding this stance is to consider Celis's description of Montaigne, in whose creative fidelity I have located the approach of the *ressourcement* and of Merton: 'Montaigne is the most natural of Catholics. (...) He felt it as natural as breathing or moving around. He seems to have thought that as a living man does not have to give reasons for his breathing. (...) He did not tie his faith to solid 'proofs' or convincing 'arguments. (...) If there are reasons to doubt our capacity for knowledge and our own judgment on most matters, then, Montaigne considered we could not sustain our faith by such a feeble foundation as the reasons our intellect approves.' Nikola Krestonosich Celis, 'The Natural Catholicism of Michel de Montaigne', *Aleteia*, 11 December 2017, <<https://aleteia.org/2017/12/11/the-natural-catholicism-of-michel-de-montaigne/>>.

⁵³ Henri de Lubac 'Explication Chrétienne de Notre Temps', in *Théologie dans l'Histoire* 2:234, cited by Komonchak, p. 592.

⁵⁴ Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie - New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II*, p. 45.

A more serious difference, however, for Lubac, lay in the scholastic understanding of nature and grace. Lubac's work *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, which helped launch the *ressourcement* agenda, identifies a foundational principle at odds with *ressourcement* thinking.⁵⁵ He lists the failings of a theological standpoint which insisted upon rigorously separating human realities from dogma, through its categorical separation of nature and grace:

What a shabby theology it is that treats the object of faith as an object of science. (..) It confines dogma to the extremities of knowledge, in a distant province out of touch with the other provinces. It makes dogma a kind of superstructure, (..) and thinking that by cutting it off from all human roots it is making dogma all the more divine. As if God were not the author of both nature and grace.⁵⁶

Not only did he argue against the scholastic separating out of nature and grace,⁵⁷ insisting instead on their enmeshment, 'the whole natural order (..) is already penetrated by something supernatural that shapes and attracts it'.⁵⁸ He also targets the very obsession with division and subdivisions, for creating theologians, who through their scholastic proficiency, are so practised in categorising, they can even separate out mystery into a ready-made category:

like curators in a museum, in which we have inventoried, ordered, and labelled everything, we know how to define all the terms, answered all the objections, we bring the precise and needed distinctions to bear. (..) If there is still a mystery there, at least we know exactly where to place it and we can point with our fingers to where exactly it lies.⁵⁹

The failings of the scholastic manual tradition for the *ressourcement* thinkers, therefore, included the neglect of acknowledging mystery and beauty, and the dense reference book format, which was deemed oppressive and unwieldy. Chief amongst such failings, however, was the embedded dualism. This belied their understanding of the sacramental presence of supernatural grace in natural realities, thus dismantling the polarisation of nature and grace. Furthermore, their

⁵⁵ Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (Chicago: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967).

⁵⁶ Henri de Lubac, *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), pp. 94–95.

⁵⁷ De Lubac, *Mystery of the Supernatural*, 26 and 21, cited p. 3 of David Grumett, 'Eucharist, Matter and the Supernatural: Why de Lubac Needs Teilhard', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 10.2 (2008), 165–78 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2400.2007.00295.x>>.

⁵⁸ Henri de Lubac, 'Internal Causes of the Weakening and Disappearance of the Sense of the Sacred', in *Theology in History* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), p. 231, cited p. 3 of Grumett.

⁵⁹ Henri de Lubac *Causes internes de l'atténuation et de la disparition du sens du Sacré*, in *Théologie dans l'histoire: II Questions disputées et résistance au nazisme* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1990)13-30. p.23, cited by Komonchak, p. 583.

appreciation of the experiential character of faith at the root of theology, in kinship with the mystical tradition, emphasised theology as lived. For this reason, the locating of theological truth in a zone anaesthetised from the world was seriously problematic. They concluded that there is no separated out zone. Rather, with an emphasis on sacrament and the incarnation, nature and grace constitute an organic unity. The world then becomes a locus oriented towards God in which grace is constantly at work. Thus, the scholastic dualisms of human and divine, body and soul, nature and grace are re-interpreted as intricately bound.

It was, nonetheless, the dualistic and systematising tradition which answered to the continuing papal insistence on scholasticism as the sole channel for Catholic theology. Ott's work was published five years after the encyclical *Humani Generis*, in which Pope Pius XII ruled out innovation. He opposed any reform of Catholic theology as reflective of modernist tendencies and re-asserted the primacy of scholasticism.⁶⁰

II.ii The Return to Sources

The alienation of the *ressourcement* theologians from manual scholasticism generated a sense of urgency, in Congar's words, to leave the fortress in which theology had shackled itself,⁶¹ in order to establish connections between the Church and the contemporary world.⁶² Like Guardini they sought inspiration for a new idiom and fresh emphases for theology in the patristic tradition. The name *ressourcement* had been suggested for this direction of thinking by the poet-

⁶⁰ Pius XII, 'Humani Generis', 1950 <http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis.html> [accessed 25/12/2019]. 'It is apparent, however, that some today, as in apostolic times, desirous of novelty, and fearing to be considered ignorant of recent scientific findings, try to withdraw themselves from the sacred Teaching Authority and are accordingly in danger of gradually departing from revealed truth and of drawing others along with them into error,' par. 10. 'In theology some want to reduce to a minimum the meaning of dogmas; and to free dogma itself from terminology long established in the Church and from philosophical concepts held by Catholic teachers, to bring about a return in the explanation of Catholic doctrine to the way of speaking used in Holy Scripture and by the Fathers of the Church. They cherish the hope that when dogma is stripped of the elements which they hold to be extrinsic to divine revelation, it will compare advantageously with the dogmatic opinions of those who are separated from the unity of the Church and that in this way they will gradually arrive at a mutual assimilation of Catholic dogma with the tenets of the dissidents,' par. 14. 'Moreover, they assert that when Catholic doctrine has been reduced to this condition, a way will be found to satisfy modern needs, that will permit of dogma being expressed also by the concepts of modern philosophy,' par 15. 'Unfortunately, these advocates of novelty easily pass from despising scholastic theology to the neglect of and even contempt for the Teaching Authority of the Church itself, which gives such authoritative approval to scholastic theology,' par. 18.

⁶¹ Mettepenningen, p. 45.

⁶² Mettepenningen, p. xiii.

soldier, Charles Péguy,⁶³ and it remained their preferred identity in the spotlight it gave to earlier sources of Catholic theology, represented by patristic and medieval texts.⁶⁴

Patristic literature denotes all literature written by Christians up to around the 8th century, especially that written by those writers classified as ‘fathers of the Church’.⁶⁵ The exploration of ancient sources included later medieval texts written by the founders of monastic orders, and a close study of Aquinas, though bypassing the commentaries to focus on the primary texts.⁶⁶ As such, the field of literature offered a vast resource from the tradition of the Church and provided an approach to biblical exegesis which enthused the *ressourcement* thinkers.⁶⁷ The variety of texts were considered to reflect more closely the *ressourcement* understanding of what theology might be: a dynamic synthesis of theology, spirituality and pastoral practice. Péguy described the early manifestations of this endeavour as ‘a new and deeper sounding of ancient, inexhaustible, and common resources’.⁶⁸ His definition suggests a spirited quest, full of excitement at the task of exploring an unlimited field.

Such enthusiasm was buoyed by the idea of ‘source’ as being more than a mere document. The words of Balthasar and Chenu echo those of Péguy, in their inference of an additional metaphorical understanding, through which source becomes a spring, suggesting freshness, vitality and a dynamic foundational quality. Balthasar, on referring to the patristic texts claimed: ‘We would rather hope to penetrate to the vital source of their spirit, to the fundamental and secret intuition, which directs the entire expression of their thought’.⁶⁹ In a similar vein, Chenu pronounced:

⁶³ Flynn and Murray, p. 4 Charles Péguy died as a soldier in the first battle of the First World War in Villeroy, 1914.

⁶⁴ D’Ambrosio, ‘Ressourcement Theology, Aggiornamento, and the Hermeneutics of Tradition’.

⁶⁵ ‘Patristic Literature | Christianity’, Encyclopaedia Britannica <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/patristic-literature>> [accessed 25/12/2019]. Examples include Augustine (354–430), Gregory the Great (540–604), Origen (c. 185 – c. 254) and Clement of Alexandria. (c. 150 – c. 215).

⁶⁶ D’Ambrosio, ‘Ressourcement Theology, Aggiornamento, and the Hermeneutics of Tradition’.

⁶⁷ Flynn and Murray, p. 515.

⁶⁸ Charles Péguy, *Oeuvres Complètes de Charles Péguy, 1873-1914: Oeuvres de Prose; Lettre de Provincial; De la Grippe; Entre Deux Trains; Pour Ma Maison, pour Moi; Compte Rendu de Mandat; La Channon du Roi Dagobert (Classic Reprint)* (Fb&c Limited, 2017), pp. 186-192.

⁶⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Présence et pensée: essai sur la philosophie religieuse de Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris: Editions Beauchesne, 1988), p. xiii.

I am not a documentalist, I am a historian. What I look for in history is not a documentation, it is an inspiration. What I seek are the indeterminate elements of creative inspiration which remain alive under the weight of the structure.⁷⁰

The contrasting terminology between the *ressourcement* aspirations and the papal documents highlights two different models for theology. The papal documents, favouring the scholastic approach define theology as an edifice is to be solidly raised, and an invincible bulwark for the faith. Their interpretation is echoed in the *ressourcement* indictments of ‘the weight of their structure’ or more pejoratively, ‘mired immobility’. Conversely, the *ressourcement* prioritises the terms ‘vital,’ ‘spirit,’ ‘inspiration,’ ‘intuition,’ ‘creative,’ ‘indeterminate’, ‘new’, and ‘alive’. Their characterisation creates an image of digging deeper, merging with the unexpected mystery of the earth’s depths. It is a more organic model than a man-made defensive construct on the earth’s surface.

The idea of newness led to accusations that the movement was inventing a new theology, and studies on their endeavours place *ressourcement* alongside the corresponding term, ‘New Theology’, thus identifying the movement as a modernising trend.⁷¹ The *ressourcement* thinkers believed, however, that this association was confused and misplaced, as they were not in fact seeking to conform or adapt to the times. Rather, displaying an equal academic rigour in their efforts as their scholastic peers, they sought a more subtle probing of what was deemed in the light of Christian reflection to be most appropriate. They were convinced that it was possible to have solidity without emulating a military model in its defensive and combative character, or a legalistic model, in its preference for a formulaic and technical style. The image of a spring generated a sense of flowing freely, whilst being profoundly connected to the depths of a tradition.⁷²

⁷⁰ Jacques Duquesne and Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Jacques Duquesne interroge le père Chenu: un théologien en liberté* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1975), p. 63.

⁷¹ Garrigou-Lagrange, Reginald P. ‘La Nouvelle Théologie Où Va-t-Elle?’ *Angelicum*, 23.3/4 (1946), 126–145. *Salve Regina*, 1943 <http://salve-regina.com/index.php?title=La_nouvelle_th%C3%A9ologie,_o%C3%B9_va-t-elle_%3F> In 1943, the Dominican theologian Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P. issued a severe indictment of the theologians of the ‘Nouvelle Théologie’, in which they were accused of grave error and for being modernists by another name. Cited in English by Mettepenningen, p. 8.

⁷² The importance granted to tradition as of parallel importance to scripture is a key factor in the definition of Catholic theology. *Catechism of the Catholic Church - The Transmission of Divine Revelation* <http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s1c2a2.htm> [accessed 30/12/2019]. Pope Benedict in a general address of 2006 acknowledged an understanding of tradition as static revelation, echoing the image of bulwark in the earlier papal documents. He claimed however that seeing it in this light bypasses its true character. He speaks rather of tradition in the

PART ONE: TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL POETICS OF PLACE: Chapter One

This accent was not simply taking refuge in a poetic notion of fluid vitality to offset a perception of impassive rigidity. It was in fact generated by the prevailing character of many patristic texts. In a study of patristic exegesis of biblical texts, Tarmo Toom outlines that the desire to connect revelation with how it is lived, meant there was limited interest in isolating theory from praxis. Hence, patristic exegesis avoided outlining truth as theoretical and static but as inseparable from its use.⁷³ As a result, it was characterised by a readiness to weave connections between an understanding of God and the world. Such an emphasis stood in contrast to the abstractions and dualisms of scholasticism, to the tradition of commentaries upon commentaries, or the headings, minor headings, and itemised sub-divisions of the manuals.⁷⁴

This sense of a bountiful and varied terrain also arose from an image-rich language, influenced by Scripture and liturgy and the corresponding use of multiple genres for theological expression.⁷⁵ In describing the language of patristic texts, Marcellino d'Ambrosio highlights an abundant use of imagery, a vast commentary upon the nature of scripture and sacrament, and a concern also identified by Toom, to link theology with historical context and the individual.⁷⁶ Patristic writings thus offered a theology embedded in experience and in sacramental praxis. The emphasis on connection rather than separation responded to Chenu's insistence that 'to be a

terms voiced by the *ressourcement* in their own endeavours towards a revitalised theology: 'Tradition is not the transmission of things or words, a collection of dead things. Tradition is the living river that links us to the origins, the living river in which the origins are ever present, the great river that leads us to the gates of eternity. And since this is so, in this living river the words of the Lord that we heard on the reader's lips to start with are ceaselessly brought about: 'I am with you always, to the close of the age'.' (Mt 28: 20). Benedict XVI, 'General Audience of 26 April 2006: Communion in Time: Tradition', 2006, <http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20060426.html> [accessed 30/12/2019]. It is in this way that the *ressourcement* viewed the patristic and medieval texts. Scholastic methodology became an unnecessary armour which confined the discipline and belied the notion of a living source.

⁷³ Tarmo Toom, *Patristic Theories of Biblical Interpretation: The Latin Fathers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 2. 'They felt no need to separate out hermeneutics, the principles of interpretation, with exegesis the application of the principles'. (...) 'Patristic authors never postulated an abstract full-blown hermeneutical theory that was envisaged in isolation from the actual practice of interpreting the word of God. Neither was patristic biblical exegesis ever a mere procedural affair, some sort of 'neutral' application of techniques and theory to scriptural texts without a simultaneous concern for the interpreter's spiritual benefit. For Christian interpreters, the Bible was a book which had been read and expounded in the Christian liturgy, used for introduction, edification and prayer. Its interpretation could not be divorced from its use.'

⁷⁴ 'Scholasticism - New World Encyclopaedia'. <<https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Scholasticism>>, [accessed 12/06/2020]. Scholastic method grew out of the practice of disputations in medieval theological schools. 'Its basic instruments were definition, distinction, and argumentation, and its ideal goal was certain truth.'

⁷⁵ Foundational myths and legends; legal codes; historical narrative, oracles as in prophetic books; poetry; the Wisdom tradition, parables, lament, letters and sermons. Felix Just, 'An Introduction to Biblical Genres and Form Criticism', *Catholic Resources*, 2017 <<http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Biblical-Genres.htm>> [accessed 25/12/2019].

⁷⁶ D'Ambrosio, 'Ressourcement Theology, Aggiornamento, and the Hermeneutics of Tradition'.

theologian means not to be cut off from the daily concrete life of the Church',⁷⁷ and to Congar's plea for a theology of life.⁷⁸ Addressing spirituality, or theology as it is lived, became a prime concern.

Balthasar's *ressourcement* work *Cosmic Liturgy* concerning the patristic theologian, Maximus the Confessor, offers a valuable focus for discovering the character of patristic writing and its appeal to those theologians seeking neglected, yet orthodox sources for revitalising theology. An added significance of this text to my study arises from Merton's description of this work, as his favourite by Balthasar.⁷⁹

Cosmic Liturgy begins by describing Maximus as a 'free mind' involved in 'opening up' a tradition. It is directly resonant with the *ressourcement* plea for release from confining structures. The approach of Maximus, according to Balthasar is characterised by seeking connection over differentiation.⁸⁰ The writing style of Maximus pays little attention to orderliness of expression.⁸¹ A further significant detail Balthasar offers is the evidence provided of a 6th century conflict, not dissimilar to the polarity between 20th century scholasticism and the *ressourcement*:

The division between scholasticism and mysticism, the theology of the schoolroom and the spirituality of the monastery, was in the sixth century complete. The former held hostage by politics kept inventing new distinctions that lacked any genuine basis in the experience of being; the latter had withdrawn from the dogmatic and political theatre into a world beyond time.⁸²

Balthasar's assessment criticises scholasticism's technical distinctions and mysticism's withdrawal from the world. In contrast, Balthasar claims that 'Maximus had an eye for the unity of these currents of religious thought'. The task was 'to strike mystical and spiritual sparks out of

⁷⁷ D'Ambrosio and M.-D. Chenu, 'A Conversation with Père Chenu,' *Dominicana* 50 (1965), p. 141.

⁷⁸ Congar, Yves *Deficit de la Théologie*, cited by Mettepenningen, p. 14.

⁷⁹ Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal & Spiritual Direction* (Orlando: First Harvest/HBJ edition, 1993), p. 227.

⁸⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), p. 29, first published 1941. 'In all its dimensions the inner form of his work is synthesis.'

⁸¹ Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, p. 30. 'His main works are without form, and the collection of his writings incredibly haphazard.'

⁸² Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, pp. 50–51.

the rough scholastic flint',⁸³ creating a theology which Balthasar would term 'dark radiance'.⁸⁴ Balthasar's characterisation of theology as a channel for radiating its own mystery outwards stands in marked contrast to the image of an inviolable theological fortress.

II.iii The Negotiation of Paradox and Sacramental Vision

The term 'dark radiance' attributes to patristic texts a capacity to represent paradox by holding the tension of polarised elements. This characteristic echoes the stance of those key figures in Catholic theology who stood in the gap between conflicting standpoints. For the *ressourcement* thinkers, scholastic method had fragmented theology into multiple autonomous sub-categories. In contrast, patristic texts offered a greater disciplinary integration. Daniélou, for example, interpreted patristic texts as 'a vast commentary on scripture' capable of signalling all kinds of continuities, not only between Old and New Testaments but between liturgy, scripture and spirituality.⁸⁵ The patristic texts therefore provided a model in which the full complement of theological resources reflected an organic unity.

In parallel with this attempt to reclaim disciplinary integration, the concern to connect with the contemporary context was an equal priority. Jennifer Newsome Martin identifies this dual endeavour to seek 'a retrieval of a unified tradition' accompanied by 'a no less serious and coincident awareness of the modern situation'.⁸⁶ Tracking the early development of the Church, by beginning with the Bible, passing through the patristic texts, and continuing to explore the early liturgy, offered a means of restoring to theology a sense of historical development. Daniélou singled out Irenaeus (d. c.202), Origen (c.185–c.254), and Gregory of Nyssa (c.334–c.395) to assist in this endeavour.⁸⁷ The placing of ancient texts against a contemporary background reduced the risk of a disembodied theology. Daniélou located this endeavour as a place at once in between and bridging a gap, where the theologian reflected a readiness to 'move

⁸³ Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, p. 51.

⁸⁴ Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, pp. 81 and 97.

⁸⁵ Daniélou, Jean, Essay: 'Orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse', *Études* 249, 1946, p. 12. Cited by Michel Fédou SJ, *The Fathers of the Church in Christian Theology* (Washington D.C., CUA Press, 2019), p. 37.

⁸⁶ Newsome Martin, Jennifer, 'Only What is Rooted is Living: A Roman Catholic Theology of Ressourcement', Chapter 5, pp. 81-100, of *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal*, ed. by Darren Sarisky (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), p. 86.

⁸⁷ Daniélou, Jean 'Orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse', *Études*, 249, p. 8.

like angels on Jacob's ladder between time and eternity, weaving among them always new connections'.⁸⁸ We encounter once again the bridge-building role of creative fidelity with its impulse to hold the tension of habitual dualisms and to dismantle hierarchies and divisions.

Hans Boersma, in his study of the *ressourcement* movement, identifies this paradoxical stance as sacramental vision, which he claims is central to their approach.⁸⁹ According to Boersma, at the heart of *ressourcement* sensibility was 'the desire to reconnect nature and the supernatural' in order 'to overcome the rupture between theology and life'.⁹⁰ His words emphasise the upturning of neglected emphases rather than the creation of something new. For Boersma, the purpose of the *ressourcement* venture 'was to revitalise the sacramental ontology, that had been obscured, by the neo-scholastic separation between nature and the supernatural'.⁹¹ He defines sacramental ontology as 'the conviction that historical realities of the created order served as divinely ordained, sacramental means leading to eternal divine mysteries'.⁹²

This emphasis on sacramental vision belied the view that *ressourcement* outreach to the world was an attempt to secularise or modernise the Catholic faith, even though such aspirations were being framed at a time of increasing secularisation of social structures. The principle of *laïcité* was established in France in 1905, in which public life had to be separated from religious interference.⁹³ The isolating of the holy by scholasticism was perceived by the *ressourcement* thinkers as reflecting and reinforcing the dualism imposed by secularisation. Guardini pinpoints this proximity between the scholastic and the secular approach in one of his *Letters from Lake Como*. He identifies two ways of knowing:

I have come to realise so clearly these days that there are two ways of knowing. The one sinks into a thing and its context. The aim is to penetrate, to move within, to live with.

⁸⁸ Daniélou, Jean, Essay: '*Orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse*', *Etudes* 249, 1946, p. 13. Cited by Jennifer Newsome Martin in 'Only What is Rooted is Living: A Roman Catholic Theology of *Ressourcement*', p.86.

⁸⁹ Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: OUP 2009), p. 9.

⁹⁰ Boersma, p. 4.

⁹¹ Boersma, p. 12.

⁹² Boersma, p. 289.

⁹³ Law of 09/12/1905 of separation of Church and State. The concept of *laïcité* can be defined as the neutrality of the state towards religious beliefs, and the complete separation of the religious and public sphere. Vie Publique, 'Le Régime de Séparation Principe Des Relations État et Les Cultes', 2020 <<https://www.vie-publique.fr/eclairage/20205-le-regime-de-separation-principe-des-relations-etat-et-les-cultes>> [accessed 26/12/2019].

The other, however, unpacks, tears apart, arranges in compartments, takes over and rules.⁹⁴

Guardini juxtaposes a sacramental way of seeing the world, as permeated by the sacred and echoed in the doxological echoes of ‘through, with and in’, with a secular and scholastic approach which seeks to compartmentalise. Guardini’s words echo those of Lubac, mentioned earlier, in which the action of the supernatural within the natural is described as penetrating, shaping and attracting, suggestive of an impelling magnetism within the natural order, which signals towards reverent wonder.⁹⁵ The sense of movement resembles that image of a spring, offsetting the defensive construct, which isolates, ‘takes over and rules’, or indeed, secular thinking, which unhesitatingly sets apart the religious from public life. Through a focus on sacrament and on the incarnational indwelling of the divine in the material world, the dualism inherent in the compartmentalising of religion, had to be challenged. This was the case whether it emerged from scholasticism or the modernist principle of *laïcité*.

Without this integrating vision, mystery was constrained. The *ressourcement* theologians understood mystery as something momentous and overflowing into the plenitude of God, defying any human-made boundaries. They hence prioritised what Boersma names a ‘return to mystery’.⁹⁶ By seeking in parallel to fully inhabit their own context, they conveyed a powerful and vital symbolism, reflecting both an affirmation of the material world in its located temporality, whilst equally placing the spotlight on Christian mystery. Place and transcendence are hence in dialogue.

II.iv The Impact on Vatican II

The aspirations of this group of theologians were inscribed into ecclesial history with the advent of Vatican II (1962-1965), when *ressourcement* endeavours and the parallel aspirations of

⁹⁴ Romano Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como: Explorations in Technology and the Human Race* (Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), p. 43. There are, moreover, biblical echoes: ‘for in him we live, and move, and have our being’. All biblical references from *The Holy Bible N.R.S.V.* Catholic Edition (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005), Acts 17:28, N.R.S.V., p. 1,331.

⁹⁵ Henri de Lubac, ‘Internal Causes of the Weakening and Disappearance of the Sense of the Sacred’, in *Theology in History* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), p. 231, cited p. 3 of Grumett. ‘The whole natural order (...) is already penetrated by something supernatural that shapes and attracts it’. Chapter One, II.i ‘The *Ressourcement* Lament’, p. 25.

⁹⁶ Boersma, p. 4. Alister McGrath similarly identifies this aspiration, describing it as the ‘recovery of the transcendent in theology’, as ‘an integral part of the programme of *ressourcement*’. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), p. 87.

the Liturgical Movement were adopted.⁹⁷ In contrast to the earlier pivotal moments of the Reformation and the Council of Trent, Vatican II questioned the hold which scholasticism had on Catholic theology, a questioning which arose directly from these reforming agendas. The crowning achievement of the Liturgical Movement was *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.⁹⁸ In the light of *ressourcement* emphases, the use of language highlighting paradox and the frequency of terms such as font or spring is striking. The liturgy is ‘summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows’; and ‘grace is poured upon us’, ‘from the liturgy’ ‘as from a font’.⁹⁹ Paradox is hence underlined as a pre-eminent component in the identity of the Church.¹⁰⁰

The *ressourcement* concern to give attention to context is outlined in *Dei Verbum* (1965), which states that, rather than seeking conformity to a prefabricated system, as was the case with scholasticism, exegesis must pay attention ‘to literary forms,’ and ‘the exegete must look for that meaning which the sacred writer, in a determined situation and given the circumstances of his time and culture, intended to express’.¹⁰¹ Such comments are redolent of the stance of Erasmus and Newman. Similarly, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), the conciliar document on the Church in the modern world, embraced the two-fold focus on transcendence and immanence. It was necessary ‘to focus attention on the world of men’ yet ‘as created and sustained by its Maker’s love’,¹⁰² to

⁹⁷ Carol Glatz, ‘Pope Francis: Mass in Vernacular Helps People Understand God, Live the Faith’, *The Francis Chronicles*, 2015 <<https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/francis-chronicles/pope-francis-mass-vernacular-helps-people-understand-god-live-faith>> [accessed 26/12/2019]. Demonstrating the extent to which the documents were not an event simply fixed in the 1960s, Pope Francis, on March 9, 2015, the same date in 1965 when Pope Paul VI publicly celebrated Mass in Italian for the first time in accordance with the norms established by the Second Vatican Council, in his homily called upon those present to connect the liturgy to their own lives saying: ‘The liturgy isn’t something odd, over there, far away that has no bearing on one’s everyday life. (...) The Church calls us to have and promote an authentic liturgical life so that there can be harmony between what the liturgy celebrates and what we live out with the aim of expressing in life what has been received in faith.’ He refers to the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, which defined the liturgy ‘as the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit’.

⁹⁸ Paul VI, ‘Sacrosanctum Concilium’, 1963 <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html> [accessed 26/12/2019].

⁹⁹ Paul VI, ‘Sacrosanctum Concilium’, par.10.

¹⁰⁰ Paul VI, ‘Sacrosanctum Concilium’, par.2. ‘It is of the essence of the Church that she be both human and divine, visible and yet invisibly equipped, eager to act and yet intent on contemplation, present in this world and yet not at home in it.’

¹⁰¹ Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1975), p. 757, par. 12.

¹⁰² Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, p. 904, par. 2.

read ‘the signs of the times’ yet ‘interpreting them in the light of the Gospel’.¹⁰³ Such propositions underlined that meeting of nature and grace integral to *ressourcement* thinking. Vatican II would underline the importance of connecting theology with the contemporaneous context, whilst insisting on providing space for a corresponding attention to transcendent realities. The theological underpinning of *ressourcement* thinking was hence recognised. The more challenging issue became the application of such aspirations.

II.v Towards an Alternative Language

Within the work of the *ressourcement* thinkers, there is no clearly identifiable shared proposition for a form of language, which might provide a model for a revitalised theological expression. A. N. Williams, in exploring the contemporary significance of the *ressourcement* movement claims that:

they remind the modern theologian that the mode of theological discourse is confined neither to the technical, nor to the commonsensical (..) but must aspire also to the lyric if it is to speak truly of the mystery that transcends all others, and can therefore never be encapsulated, but only evoked.¹⁰⁴

Williams thus extracts a common endeavour in the style of writing of a highly diverse group of theologians. He suggests that they all seek to represent the paradox of sacramental thinking, to find words which acknowledge a role for the lyrical and to evoke rather than encapsulate. I suggest that the *ressourcement* thinkers, in addressing this emphasis on the sacramental and the lyrical, projected various creative models from which theology might learn. To outline this claim, I begin with Congar and a model drawn from music and continue with reference to Maritain on art, Rahner on poetry and Balthasar on drama. I then explore this expansive and creative stance in relation to Merton.

¹⁰³ Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, p. 905, par. 4.

¹⁰⁴ A. N. Williams, ‘The Future of the Past: The Contemporary Significance of the Nouvelle Théologie,’ *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 4 (October 2005), P. 356. Cited in Tyler Sampson, ‘Scripture, Tradition, and Ressourcement: Toward an Anglican Fundamental Liturgical Theology’, *Anglican Theological Review*, 18, p. 312.

II.v.a. Congar and Music

In Congar's essay, 'Theology's Deficiency' (1935), Congar poses the question: 'how does one write about the numinous?'¹⁰⁵ Through the image of a balance sheet between the world's needs and theology's response, he suggests that there is a significant shortfall in the latter, due to an 'incarnation deficit', or the absence of a theology clothed in the temporal and material realities of human existence. According to Congar, theology is hence stuck within a rigid framework and an excessive use of jargon, which he represents as a 'wax mask'. The implication is that a certain artificial theatricality dominates. He wishes to replace the mask with the face of the human, by setting aside technical vocabulary and framing theology in a more accessible idiom, to reach beyond a specialist audience.

For Congar, the distance between the mask and faith as it is lived could only find reconciliation through an emphasis on the Incarnation.¹⁰⁶ He provides an image of the process through which theology might take flesh:

Each one of us has his own gifts, his own means and his own vocation. Mine are as a Christian who prays and as a theologian who reads a great deal and takes many notes. May I therefore be allowed to sing my own song! The Spirit is breath. The wind sings in the trees. I would like, then, to be an Aeolian harp and let the breath of God make the strings vibrate and sing. Let me stretch and tune the strings - that will be the austere task of research. And then let the Spirit make them sing a clear and tuneful song of prayer and life.¹⁰⁷

Theological truth takes the form of a musical instrument, the theologian then becomes a musician, whilst the sophiological content is articulated through the melody.¹⁰⁸ The inference is that dogma and doctrine are integral and foundational but will not communicate unless they engage with human creativity and human terms of reference. His own reflection refuses to delimit what this theology might look like, except in its concern to project something beyond theological erudition. Pre-eminently however, Congar asks theology to offer a greater

¹⁰⁵ Mettepenningen, 14, Yves Congar 8 January 1935 'Déficit de la théologie'.

¹⁰⁶ Mettepenningen, p. 47.

¹⁰⁷ Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), p. x.

¹⁰⁸ From the Greek, Σοφία. A philosophical concept related to wisdom and a theological concept concerning the wisdom of God.

numinosity than words can provide. His plea thus challenges theology to engage in a more multi-faceted way with its function

Contemporary Dominican, Timothy Radcliffe claims that Congar's communication of theology displays 'immense erudition with arguments that are accessible to the non-specialist.'¹⁰⁹ They offer a rare combination of passion and precision'.¹¹⁰ If Congar creates an 'incarnate' idiom, it is in his image-rich writing and a determination to demonstrate the divine origin of theological knowledge, by projecting towards numinosity, whilst mindful of its own accessibility. Such a language reflects a more layered communication of theology, as opposed to the monochrome of technical terminology, which for the *ressourcement*, characterised scholastic theological expression.¹¹¹

II.v.b. Maritain and Art

Maritain in his short work, *Art and Poetry* (1943), explores visual art as a means of naming transcendence framed in material and human realities.¹¹² For Maritain, the pictorial form provides a material and accessible articulation of the dynamic and paradoxical exchange between the created and the uncreated. Maritain claims that through the paradoxical representation of jarring juxtapositions, vision can be transformed. He describes the work of Chagall, a painter much admired by Merton,¹¹³ as 'topsy turvy visually',¹¹⁴ with the depiction of conflicting elements on a single canvas. According to Maritain, this achievement generates 'a magical light with a 'taste for difficult balances, seeing the world from the angle of a happy catastrophe',¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ Timothy Radcliffe was Master of the Dominican Order from 1992 until 2001.

¹¹⁰ Yves Congar, *At the Heart of Christian Worship: Liturgical Essays of Yves Congar* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010), p. i.

¹¹¹ Robert Nugent, *Silence Speaks: Teilhard de Chardin, Yves Congar, John Courtney Murray, and Thomas Merton* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2011), p. 1. In Richard Gaillardetz's introduction to *Silence Speaks*, he outlines the monochrome of the ecclesiastical framework which Congar, de Chardin and Merton faced: 'The particular ecclesiological framework (...) began to take shape with the rise of ultramontanism in the early nineteenth century and came into full bloom in the first half of the twentieth century in which these theologians lived. This framework reduced the great tradition of the church to a monochromatic scholasticism, authentic leadership to ecclesiastical paternalism, and the personal response of believers to an unthinking canonical obedience.'

¹¹² Originally entitled '*Frontières de la poésie*', (1935), *The Frontiers of Poetry*.

¹¹³ Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. by Robert E. Daggy (London: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd, 1990), p. 90.

¹¹⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Poetry* (Philosophical Library, 1943), p. 10.

¹¹⁵ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, p. 10.

and unfolding a ‘fluid chaos traversed by the soul, all the more moving because it is engaged in the discords of matter’.¹¹⁶ The meeting of material and mysterious is encapsulated in the image on the materiality of canvas, which he would claim, ‘through the harmonies it constructs, handles and makes use of mystery like an unknown force’.¹¹⁷ Maritain, hence, underlines how the forms of artistic creation provide a channel through which mystery can emerge.

The sense of a discordant synthesis is further evident in Maritain’s highlighting of those painters who appear to depict divine beauty in the rejected: ‘these prostitutes and clowns, these monstrous miserable flesh-tints captured in the deaf harmonies and the precious transparencies of the most complex matter.’¹¹⁸ With reference to the paintings of Rouault, another painter admired by Merton,¹¹⁹ Maritain identifies a blend of an ‘impalpable treasure of dream and nostalgia, of suffering and azure’.¹²⁰ He associates this vision with homesickness, derived from a longing for an absent heaven, and a consequent uprootedness which leads to a standing on the margins. The stark materiality of the human situation, underpinned by longing for the divine, allows the viewer to encounter both the concrete situation and the mystery within it. The painting thereby, facilitates participation in incarnational vision.

In a much later work, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1977), Maritain describes this encounter as an insight into a *quasi*-sacramental code:

If he hears the passwords and the secrets that are stammering in things, if he perceives realities, correspondences, ciphered writing that are at the core of actual existence, (..) he does not do so by knowing all this in the ordinary sense of the word to know, but by receiving all this into the obscure recesses of his passion.¹²¹

The terms which Maritain uses for the emergence of theological understanding are at opposite poles to the definitive clarity of scholasticism. He underlines an unknown or apophatic element through his choice of words: ‘passwords’, ‘stammering’, ‘ciphered writing’, yet which are equally ‘at the core of actual existence’. It is suggestive of a meeting of apophatic and cataphatic

¹¹⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, p. 12.

¹¹⁷ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, p. 7.

¹¹⁸ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, p. 17.

¹¹⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1985), p. 357.

¹²⁰ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, p. 14.

¹²¹ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 83.

understanding. Materiality is divinely and mysteriously animated, whilst divine presence is rooted in materiality.

Maritain's engagement with paintings provides an example of an embodied mysticism within his own theological analysis. Whilst highlighting the meeting of cataphatic and apophatic approaches, his own prose is acclaimed for a similar multidimensionality. Michael Novak, underlines Maritain's articulation of clarity alongside imaginative suggestion:

Maritain wrote a beautiful prose, prose that reaches the heart and the imagination more than that of most philosophers, even while manifesting a Thomist love of exquisite clarity, particularly in the making of distinctions. To read him on any subject is to be forced to look, through such distinctions, from many angles of vision at once.¹²²

In respect of both Congar and Maritain, the scholastic precision is not so much rejected as incorporated into a much wider frame, which highlights the importance of artistic forms in providing an embodied theology and hence a greater multi-dimensionality. The image of instrument, musician, and music projects the idea of synthesis of all three necessary elements, the form, the performer, and the message. Similarly, the materiality of the painted canvas, and the model of juxtapositions within it reflect both the clash, and simultaneous integration of divine and human. A directive for theological expression is provided by the synthesising and integrating qualities.

II.v.c. Rahner and Poetry

Rahner's essay 'Poet and Priest' (1956) engages with the *ressourcement* concern for naming paradox in the light of sacramental vision. Rahner launches his enquiry with the assertion: 'To the poet is entrusted the Word', then proceeds to lament, 'Alas, that there should still be no theology of the Word!'¹²³ The primacy of such assertion placed at the start of his essay, could be interpreted as reflecting a certain perverse stance in relation to the scholastic hierarchy of jurisdiction, in which the entrusting of divine knowledge lies at the top of the ecclesial hierarchy with the papacy and the episcopate, not the poet. The lament thus dismisses the bulwark of scholastic theology from its role offering a theology of the Word. As the essay

¹²² Michael Novak, 'The Achievement of Jacques Maritain', *First Things* <<https://www.firstthings.com/article/1990/12/the-achievement-of-jacques-maritain>> [accessed 03/01/2019].

¹²³ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations, Volume III; Theology of the Spiritual Life* (London: Helicon Press, 1967), p. 294.

proceeds, Rahner calls for a language of greater accessibility, with a hint that inherent holiness is found at the opposite pole to ecclesial hierarchical structure: 'The word of God enters those spheres where the laboured, humble daily word dwells'.¹²⁴

This stepping into an ambivalent stance, both innovative and orthodox, recalls the stance of paradoxical creative fidelity. Rahner insists that 'all human discourse witnesses to the word and to the reality of God, only by its character of absolute paradox.'¹²⁵ He claims further that paradox is a defining element of theology, thus toppling rationality as the driving force: 'Only when a theology of rational descriptions negates itself and becomes a theology of captivating incomprehensibility is it actually theology.'¹²⁶

Such assertions reflect the challenge the *ressourcement* theologians were setting themselves. On the one hand is a theology that projects towards the apophatic, to

force people out of the visible clarity of their existence, into the mystery of God where they no longer comprehend, but are being apprehended, where they no longer reason but pray, where they do not master but are being mastered.¹²⁷

The plea is to replace control and assertion with a yielding passivity. On the other, Rahner prioritises the context of the labourer, the humble word rooted in familiar material realities. The biblical image of re-animating dead bones by the Spirit in Ezekiel 37 underlines the encounter between the material and numinous in the manner of prophetic and sacramental utterance. Thus, for Rahner, the task of theology is to gather like Ezekiel, 'the scattered members on the fields of theology and philosophy and speak over them the word of the spirit so that they rise up as a living body'.¹²⁸ Rahner's choice of vocabulary in this work points towards a theology made incarnate, with a revolutionary shading, from the lowly humble word, through proclamation, to an uprising, suggestive of a theology for all people.

Whilst it is not possible to present the essay as a *ressourcement* manifesto for theological expression, it chimes directly with those directives for creative expression articulated by Congar

¹²⁴ Rahner, p. 314.

¹²⁵ Rahner, p. 313.

¹²⁶ Rahner and Lehmann, p. 126.

¹²⁷ Rahner and Lehmann, p. 126.

¹²⁸ Rahner and Lehmann, p. 295.

and Maritain. Equally, the tone has an impact on Rahner's own style of writing theology in this particular essay. He displays both a conversational quality, as well as a richness of poetic sentences, full of adjectives, similes, interjections, and rhetorical structures. He is at ease using the first person, sharing his own experience. Thomas O'Meara identifies Ignatian inspiration in Rahner's writing in its attentiveness to the concrete, the real and the active,¹²⁹ which allows theology to dialogue with the contemporary person's understanding of self and world.¹³⁰ This rooting in human reality not only projects a sense of equality between theologian and reader, it also projects a shared intimacy, which in its warmth invites participation in a sense of wonder.

II.v.d. Balthasar and Drama

In Balthasar's engagement with patristic texts, he discovered, according to Ben Quash, 'a passion and a mystical warmth' alongside 'a sense of God's dynamism and freedom', and 'no fear of paradox',¹³¹ all of which he struggled to see in scholastic texts. Such characteristics emerge from his exploration of the work of Maximus, identified earlier: the haphazardness, the concern for synthesis, the sense of freedom, the paradoxical striking of 'mystical sparks from scholastic flint'.¹³² In seeking to recast theology into a mode closer to patristic texts, Balthasar proposes a model reflecting a dramatic interplay between the three persons of the Trinity, and between God and the human. Such a model would mirror that dynamism, creative freedom, warmth, and ease with paradox, he encountered in pre-modern theologians and in his own understanding of Christian revelation:

It is not a question of recasting theology into a new shape previously foreign to it. Theology itself must call for this shape; it must be something implicit within it. (..) Revelation is dramatic. It is the history of an initiative on God's part for his world, the

¹²⁹ Thomas O'Meara, *God in the World: A Guide to Karl Rahner's Theology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015), p. 62.

¹³⁰ Karl Rahner, Paul Imhof, and Hubert Biallowons, *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews, 1965-1982* (Waltham: Crossroad, 1986), p. 10.

¹³¹ Quash, Ben, 'The Theo-drama', in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs Von Balthasar*, ed. by Edward Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 143-157, (p. 145).

¹³² Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, p. 51.

history of a struggle between God and the creature over the latter's meaning and salvation.¹³³

Aidan Nichols outlines how Balthasar's work, *Theodramatik* seeks to define 'a transforming encounter between two freedoms - infinite uncreated freedom and finite created freedom - in a drama where the players are not only human but divine'.¹³⁴ Nichols' suggestion is that the word dramatic, in 'Revelation is dramatic', does not simply mean impressive but actually signals the genre of drama. As a literary medium, drama is open to the non-sequential and the unexpected, allowing events to hover on the edge of anticipation and unknowing. This necessary apophatic quality implies that unambiguous systematic communication cannot fully capture the sense of dramatic interplay, hence:

Theology will always have to reflect on all this, without ever coming to a finished conclusion; however much it tries to create a systematic presentation, it must leave room for this dramatic aspect and find an appropriate form of thought for it.¹³⁵

Balthasar's style of writing is described as dense, and yet devotional.¹³⁶ Nichols refers to 'thickets of seven volumes',¹³⁷ whilst Karen Kilby refers to Balthasar's own description of his writing as 'a kneeling theology', which she considers is 'often closer to prayer, to the language of devotion, to contemplation, than to the language of investigation and argument'.¹³⁸ Beyond any directives that can be gleaned from his suggestions, as with Congar, Maritain and Rahner, Balthasar in his own writing steps away from conformity to scholastic expression.

These reflections, although selective, provide important examples of an alternative mode for theological communication, which existed among *ressourcement* theologians. As such they demonstrate how an artistic form can provide a model of expression from which theology can learn. Such engagement is indicative of an openness as to how theology might approach its task.

¹³³ Aidan Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar: Hans Urs Von Balthasar on Beauty, Goodness, and Truth* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011), pp. 59-60, *Theo-drama. Theological Dramatic Theory I. Prolegomena*, p. 126.

¹³⁴ Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar*, p. 49.

¹³⁵ Nichols, 59-60, Von Balthasar, Hans Urs, *Theo-drama, Theological Dramatic Theory I. Prolegomena*, p. 126.

¹³⁶ Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), p. 2. 'It is easy to feel lost in the fog when reading Balthasar.'

¹³⁷ Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad*, p. 7.

¹³⁸ Karen Kilby, 'Balthasar and Karl Rahner', Chapter 17, pp. 256-267, in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs Von Balthasar* ed. by Edward T. Oakes and David Moss, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 265.

An overriding consensus, arising from this survey of reflections, is the demand for a necessary negotiation of both mystery and human realities.

With such an aspiration, the individual style of each of the theologians displays some divergence from the scholastic mode which signals towards possible features of a *ressourcement* style. Balthasar's literary and devotional style invites a shared devotion, accompanied by a projection of mystery due to the difficulty of navigation. Congar's model of music-making signals the equal importance of articulating apophatic and cataphatic statement. The pictorial sacramentality of Maritain and the conversational image-rich style of Rahner invite the reader to excavate sacramental reality from within their own experience. Each theologian balances a recognisable landscape with an invitation to a shared wonder, whether in devotion, in conversation, or in poetic and visual imagery.

This outline highlights the energetic and questioning engagement with theology exhibited by *ressourcement* thinkers. I have shown how *ressourcement* frustration with a seeming unanalysed acceptance of prevailing stylistic norms was channelled into vigorous discussion. It fostered their endeavour not so much to create something new, as to re-new by looking back to Catholic theology's rich foundational roots. Thomas Merton, as a Trappist monk, was rooted in a tradition profoundly shaped by the foundations laid out in patristic and medieval theology, and by the founding leaders of the religious orders. He was also, like the *ressourcement* thinkers, engaged energetically with his contemporary context.

III

Merton and the *Ressourcement*

III.i Secondary Critique

Merton's contribution to this interrogation of language is significant and he echoes the projections of Congar, Maritain, Rahner and Balthasar, as I shall shortly explore. Studies focused specifically on the *Ressourcement*, however, do not refer to Merton. He does not figure in discussion by Marcellino d'Ambrosio, (1991, 2017) Hans Boersma (2009, 2012) Jurgen

Mettepingen (2010) and the compendium of commentary by thirty-four contemporary theologians, edited by Gabriel Flynn and Paul Murray (2014).¹³⁹

Ron Dart, who explored the link between Merton and the Beat poetry of 20th century counterculture,¹⁴⁰ claimed in 2011 that this silence concerning Merton's role as a *ressourcement* theologian needs correcting. In his view, Merton is 'writing on the same page as the renowned thinkers and shapers of Catholic theology of the mid-20th century'.¹⁴¹ He points out that simply by being a Trappist, Merton was planted deep in the sources of medieval culture, but he also highlights Merton's own careful study of Cistercian sources, and the extent to which he illuminated these works in his teaching. Dart highlights three recent studies by Patrick O'Connell, which explore the notes for Merton's lectures on patristic and Cistercian writers, and hence illustrate Merton's closeness to the *ressourcement* agenda. O'Connell offers a clear statement, according to Dart, on how absorbed Merton was in the patristic tradition, and how he worked to deliver its content to novices in the monastery.¹⁴² The key assertion of Dart is that Merton operated as a *ressourcement* theologian in illuminating patristic texts. This study in part, responds to Dart's claim that the absence of locating Merton within the wide context of *ressourcement* needs correcting.

There are several studies which associate Merton with the theology, or experience in relation to the Church, of key *ressourcement* thinkers. Ross Labrie explores Maritain as a prime influence on Merton with reference to Maritain's work *Art and Poetry* and underlines the importance of artistic elements in Merton's theological expression.¹⁴³ He identifies Merton's vision as both sacramental¹⁴⁴ and inclusive,¹⁴⁵ thus associating him with *ressourcement* sacramental vision, identified as pre-eminent by Boersma, and that notion of synthesis, which Balthasar identified in the work of Maximus. Christopher Nugent's study, *Silence Speaks* (2011)

¹³⁹ Flynn and Murray, *Ressourcement*.

¹⁴⁰ Ron Dart, *Thomas Merton and the Counterculture: A Golden String* (Abbotsford, Canada: St Macrina Press, 2016).

¹⁴¹ Ron Dart, 'Thomas Merton and Nouvelle Theologie', p. 8.

¹⁴² O'Connell, Patrick, *Thomas Merton: Cassian and the Fathers* (2005); *Thomas Merton: Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* (2006); *Thomas Merton: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (2008).

¹⁴³ Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), p. 8.

¹⁴⁴ Ross Labrie, *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1997).

¹⁴⁵ Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

places Merton alongside Congar, based on their shared experience of marginalisation by the Church.¹⁴⁶ Christopher Pramuk, in his study of sophiological thinking based on Merton's poem, *Hagia Sophia*,¹⁴⁷ places Merton close to the theology of Rahner.¹⁴⁸ Conversely, Helen Tedcastle, in a recent thesis 'Thomas Merton as a Wise Theologian', argues against Pramuk and places Merton closer to Balthasar.¹⁴⁹ Such debate highlights, on the one hand, the tension identified between these two theologians. On the other, it demonstrates the role of Merton as one who stands in both camps and thereby reflects a capacity to synthesise disparate stances.

Pramuk's study (2015) was written four years after Dart highlighted the neglect of placing Merton in the *ressourcement* context. Whilst a key premise is his association of Merton and Rahner, he does in fact align Merton with the wider *ressourcement* agenda and thus represents the closest stance to this particular claim of my thesis. Referring to a conference that Merton gave to monks at Gethsemani in summer 1961, Pramuk outlines how Merton insists there can be no separation between mysticism and the dogmatic and moral tradition',¹⁵⁰ a view, Pramuk claims, was characteristic of a 'school of thought which was particularly active in continental Catholicism in the middle of the century'. He names in particular, Lubac, Congar, Louis Bouyer, and Jean Leclercq',¹⁵¹ and continues by claiming that for each it might be said:

¹⁴⁶ Robert Nugent, *Silence Speaks: Teilhard de Chardin, Yves Congar, John Courtney Murray, and Thomas Merton* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2011).

¹⁴⁷ Merton, Thomas, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1980), pp. 363–71.

¹⁴⁸ Pramuk, *Sophia*.

¹⁴⁹ Helen Louise Tedcastle, 'Thomas Merton as a 'Wise Theologian': An Engagement with Hans Urs von Balthasar and David F. Ford', University of Birmingham, Master of Philosophy thesis, Department of Religion and Theology, January 2015, <<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/42551115.pdf>>.

¹⁵⁰ Pramuk, *Sophia*, p. 21. Pramuk cites Merton: 'By mysticism, we mean the personal experience of what is revealed to all and realised in all, in the mystery of Christ. And by theology we mean the common revelation of the mystery which is to be lived by all. The two belong together. There is no theology without mysticism (for it would have no relation to the real life of God within us) and there is no mysticism without theology because it would be at the mercy of individual fantasy.'

¹⁵¹ Pramuk, *Sophia*, pp. 22–23. Describing communal life and the doxology of faith, Pramuk identifies the collective endeavour of the *ressourcement* thinkers, as the recovery of 'the theological vision of the first ten centuries, (...) before the rise of Scholasticism in the West. And in so doing to overcome the aridity, rigidity and formalism of neoscholastic theology'. According to Pramuk, the *ressourcement* theologians 'were committed to a manner of doing theology that rises out of prayer'.

‘The heart of the matter lies in an appropriation of the tradition, which is at once mystical and theological, subjective and objective, experiential and yet more than experiential’.¹⁵²

The ability to mediate between different cultural realms is identified by other critics where Merton is placed as a bridge between medieval theology and the 20th century, which reflects the *ressourcement* stance between pre-modern and modern. Merton is thus presented by Susan Rakoczy as both mystic and earnest advocate for social justice,¹⁵³ by Mario Aguilar as a contemplative and a political activist,¹⁵⁴ and by Monica Weiss as monk and 20th century environmentalist. In a similar vein Robert Inchausti’s study *Thinking Through Thomas Merton*, explores Merton as an orthodox *avant-garde* who searched the past to find emphases which might connect with the contemporaneous church, a trajectory resonant with the *ressourcement* endeavours.¹⁵⁵

Whilst building on the neglect of placing Merton alongside the *ressourcement*, this study will also develop Pramuk’s identification of Merton’s stance as an intermediary between theology and mysticism. I do not, however, intend to continue the interrogations concerning which theologian, Merton stands closest to. Rather, I shall forge new ground with a focus specifically on the framing of a language for theology, and the distinct shaping that Merton’s poetics of place brings to *ressourcement* aspirations.

III.ii The *Ressourcement* According to Merton

Merton’s reflections on scholasticism and on *ressourcement* thinkers dismantle the polarisation in which my initial discussion has placed the two approaches to theology. Merton refers frequently to the influence and friendship of the theologians Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. It is not, however, through a lens which stands in opposition to scholasticism, but as

¹⁵² Pramuk, p. 23. Pramuk describes the *ressourcement* vision for theology as one which sought to retrieve the ‘human dimension, as Merton put it, its incarnate character, its capacity to form the whole man’. It is on this basis that Pramuk claims that Merton is ‘not a theologian’s theologian,’ p. 24.

¹⁵³ Susan Rakoczy, *Great Mystics and Social Justice: Walking on the Two Feet of Love* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

¹⁵⁴ Mario I. Aguilar, *Thomas Merton: Contemplation and Political Action* (London: S.P.C.K. Publishing, 2011).

¹⁵⁵ Robert Inchausti, *Thinking through Thomas Merton: Contemplation for Contemporary Times* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), p. 77.

representatives of that very tradition.¹⁵⁶ Drawing together polarised stances, they reflected on the one hand, the scholastic focus on Thomas Aquinas and are defined as neo-Thomists. On the other, in the manner of *ressourcement* thinkers, they prioritised original medieval texts, rather than the subsequent commentaries.

An empathy for both scholasticism and the *ressourcement* endeavours initially characterises Merton's position. Referring to his own reading of scholastic texts in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), the autobiographical work that placed Merton's name on an international stage, he lingers over the term, *aseitas*,¹⁵⁷ describing the word as 'one of those dry, outlandish technical compounds that the scholastic philosophers were so prone to use'.¹⁵⁸ Despite its strangeness to him, the scholastic endeavour to find a precise term through a neologism became a source of revelation in his understanding of the world.¹⁵⁹ He thereby highlights how scholastic language can be revelatory.

After this discussion, he continues to outline the start of his life-long friendship with Jacques Maritain,¹⁶⁰ whom he praises for avoiding 'the evil of narrowing and restricting Catholic philosophy and Catholic theology to a single school, to a single attitude, to a single system'.¹⁶¹ Even at this pre-Trappist stage of his engagement with theology, Merton's admiration demonstrates an awareness of problems arising from prescriptive formulae for theology.

The landscape of Merton's early poems (1941-1949) reflects a scholastic dualism, in an interpretation of the world divided into holy and profane, transposing the scholastic separation of nature and grace. My analysis of this poetry in Chapter Four will highlight the nuances within his stance, but it serves here to illustrate an early affinity with scholastic dualism, particularly during the years closely following his conversion. William Shannon tracks the scholastic influence on Merton's early works, suggesting that his first work on contemplation, *What is Contemplation?*

¹⁵⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1981), p. 140. Merton refers to Gilson and Maritain as 'modern scholastics'.

¹⁵⁷ Existing of itself, a term used by the scholastics to refer to the existence of God.

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 172.

¹⁵⁹ From this word, Merton could conceptualise God's own self-making through which everything in the cosmos was endowed with meaning by being contingent upon God.

¹⁶⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 240–41. Merton first met Jacques Maritain in 1937.

¹⁶¹ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 241.

(1948) echoes neo-Thomist theologians, such as Garrigou-Lagrange, who were vocally anti-*ressourcement*.¹⁶² Early reviews of Merton's work similarly identify a scholastic gulf between natural and supernatural.¹⁶³ In addition, by describing the locus of contemplation as 'a citadel'¹⁶⁴ in *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949), Merton echoes the papal designation of scholastic theology as a fortress. Two years later, *The Ascent to Truth* (1951), emerges according to Shannon directly out of a scholastic setting,¹⁶⁵ and is overly speculative.¹⁶⁶ In this work, however, a certain ambiguity is evident as Merton makes use of scholastic terms to undermine the divorce between nature and grace.¹⁶⁷ The work thus demonstrates an affinity with the terminology of scholasticism and its value in teaching, even whilst beginning to question its dualism. Merton's unfolding opposition to scholasticism is ambiguous, reflecting both dissatisfaction with method and emphasis, whilst hesitant about forging new ground.

Over the ensuing years, Merton's letters indicate the influence and friendship with a range of theologians associated with the *ressourcement*, the longest and warmest correspondence being with Maritain, Balthasar, and Jean Leclercq.¹⁶⁸ His exchanges reflect a close engagement and shared energy. He is clearly delighted at Balthasar's editing of the first German edition of his

¹⁶² William H. Shannon and Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000), pp. 26-27.

¹⁶³ TLS December 23, 1949, cited Shannon and Merton, p. 45.

¹⁶⁴ Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1986), p. 147, cited Shannon and Merton, p.156.

¹⁶⁵ Shannon and Merton, p. 159.

¹⁶⁶ Shannon and Merton, p. 67.

¹⁶⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1991), p. 27. Merton claims that that 'the contemplation of God in nature, which the Greek Fathers call *theoria physike* [...] is a positive recognition of God as he is manifested in the essences (*logoi*) of all things'. It is 'a habit of religious awareness which endows the soul with a kind of intuitive perception of God as He is reflected in His creation.'

¹⁶⁸ This demonstrates the eclectic nature of Merton's friendships, and the variety within the *ressourcement* movement, including as it does, Maritain, a renowned 'neo-Thomist' theologian, Balthasar, who was recognised for seeking to recover theological alternatives to 'neo-scholastic' theology, (Stanley Hauerwas, *Minding the Web: Making Theological Connections* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), p. 34,) and Leclercq, a Benedictine monk, who did not place himself centrally within the *ressourcement* movement alongside Daniélou and Lubac, (Duncan Robertson, *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading* (Liturgical Press, 2011), p. 5). He did, however, participate fully in the *ressourcement* task of illuminating the sources of medieval monastic literature. (Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq, *Survival or Prophecy?: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).

poetry,¹⁶⁹ and in the support and friendship of Maritain.¹⁷⁰ He claims to make use of the works of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain for his teaching,¹⁷¹ thus highlighting the contribution made by Raïssa, one of the only women in this group, which I explore further in Chapter Six.¹⁷² An entire volume of letters of Merton's correspondence with Leclercq underlines their shared endeavour to open up monastic sources, in the light of the *ressourcement* and ultimately Vatican's II's call for religious orders to return to the wisdom of their founders.¹⁷³ For Merton this endeavour is reflected in his own careful writing about St Bernard, which he dedicates to Gilson and to founders of the Cistercian tradition.¹⁷⁴ It is also evident in the many books he writes about the contemplative tradition through the lens of ancient sources.¹⁷⁵ These works demonstrate that Merton is a practitioner of *ressourcement* endeavours alongside Leclercq, as well as being within the community of theologians, as a mutual sounding board for each other's works.

More widely in Merton's letters, there are recurring references which underline his connection with the varied strands of the movement. He claims to be influenced by or in agreement with the priest-theologians Guardini, Rahner, Chenu, Lubac, Daniélou and Louis

¹⁶⁹ Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity*, p. 312.

¹⁷⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy*, p. 244, February 1963. Merton describes Jacques as 'a wonderful person, to whom I feel very close these days. I have never got such letters. He wrote a wonderful one on *Hagia Sophia!* too, which just came yesterday.'

¹⁷¹ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994), p. 32.

¹⁷² Merton's recognition of both Maritians on an equal plain, offsets what has been identified by Marian Ronan, as an 'imbalance in scholarly attention that has disproportionately favoured Jacques, often ignoring Raïssa or treating her work as a mere extension of Jacques's project'. Marian Ronan, Research Professor of Catholic Studies, The Center for World Christianity, New York Theological Seminary in review of Brenna Moore, *Sacred Dread: Raïssa Maritain, the Allure of Suffering, and the French Catholic Revival*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013).

¹⁷³ Paul VI, 'Perfectae Caritatis', *Vatican*, 1965 <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html>, par. 2. [accessed 26/12/2019]. Decree on the Adaption and Renewal of Religious Life, proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, October 28, 1965, par 2. 'The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time. This renewal, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of the Church, must be advanced according to the following principles: a) Since the ultimate norm of the religious life is the following of Christ set forth in the Gospels, let this be held by all institutes as the highest rule. b) It redounds to the good of the Church that institutes have their own particular characteristics and work. Therefore, let their founders' spirit and special aims they set before them as well as their sound traditions-all of which make up the patrimony of each institute-be faithfully held in honour.'

¹⁷⁴ Thomas Merton, *Last of The Fathers*, p. 5.

¹⁷⁵ *What is Contemplation?* (1948); *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949); *The Ascent to Truth* (1951); *Bread in the Wilderness* (1953); *The Last of the Fathers: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and the Encyclical Letter* (1953); *The Living Bread* (1956); *Praying the Psalms* (1956); *Thoughts in Solitude* (1958); *What Ought I to Do? Sayings of the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (1959); *The Wisdom of the Desert* (1960).

PART ONE: TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL POETICS OF PLACE: Chapter One

Bouyer,¹⁷⁶ as well as referring his friends to their works,¹⁷⁷ and to those of Péguy.¹⁷⁸ To Rahner he writes ‘I am in hearty agreement with your book and share with you the deep concern for a new and less rigidly institutional view of the church’.¹⁷⁹

It is, however, only in the 1950s that his antagonism towards scholastic language begins to emerge, thus adding a Cistercian lament to that of the Dominicans, Jesuits, and lay theologians which I have outlined. Merton’s antagonism towards scholasticism targets the language, the elitism, and the side-stepping of issues of vital importance. In 1953, five years after the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he writes: ‘I have found that technical language, though it is universal and certain and accepted by theologians, does not reach the average man, and does not convey what is most personal and most vital in religious experience’.¹⁸⁰ He continues by suggesting that a concern for absolute precision can lead to a lack of nuance, as he equates the spirit of St Dominic ‘with sharpness, definiteness, precision in theology’, which is ‘sometimes the fruit of oversimplification.’¹⁸¹ He declares himself unable to ‘get along with formalists, I am alien to them and they to me’.¹⁸² Ten years later, he targets a legalistic approach and an accompanying obfuscation with the accusation that theologians are ‘jurists’,¹⁸³ who deal in ‘the obscurantism of faith’, reflecting a power struggle rather than a love for truth.¹⁸⁴ It is the sense of misfit between the mystery of Christian revelation and the method of communicating that leads him to insist that ‘The Incarnation is not something that can be fitted into a system’.¹⁸⁵ This statement echoes Congar concerning the inability of scholastic method to ‘incarnate itself’,

¹⁷⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy*, p. 349.

¹⁷⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 56. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity*, p. 186.

¹⁷⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, pp. 74–75 and 101.

¹⁷⁹ Thomas Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. by William H. Shannon (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993), pp. 496–97. Merton refers to ‘The Christian Commitment’ by Rahner. He writes ‘a word from a fellow disciple in a distant country would be of some cheer and encouragement to you. I too am often discouraged with the obtuseness of certain critics and censors and find myself in a position where I am forbidden to speak’.

¹⁸⁰ Merton, Thomas *The Sign of Jonas* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1953), pp. 6–7.

¹⁸¹ Merton, Thomas *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 207.

¹⁸² Seyyed Hossein Nasr and William C. Chittick, *Merton & Sufism: The Untold Story: A Complete Compendium*, ed. by Rob Baker and Gray Henry (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), p. 105. Cited by Sidney H Griffiths in study of Merton’s correspondence with Abdul Aziz, April 4 1962.

¹⁸³ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Kent: Burns and Oates, 1995), p. 51.

¹⁸⁴ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 52.

¹⁸⁵ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 17.

and once again, Lubac's term of a disembodied mysticism. Merton is thus firmly placed within the *ressourcement* movement through his participation in the *ressourcement* opening up of patristic and medieval texts, through his ongoing conversation and through his voiced opposition to the systematic abstractions of scholasticism.

When in 1962 Merton re-writes his popular work, *Seeds of Contemplation* as *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he claims to have adopted a different style: 'the author is talking about spiritual things from the point of view of experience rather than in the concise terms of dogmatic theology'.¹⁸⁶ There is also a significant shift in his description of contemplation as a 'citadel', to being 'a wide impregnable country'.¹⁸⁷ Whilst echoing the sense of invincibility, it is now less confined and resonant of Péguy's reference to an inexhaustible terrain. Shannon claims that by this stage, 'Merton had without doubt gotten the scholastic approach out of his system'.¹⁸⁸

III.iii Merton's Directives for Theological Genre

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966) Merton offers an alternative approach to theology, both explicitly, through his propositions, and implicitly, in his writing style. I shall give close attention to the prose and structure of this work in Chapter Seven, but as a measure of this approach, it is worth noting that he channels his argument with scholastic methodology by adopting a casual and light-hearted tone, to offset the gravitas which he perceives in the scholastic approach. Referring to a theological conference on the theme of being saved,¹⁸⁹ he describes it as 'fumbling and bumbling about certitude', 'anything but faith, only intent on proving wrong any opposition'.¹⁹⁰ He emphasises the prevailing insistence within theology of an adversarial approach: 'We are all pontiffs haranguing one another, brandishing our croziers at one another, dogmatizing threatening anathemas!'¹⁹¹ Describing such authoritarianism as

¹⁸⁶ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), p. xii.

¹⁸⁷ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 228.

¹⁸⁸ Shannon and Merton, p. 159.

¹⁸⁹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 39–40.

¹⁹⁰ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 40.

¹⁹¹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 81–82, 'Christian social action is first of all action that discovers religion in politics, religion in work, religion in social programs for better wages, not to 'win the worker for the church' etc, because God became man, because every man is potentially Christ, because Christ is our brother.'

‘booming’,¹⁹² he suggests how relentless it seems by inferring that the theologians proceed to wear their mitres in bed.¹⁹³ The humour in his evident dismay continues. During one theological conference, to cope with the tedium, he claims to have done some yoga breathing exercises. Marvelling at the tolerance of his fellow monks, he claims that in any ‘normal’ gathering, there would have been ‘boos and catcalls, if not a near riot.’ Instead, ‘We just stood up and chanted the *De Profundis*.¹⁹⁴ If you ask me, that was significant enough!’¹⁹⁵

Aside from this implicit modelling of a different approach, he explicitly distances his own writing from what he describes as the ‘dry doctrinaire’ approach of scholasticism.¹⁹⁶ His greatest frustration however is, like that of Congar and Lubac, directed at a form of dualism which sets theology apart from the world:

The particular form taken by *contemptus mundi* was the assumption that theology had nothing to learn from the world and everything to teach the world. (..) This *contemptus mundi* amounted, in a word, to the assumption that the world must accommodate itself to the systems of Scholastics and should cease to develop. History should simply *stop*. In no circumstances did it occur to anyone that perhaps the theologian might have to question the world, even if only to make sure he was still in contact with it.¹⁹⁷

Merton thus refutes a stance which sets itself apart and claims to have all the answer emphasising that his own prioritising of questions over answers is what marks the accessibility and appeal of his writing to his many readers.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 40.

¹⁹³ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 40.

¹⁹⁴ Psalm 130: Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord! Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! N.R.S.V., p. 718.

¹⁹⁵ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 140.

¹⁹⁶ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 6. ‘At no point in this book are any questions treated systematically. Aspects of them are briefly noted, when they come to mind or when they fit in with the organic pattern of the book. Such a procedure is obviously unsatisfactory from the viewpoint of professional theology, but perhaps it may keep the book from being dry and doctrinaire.’

¹⁹⁷ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 50–51. Merton continues ‘That theology was a store of static and eternal truths which were unaffected by any conceivable change in the world, so that if the world wanted to remain in touch with eternal truth it would do well to renounce all thought of changing’. His words echo Daniélou’s statement of a theology ‘mired in the immobile world of Greek thought’. Daniélou, Jean, *Orientations Présentes de la Pensée religieuse*, Etudes 249, 1946, p. 14. Cited by D’Ambrosio, ‘Ressourcement Theology, Aggiornamento, and the Hermeneutics of Tradition’.

¹⁹⁸ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 49. ‘It seems to me that one of the reasons why my writing appeals to many people is precisely that I am not so sure of myself and do not claim to have all the answers. In fact, I often wonder quite

Demonstrating the same preference for patristic texts as the *ressourcement*, he highlights their emphasis on integration rather than separation, in which theology and spirituality each need the other as partners in a dialogue on the sacred, so that the universal coherence of theology meets its varied manifestations in human reality. Merton describes this approach as ‘existential, singular and poetic’.¹⁹⁹ Singular denotes both the uniqueness of an individual experience, as well as something extraordinary or unconventional. It does not necessarily conform to an established mode. Existential relates to human existence and to experience. Poetic highlights a sensitivity to beauty of expression, to feeling and to imagination, hence gesturing towards literary and aesthetic qualities in language, favoured by Balthasar, Congar and Rahner. Merton’s preferences hence prioritise a non-conformist language which integrates aesthetic and numinous possibility with temporal and material realities. His description of the writing of Bernard of Clairvaux, outlined earlier, provides a representative model as one who can embrace ‘the whole of life’.²⁰⁰ For Merton, this integrated theology is fundamental.²⁰¹

It is not simply integration, however, which is important to Merton but a greater multi-dimensionality. He hence trawls more widely in texts beyond the pre-modern or specifically theological. One such source includes later theologians who were marginalised for their dissenting stance against a predominant theological tradition, including the two cardinals: 17th century François Fénelon, reputedly silenced over his defence of mystical writing,²⁰² and John Henry Newman who, as outlined above, stood as an anomaly amidst the dominant Neo-Scholasticism of the 19th century.²⁰³ Merton emphasises the contradictions they embody: being in

openly about these ‘answers’ and about the habit of always having them ready. The best I can do is to look for some of the questions.’

¹⁹⁹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 7.

²⁰⁰ Thomas Merton, *Last of The Fathers: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux And The Encyclical Letter Doctor Mellifluus* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1981), p. 48. ‘Taking a broad, general view of all of Saint Bernard’s writings, we find that they give us a definite and coherent doctrine, a theology, embracing not merely one department of Christian life but the whole of that life. In other words, Saint Bernard is not merely to be classified as ‘a spiritual writer,’ as if his doctrine could be limited to a certain nondogmatic region of affective intimacy with God. He is spiritual indeed, and a great mystic. But he is a speculative mystic; his mysticism is expressed as a theology.’ Quoted earlier in this chapter, I ‘Creative Fidelity in Catholic Thought’, p. 10.

²⁰¹ Thomas Merton, *Last of The Fathers*, p. 48.

²⁰² Jon Bartley Stewart, *Kierkegaard and the Renaissance and Modern Traditions: Literature, Drama, and Music* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2009), p. 131.

²⁰³ Vox Nova, ‘Culture and Theology: The Ressourcement Movement (Part 1)’, *Vox Nova*, 2008

<<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/voxnova/2008/03/30/culture-and-theology-the-ressourcement-movement-part-1/>>, [accessed 26/12/2019].

time, and yet timeless; the silence of their utterance; the wisdom embodied in the pain of rejection, which becomes paradoxically liberating; being both cardinals and yet reflecting the non-conformist stance which he saw in monastic theology.²⁰⁴

Another source is found in his empathy with Charles Péguy, (1873-1914) and Simone Weil, (1909-1943), both of whom he identifies as not preferring to be ‘in the middle of the Catholically approved and well-censored page, but only on the margin. And they remained there as question marks: questioning not Christ, but Christians’.²⁰⁵ At an even greater distance from the dominant face of Catholicism, he gives considered attention to Jean Giono (1895-1970), who, due to his pacifism was forced to the margins as a writer, an experience Merton shared.²⁰⁶ Giono in Merton’s analysis becomes a model for expressing an incarnational vision, reflected variously in a love of nature, a profound dismay at war, a concern for the locality and an anti-intellectual stance.²⁰⁷ All such elements according to Merton point towards the Incarnation and the theological necessity of focusing on the human:

Giono is a passionate and articulate defender of the human scale, the human measure. And in the long run, without this measure, God Himself cannot be known, for He revealed Himself scaled down to our dimensions.²⁰⁸

This prioritisation of a human element is reiterated in his own criticism of his early work *Seeds of Contemplation*. He claims that ‘there is nothing to be proud of in this one. It lacks warmth and human affection. (..) It is cold and cerebral’.²⁰⁹ In order to remedy this absence of humanity, Merton claims that it is necessary to focus on the interactions of humankind as a manifestation of the presence of Christ.²¹⁰ Hence, reflecting those works of Giono which highlight the dignity of

²⁰⁴ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 24. ‘They are not of their time, or ahead of it, or behind it. They are outside of it. Indeed, they reach this condition by suffering a kind of rejection which liberates them into a realm of a final perfection, a uniqueness, a humility, a wisdom, a silence that is definitive and contains all that they have ever said.’

²⁰⁵ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 40.

²⁰⁶ In 1939 Giono spent two months in jail for pacifist activities. In 1945 he was held captive by a communist band of Resistance fighters who construed pacifism as collaboration with the Nazis.

²⁰⁷ *Le grand troupeau* (1931, published in English as *To the Slaughterhouse*). Giono was one of only 11 survivors out of 162,440 who fought at Verdun.

²⁰⁸ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 43.

²⁰⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 165.

²¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 81-82. ‘Christian social action is first of all action that discovers religion in politics, religion in work, religion in social programs for better wages, not to ‘win the worker for the church’ etc, because God became man, because every man is potentially Christ, because Christ is our brother.’

the human, theology for Merton must embody an incarnational character in which salvation is encountered in the brokenness of human reality.²¹¹

This focus on incarnational vision is the subject of an essay reviewing a study of William Blake, written during Merton's last year of life. Merton's reflections on Blake are highly appropriate within this thesis, as there is a strong resonance between Blake's stance towards 'official Christendom', and that of Merton and the *ressourcement* towards scholasticism. According to Merton, Blake facilitates theological understanding and creates a new form for theology by the negotiation of opposite poles and by locating theology in the brokenness of the material world:

Blake saw official Christendom as a *narrowing* of vision, a foreclosure of experience and of future expansion, a locking up and securing of the doors of perception. He substituted for it a Christianity of openness, of total vision, a faith which dialectically embraces both extremes, not seeking to establish order in life by shutting off a little corner of chaos and subjecting it to laws and to police, but moving freely between dialectical poles in a wild chaos, integrating sacred vision, in and through the experience of fallenness, as the only locus of creativity and redemption. Blake, in other words, calls for 'a whole new form of theological understanding.'²¹²

This description will be explored further in Chapter Two, but suffice it here to underline that this 'whole new form of theological understanding' is multiply resonant with *ressourcement* endeavours: the release of theology from a form in which it had remained shackled; a certain non-conformism to officialdom; the rejection of closure; the corresponding need for openness and receptivity; something of the topsy-turvy chaos mentioned by Maritain; the dialogue between the created and uncreated; the integrated vision of a Bernard of Clairvaux or Maximus the Confessor.

Within these expansive horizons, Merton locates theology in corners of chaos and brokenness, echoing the biblical pronouncement of the Incarnation, where the sacred takes flesh and dwells in the brokenness of the material world.²¹³ There is a sense of dynamic movement in

²¹¹ *Le Chant du monde* (The Song of the World 1934) provides a key example of a regionalist, anti-intellectual protest against modern civilisation.

²¹² Published posthumously in 1985. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1985), p.6.

²¹³ John 1: 1 and 14: ¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us. N.R.S.V., p.1,279.

this process indicated by the prepositional placing: ‘in’, ‘through’ and ‘between’ ‘sacred vision and the experience of fallenness’. Reflecting the concluding doxology of the Mass,²¹⁴ and those words of Guardini and of Lubac, Merton reiterates the concerns of the Liturgical Movement for a dynamic exchange between liturgy and life. It directly mirrors the *ressourcement* concern for theology vitally connected to human activity. This ‘whole new form of theological understanding’ asks theology to enter into the wild chaos of materiality, and instead of ordering it, to demonstrate that brokenness provides ‘the only locus of creativity and redemption’.

This nexus of material brokenness, verbal creativity and an understanding of the divine connects my focus on language for theology in Chapter One, with the exploration of place as a partner to theological dialogue in Chapter Two. Where theology is asked to enter into this material chaos, it is a request for words about God to engage with the materiality of place, thus creating an interplay between language, place, and an understanding of the divine. It is this interplay which I name a poetics of place.

IV

Conclusion

In this first part of a theoretical framework in which I locate my analysis of primary texts, I have sought to identify the context of *ressourcement* thinking and have explored the characteristics of scholasticism which motivated the aspiration for renewal. I have continued into sketching a series of pointers, framed by key *ressourcement* thinkers, for a possible alternative language in which the over-riding consensus was to eradicate the divorce between theology and and mystery, by prioritising incarnational and sacramental vision.²¹⁵ The intention, I have suggested, was to create a more integrated theology, which contained polarities within a greater sense of wholeness, as identified in those key figures spanning the history of Catholic theology at the start of this chapter.

²¹⁴ The Doxology: ‘Through him and with him and in him, O God Almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours, for ever and ever.’ The Order of the Mass, <<https://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Missal/Text/MCFL.pdf>>.

²¹⁵ Chapter One, II.v ‘Towards and Alternative Language’ pp. 35-43.

PART ONE: TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL POETICS OF PLACE: Chapter One

Through a discussion of primary and secondary texts on Merton in relation to *ressourcement* endeavours, I have established Merton as a co-*ressourcement* theologian, firstly, in his opening up of early church sources, in particular his prioritisation of the contemplative theology characterising patristic and monastic tradition.²¹⁶ The chronology of Merton's works demonstrate an increasing advocacy for contemplative living and for a liturgically underpinned way of life. Secondly, Merton illustrated the *ressourcement* outreach to their historical context, through his dialoguing with the major movements and thinkers of the twentieth century. Thirdly, he voiced a similar antipathy towards scholastic methodology for theology, accompanied by a parallel desire to revitalise Catholic theology. Finally, I sketched Merton's own directives for theological language, closing with his description of Blake's approach to theology, which I claimed not only emulated the creatively faithful stance within Catholic theological history, but was also multiply resonant with *ressourcement* endeavours. I concluded by referring to a paradigm extracted from Merton's words on Blake which represents a three-way dialogue between language, the material context and divine mystery. As Chapter One established the key focal points of 'setting theology free' and 'an alternative language for theology', Chapter Two addresses the accompanying focus on a poetics of place.

²¹⁶ See Introduction, p. 3, note 7. Three recent editions of Merton's work edited by Patrick O'Connell include *Thomas Merton: Cassian and the Fathers* (2005), *Thomas Merton: Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* (2006) and *Thomas Merton: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (2008). These works demonstrate Merton's sounding of the patristic tradition and his sharing of his findings as Master of Scholastics and Novices at the monastery.

Chapter Two

A Poetics of Place and the Mid-20th Century

The *ressourcement* critique of the scholastic model for theology concerned both method and content. My enquiry into an alternative mode similarly has two vantage points: use of language, and the role of place as a partner to theological expression, the latter pinpointing the shift in *ressourcement* thinking concerning the enmeshment of nature and grace. Chapter One focused on the first element: use of language, sketching directives for a *ressourcement* theological expression, and, in parallel, outlining Merton's own proposals.¹ In my closing reference to Blake, the task of theology became the relinquishing of a form in which it had remained trapped and the naming of the dialogue between the created and uncreated in the broken reality of the material world. I identify this task as central to a poetics of place, the focus of this chapter.

I begin by defining this paradigm. I then consider how the theme of place is explored in secondary critique. I proceed by sketching the wider interrogation of place within socio-cultural and literary contexts of Merton's time. I conclude by identifying how a poetics of place emerges from this wider canvas. Having thus, in Chapter One, signalled the emergence of this paradigm, from Merton's *ressourcement* aspirations, in Chapter Two, I establish its relevance to the contemporaneous interrogation of place.

I

Defining a Poetics of Place

I interpret a poetics of place as a way of seeing, which shapes a way of describing what is seen. It identifies an interplay of three elements: place, language, and intimations of the divine. It approaches sacramental understanding, in which words spoken, speak of matter and mystery, or incarnational vision, in which the word and capitalised Word dwell in the material world,

¹ In summary, I identified an openness as to how theology might approach its task and an accompanying appreciation of how artistic forms of poetry, music, drama and the visual arts might provide a more integrated model for theological communication, by assisting in the naming of the transcendent via temporal and material realities. Merton also prioritised openness alongside the integrated vision he saw in Bernard of Clairvaux.

creating a nexus of the linguistic, the divine and the material. I further elucidate this definition by examining component parts.

I.i Poetics

The term poetics is frequently used without clear definition, simply gesturing towards a form, having the character of poetry. In a recent thesis (2015) on Merton's 'theological poetics', Philip Seal identifies the extent of this lack of definition, with reference to several works where poetics appears in the title.² The Oxford Dictionary definition refers to the term '*poesis*', through which poetics becomes 'the process of making; production, creation'.³ It suggests poetics is craftsmanship, thus stripping the term from a necessary association with writing in verse. Seal's interpretation reflects this dissociation. Poetics represents 'how texts work (through) the various strategies by which they are composed', including form, grammar and syntax.⁴ I, similarly, define poetics as not simply the form which emerges from the workings of Merton's text, but the very dynamic which drives those workings. It is both in the text and fashioning the text.

With a shared focus on Merton's poetics, this thesis has common points of reference with Seal's work. The overall focus of his study is 'how the literary forms of Merton's prose writings embody theological claims he makes at the level of content'.⁵ It is his discussion of a poetics of 'thereness' in particular which reflects a common focus. I shall refer further to Seal's study in Chapters Seven and Eight. In his work, however, 'thereness' and its closeness to the theme of

² Seal, Philip, 'Towards a Formalist Theological Poetics: Practising What You Preach in the Prose Writings of Thomas Merton' (University of Oxford, 2015), <<https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:be5480fc-2edf-464a-b37c-a28d2c25fd1f>>. Seal refers to several works with poetics in the title, including Andrew Shanks's '*What is Truth: Towards a Theological Poetics*' and Oliver Davies's essay 'Soundings: Towards a Christian Poetics of Silence'. He claims neither offer a foundational definition for 'poetics', given that 'the word is present nowhere in the essay except the title', pp. 13-14.

³ 'Oxford English Dictionary Online', 2020 <<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/oxford-english-dictionary-online-9780195216813>> [accessed 30/12/2019].

⁴ Seal, pp. 15-16.

⁵ Seal, p. 2. Seal outlines further a series of claims concerning self-denial, simplification, 'thereness', darkness, and obscurity, and he demonstrates how each aim is embodied in the form of Merton's writing. Seal, pp. 147-148. Seal's discussion of 'thereness' as a theological concept comes particularly close to the parameters of my study. He describes Merton's poetics of thereness 'as springing from a theological root' representing 'Merton's view that acts of simply seeing bring us closer to God by paring back various kinds of distraction'. Seal refers to an Oxford English dictionary definition of 'there' as 'the quality of being in a 'position', or 'at or in the place in question', with the further qualification that this quality of position or placement overrides any further characteristic, such as the function of the object that is there, in a particular place'.

place, is one focus amongst several. In this study, place and its primary role in shaping Merton's poetics is in the spotlight.

I.ii Place

Definitions of place by geographers identify a layered entity. Gabriel Harrington with reference to cultural geographer, Tom Cresswell and political geographer John Agnew, suggests place has three elements: location, locale and sense of place.⁶ These three elements also inform my interpretation of place. Location is the place on the map. This is found via measurable coordinates of map making and is evident in Merton's juxtaposition of Europe and the United States, or North America and South, or the monastic grounds in Kentucky and the local town of Louisville. Locale is the physical shape. This can encompass a wide spectrum of spatial characteristics: interior or exterior; natural or human-made; medieval or modern; urban or rural; chaotic or orderly; alien or familiar. It may also contain the detail of architecture or landscape. All such differentiations inform Merton's communication of locale. The third aspect is the sense of place which emerges from the human impact upon a given location and locale. The three geographers concur that this third aspect gives meaning to the place. In Merton's work, this aspect is particularly played out in the presentation of sacred space. I shall demonstrate how Merton echoes stereotypical renderings of sacred space, as well as inverting archetypes and delivering a more nuanced perspective.

I.iii Poetics of Place

By identifying Merton's poetics as a poetics of place, I am pinpointing how place, in all its aspects of location, locale and sense of place is intrinsic to his poetics. Both the form and the dynamic operating within the text calls upon some reference to locatedness. There is a further component both to poetics and place, however, beyond the definitions I have provided. Derived from a reading of St. John's Gospel, words and place are animated and permeated by divine presence. This incarnational perspective is elucidated by Thomas Berry, a monk contemporary with Merton, whose writings promote a Christian eco-vision:

⁶ Gabriel Harrington, 'Cresswell – Defining Place', *Tracing the Midcoast*, 2016 <<http://web.colby.edu/allen-island/2016/11/03/cresswell-defining-place/>> [accessed 26/12/2019].

St John tells us that in the beginning all things took on their shape through the word. (...) This was the numinous reality through which all things were made, and without which was made nothing that has been made. The word, the self-spoken word, by its own spontaneities brought forth the universe and established itself as the ultimate norm of reality and of value.⁷

Berry acknowledges not only divine indwelling in the universe, but also the verbal nature of this divine indwelling. Merton's poetics of place reflect and are animated by this enmeshment of three elements, reflective of the incarnation: the created, the uncreated and language.

Liv From *Ressourcement* to a Poetics of Place

A focus on the theme of place is a natural development of *ressourcement* endeavours. Firstly, as a concrete entity, place can be equated with the human and material context towards which the *ressourcement* reached out. Secondly, and similarly, place can represent that which is located *pro-fane*, outside the temple, beyond the scholastic 'bulwark' which isolates and confines the sacred. Thirdly, and pre-eminently, place participates in incarnational and sacramental vision in which the material world becomes the dwelling place of the Word and marks the connaturality of the material and the divine.

There is however a particular quality to Merton's engagement with place which introduces a distinctive colouring to this *ressourcement* focus. Recalling again the close of Chapter One, Merton's words concerning Blake reveal a developed awareness of how the character of a given space assists in moulding a way of seeing. Whilst in part echoing Blake's own focus on the spatial, and how the English poet identifies transcendence as physically and temporally present,⁸ Merton's critique of Blake describes 'a whole new theology' in terms of spatial definition.⁹ He identifies three elements which inform the process of theological communication. Firstly, the verbs: narrowing, locking up, securing, shutting off, closing,

⁷ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Counterpoint Press, 2015), p. 196.

⁸ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. xxii., 'If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.' William Blake, *Selected Poems* (London: University of London Press, 1962), p. 130. 'To see a world in a grain of sand /And a heaven in a wild flower, /Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, /And eternity in an hour', 'Auguries of Innocence'.

⁹ Cited in full: Chapter One, III.iii 'Merton's Directives for Theological Genre', p. 48. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, p. 6.

establishing order, subjecting it, identify that which needs to be relinquished. Secondly, Merton selects words which conjure up water imagery: expansion, openness, moving freely, in and through, between poles, integrating. He thus perceives an openness to unexpected possibilities. These two contrasting elements provide a clear echo of the images of a bulwark and of a spring. A third element is the signalling of paradox, wherein chaos and fallenness become the ‘sole locus of creativity and redemption’, variously identified by the *ressourcement* as a ‘discordant synthesis’ or ‘dark radiance’.¹⁰ Hence, the action of theology in finding words and the action of saving grace are together identified as being located in the materiality of physical surroundings. This trajectory of rejecting confinement, stepping into expansiveness, then identifying the strange geography where grace and brokenness coalesce, underpins Merton’s poetics. Through such a process, place becomes a means for Merton of opening up a dialogue, generating a source of intimacy and eventually a reference point for naming theological realities.

II

The State of Dialogue Concerning Merton and Place

This preoccupation with geography and concepts associated with relationship to place is evident from Merton’s earliest published writing to his last work. Critical comment has identified the importance of the opening epigraph to *The Collected Poems*: ‘Geography comes to an end’.¹¹ The image is qualified further in his final work of poetry, published posthumously, *The Geography of Lograire*, in which ‘geography is in trouble all over’.¹² Within these parameters, Merton regularly voices his own engagement with place: ‘my own appointed place’;¹³ ‘I am inevitably in dialogue with my surroundings’;¹⁴ ‘We do not realize our own setting as we ought to’.¹⁵ It is especially, however, the titles of the seven volumes of his journals, chosen by editors,

¹⁰ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, p. 17. Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, pp. 81, 97.

¹¹ Paul Pearson, ‘From Clairvaux to Mount Olivet: Thomas Merton’s Geography of Place’, *ITMS Annual*, 2016, p. 59 <<http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/29/Pearson58-71.pdf>>. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1980), pp. 2, 24.

¹² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1980), p. 156, section 48.

¹³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 345.

¹⁴ Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, ed. by Robert E Daggy (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 48.

¹⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, pp. 197 – 198.

which reveal the extent to which his life appears tethered to topography, to movement through space, and to a pendulum between introspective and extrospective reflection.¹⁶ In addition, the titles of his own works pan through aspects of the natural or built environment, suggesting locatedness or growth and movement through: storey and mountain,¹⁷ ascent,¹⁸ seeds,¹⁹ desert,²⁰ the waters of Siloe,²¹ the wilderness,²² world of action,²³ the hidden ground,²⁴ cables,²⁵ geography,²⁶ divided sea,²⁷ strange islands²⁸ and the bystander.²⁹

The theme of place is variously explored in Merton discourse. One frequent focus is the recognition of a pattern in Merton's relationship to place, beginning in a form of scholastic dualism where the sacred and profane are categorically separated and developing into a universal sacred geography. This is the framework of the analyses of Merton's poetry by Thérèse Lentfoehr³⁰ and Sonia Petisco.³¹ Alan Altany's assessment echoes a similar shift: 'The poetry of the 1940s and 1950s is filled with images of a theological dualism between the natural and the supernatural, between the sacred and the profane.' Whilst in the poetry of the 1960s: 'the world

¹⁶ There are seven journals covering the entire span of Merton's writing life: *Run to the Mountain* 1939-1941; *Entering the Silence* 1941-1952; *A Search for Solitude* 1952-1960; *Turning Toward the World* 1960-1963; *Dancing in the Waters of Life* 1963-1965; *Learning to Love* Jan 1966-Oct 1967; *The Other Side of the Mountain* 1967-1968.

¹⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1981), originally published in 1948.

¹⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1991).

¹⁹ Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Hertfordshire: Anthony Clarke Books, 1972); Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972).

²⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1970).

²¹ Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979).

²² Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (Collegeville, Minn. : Philadelphia, Pa: Liturgical Press, 1971).

²³ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998).

²⁴ Thomas Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. by William H. Shannon (San Diego: Harcourt Barace Jovanovich, 1993).

²⁵ Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 395-454, *Cables to the Ace*.

²⁶ Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 455-609, *The Geography of Lograire*.

²⁷ Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 59-132, *A Man in a Divided Sea*.

²⁸ Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 223-290, *The Strange Islands*, 1957.

²⁹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Kent: Burns and Oates, 1995).

³⁰ Thérèse Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1979).

³¹ Sonia Petisco Martínez, 'La poesía de Thomas Merton: creación, crítica y contemplación' (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2003).

was not just to be forsaken and prayed for, but the very ground for the experience of the sacred.’³²

This transition is regularly identified as the fruit of monastic experience, especially the practice of contemplation. For Robert Waldron, the experience of communion emerging from contemplative practice is the source of profound transformation.³³ He claims that it is through contemplation that Merton progressed from being a ‘smug, narrow-minded triumphalist Catholic convert of *The Seven Story Mountain*, a man disdainful of the world’ to ‘the monk of the hermitage (who) is a world-embracing, compassionate, wise, tolerant man, solicitously reaching out to the world’.³⁴ Monica Weis identifies Merton’s spatial attentiveness and his contemplative practice as the path towards an environmental vision, reflecting a growing advocacy for cherishing the environment.³⁵ Similarly, Susan Rakoczy identifies Merton’s contemplative engagement with the historical moment of being on American soil, transforming a confined sense of the sacred, into an outreach towards social and political justice.³⁶

Other features of monastic life also figure as key shapers of Merton’s perception of place. Christine Bochen highlights the importance of the vow of stability in the Benedictine and Cistercian traditions,³⁷ with its promise to be grounded in one place.³⁸ For Douglas Christie, the attention to place that stability generates, creates a mutual impact between place and contemplative practice. He identifies ‘the experience of monastic stability (..) as engendering a particular kind of openness to the self-disclosure within place’, which in turn underlines the

³² Altany, Alan, ‘Celtic Monasticism as a Metaphor for Thomas Merton’ <<http://www.thomasmertonsociety.org/altany1.htm>>, [accessed 03/01/2019].

³³ Robert Waldron, *Thomas Merton: Master of Attention*, (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2007).

³⁴ Waldron, p. 3.

³⁵ Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 2011).

³⁶ Rakoczy, Susan, *IHM Great Mystics and Social Justice: Walking on the Two Feet of Love* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

³⁷ Christine Bochen ‘Panel of Journal Editors’ in A. M. Allchin, *Thomas Merton - Poet, Monk, Prophet: Papers Presented at the Second General Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland at Oakham School, March 1998*, (Abergavenny: Three Peaks Press, 1998), pp. 29-34, (p. 30).

³⁸ Whilst Dominicans and Franciscans might move from place to place, those under the rule of Benedict, which include Cistercians, stay through their vow of stability within the geographical confines of their monasteries. Rule 78: The workshop where we are to toil faithfully at all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community. Monastery of Christ in the Desert, ‘Chapter 4: The Tools for Good Works’, *Benedictine Abbey of Christ in the Desert*, 2020, <<https://christdesert.org/prayer/rule-of-st-benedict/chapter-4-the-tools-for-good-works/>> [accessed 27/12/2019].

‘significance of *place* within contemplative practice’.³⁹ He thus identifies a powerful role for place in moulding contemplative vision. Fiona Gardner focuses on the influence of Mariology and Marian devotions in the Cistercian tradition, in cultivating a child’s vision of the material world, as a place to play in and to play with.⁴⁰

Further exploration of the theme of place in Merton’s work adopts a tangent springing from spatially defined experience. Marginality, for example, is regularly identified as significant. Nugent’s study, *Silence Speaks*, referred to earlier, associates Congar with Merton due to a shared experience of marginalisation by the Church.⁴¹ This is explored further by Richard Inchausti, for whom Merton is the quintessential American outsider who, through his marginality, finds connection with the world of the mainstream.⁴² A preference for the marginal stance is also evident in Merton’s own self-identification as a ‘bystander’, and the empathy he himself voices for the marginalised figures of Fénelon and Newman,⁴³ Péguy and Weil,⁴⁴ and Giono.⁴⁵

Accompanying the critique which identifies some aspect of spatiality as significant, several critics isolate the theme of place, not simply as a feature, but as the defining element of Merton’s vision. Ross Labrie refers to Merton’s ‘spontaneous openness to the suggestiveness of his immediate surroundings’.⁴⁶ Michael Mott claims ‘it would be hard to exaggerate the importance of place for Thomas Merton.’⁴⁷ Patrick O’Connell designates Merton’s awareness of the spatial dimension, as ‘the most important point of access to Merton’s poetic oeuvre’.⁴⁸ This emphasis is identified as the prime focus of his final book of poetry. Paul Pearson emphasises the importance of a specific location, suggesting that the prologue in *The Geography of Lograire*

³⁹ Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: OUP USA, 2012), p. 119.

⁴⁰ Fiona Gardner, *The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), pp. 38.170.

⁴¹ Chapter One, III: ‘Merton and the *Ressourcement*’, III.i, ‘Secondary Critique’, p. 38.

⁴² Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton’s American Prophecy* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998).

⁴³ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 24.

⁴⁴ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 40.

⁴⁵ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 43.

⁴⁶ Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. 85.

⁴⁷ Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (San Diego, California: Harcourt Brace, 1993), p. 205.

⁴⁸ Patrick F. O’Connell, ‘‘The Surest Home Is Pointless’’, p. 2.

voices a search for roots, in particular Merton's Celtic roots in Wales.⁴⁹ Malgorzata Poks identifies the same work as 'a topoanalysis of the most intimate and the most dreaded spaces of his life', in which his intention is to 'to visit old grounds and listen into speech that which has been silenced or forgotten'.⁵⁰

Poks' reference to 'visiting olds grounds' and 'listening into speech' underlines the parallel importance of language in Merton's interpretation of place, suggesting a reciprocity and mutuality between the two elements. A third element emerges within this interplay, when language and place are the site for divine indwelling. This reciprocity and mutuality become stamped with incarnational vision thus creating that three-way dialogue I have named a poetics of place.

In order to establish further contextualisation of this three-way dialogue, it is helpful to explore the interrogation of place within socio-cultural thinking, contemporaneous with Merton, and within his literary context. Without this wider context, it could be argued that a poetics of place, as I define it, emerges simply from a specifically Christian context, with a strong Catholic colouring and a monastic overlay. I shall demonstrate the wider foundation for this paradigm, whilst continuing to emphasise its Christian theological underpinning.

There are three large-scale mooring points within Merton's work which relate to his experience of geography: Western Europe, where he was born, received much of his schooling and his first year at university; the United States, where he continued his university education, converted to Catholicism and became a Trappist monk; Latin America, represented by the island of Cuba, which he visited for only one week, but which left a lasting imprint on his sense of place. The following surveys reflect this geography. I begin by referring very selectively to works by Simone Weil, Martin Heidegger, and Gaston Bachelard. Together they not only represent a post-war European context but they also pan a wide spatial canvas, from the cosmic and terrestrial, to the built environment and the intimacy of home interiors. In parallel, I refer to surveys of literature of the mid-century and its communication of place. Underlining the

⁴⁹ Allchin, p. 85.

⁵⁰ Malgorzata Poks, 'Why I Have a Wet Footprint on Top of My Mind': The World, the Text, and the Subject in Thomas Merton's *The Geography of Lograire.*, *Publisher Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin.*, *Americascapes: Americans in /and Their Diverse Landscapes*, 2013, 69–81, (p. 70).

influence of the French and British context, I cite literary criticism by Neil Corcoran, David Cooper, Neal Alexander, and Jean-Michel Maulpoix, who provide a summary overview of these contexts. An emphasis on walking emerges from the French context which links directly with its importance in Henry Thoreau, thus introducing a North American stamp to this outline. I develop this further by reflecting on Flannery O'Connor's concern for geography and the American Catholic writer. I outline Merton's connection with both American writers. I then refer to a defining element within Latin American Catholic theology in order to complete the sketch of a Catholic and Pan-American context. Each survey, the socio-cultural, the literary, and the theological, demonstrates how place serves as a key point of reference for reflection. This arc of reference seeks to acknowledge the hybridity of Merton's personal geography and the geographical anchoring points on the map of his spatial poetics, throughout all but his last six months of life.⁵¹

III

The Interrogation of Spatiality and the Mid-20th Century Context

III.i The Socio-cultural Canvas

Given the breadth of Merton's dialogue with a profusion of thinkers, there is a challenge in staking out the parameters of the socio-cultural background.⁵² Both journals and letters reveal the extent of his outreach in multiple directions: to different faith traditions; political figures; racial issues; pacifism; ecology; existentialism; Marxism. With my focus on a poetics of place, my rationale in selecting dialogue partners seeks to address the varying dimensions of place from cosmic space, through terrestrial dwellings, to the intimate spaces of home. This span is reflected respectively in the changing lens offered by Weil, Heidegger and Bachelard. A second

⁵¹ Merton was born in south-eastern France. He attended school and the first year of university in France and England. He completed his university education in North America. His single visit to the island of Cuba established a deep engagement with Latin America and led to a wide correspondence with Latin American writers. In his poetry, he polarises Europe and USA, as well as North America and South America. Although he had significant contact with writers across the globe, it is only in the last six months of his life that he travelled to Asia. Due to his heightened engagement with place in terms of geography, topography and character, Asia, as a geographical entity, would become a further mooring place, but this was only in his final months. I shall refer to the seminal importance of his encounter with Asia, in my analysis of texts in Chapter Seven, but as it came in the last months of his life, my sketch of socio-cultural and literary context, remains with Europe and North and South America.

⁵² *Hidden Ground of Love*, his letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns covering multiple themes: various religions; pacifism; public figures; writers on racial issues; in excess of 80 writers and thinkers. Similarly, *The Courage to Truth* includes letters to many significant thinkers on philosophical, literary, aesthetic, and political issues with over 30 writers.

consideration is to select thinkers who, like Merton, recognise an interplay between different elements in their interrogation of place, and are especially preoccupied with the role of language. This is true of all three as my analysis will demonstrate. Finally, Merton himself identifies a shared canvas with the three thinkers. He highlights a kinship with Weil, introduces his novices to her works, reviews a biography and admires her marginalised stance in the Catholic world.⁵³ He refers to Heidegger in his journals and makes use of Heidegger's term *Gelassenheit* in the poem *Cables to the Ace*.⁵⁴ In a later journal he gives a running commentary on Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*.⁵⁵ Like Merton, all three thinkers understand spatial reality as a foothold in the

⁵³ There is no evidence that Merton met Weil, but his letters and journals frequently refer to her. One main source of Merton's reference to Weil is his correspondence with Czeslaw Milosz (2011-2004), a Polish American poet, who was clearly impressed with Weil and from the tone of his letters was encouraging Merton to read her more closely. Merton claimed that he could understand Milosz's appreciation and that he was glad to have translated her work, (letter to Milosz, Feb 28, 1959, *Courage for Truth*, p. 56) and requested that Milosz pass on his admiration of her to Weil's mother, (May 6, 1960, *Courage for Truth*, p. 68). He will share with Milosz that 'In the depths, I have more of Charles Péguy in me, more of Simone Weil than even I have realized,' (June 5 1961, *Courage for Truth*, p.74). Six years later he will send his review of Cabaud's biography of Weil to Milosz, (March 30 1965, *Courage for Truth*, p.85). In his journals, there is recurring reference to Weil, including his re-worked version of a selection of journal writings: *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 40, 138, 142, 334. He will in fact turn to Weil's writing for consolation after outlining his frustrations with the tedious nature of theological conferences at the Abbey. (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 40). In his journal *Dancing on the Waters of Life* Merton expresses a deep fascination and a close personal empathy with Weil, whilst admitting being disturbed by her work and not knowing why, attributing it hesitatingly to her dogmatic ambiguity. He questions such dogmatic ambiguities (March 3, 1965, Ash Wednesday) and elements of Gnosticism he saw in her work, (March 2, 1965). He highlights kinship with her in mentioning that his godfather and guardian tried to treat her in the Middlesex Hospital when she refused to eat: 'Funny that she and I have this in common: we were both problems to this good man'. Affirming this closeness and appreciation, he will say a Requiem Mass for her 22 years after her death and lecture on her work to the novices and juniors in the Abbey: 'This morning I said a Requiem Mass for Simone Weil and also spoke of her in the conference to the novices and juniors (George Herbert's poem on Love etc.)', (March 4, 1965). Key elements on which he will reflect are 'her non-conformism and mysticism are on the contrary an essential element in our time', and her idea of a 'world threatened with rootlessness through Americanization. This is a thought!' All above references *Dancing on the Waters of Life*, pp. 212-214. 2). In Thomas Merton *Master of Attention* (London: Darton, Longman + Todd, 2007), Waldron associates Weil with Merton. Firstly, he claims that Merton's prayer life was congruent, with Simone Weil's theory of prayer, one she summarises in a sentence, 'Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer' (Simone Weil *Gravity and Grace* Nebraska, University of Nebraska 1997, p. 170). He also underlines that they both 'found Christ through aesthetics: by their attention to the beauty of Christ as expressed in art: Byzantine mosaics, Gregorian chant and poetry'. Furthermore, he points out that Merton's friend, Czeslaw Milosz, identifies Camus, Weil and Merton as 'bright figures whose creative thought may tip the scales of victory of good over evil', (*Master of Attention*, p. 3-4), from Czeslaw Milosz, 'http://www.Thomasmertonsociety.Org/Journal/11/11-2Milosz.Pdf', *ITMS Annual*, Vol II, no. 2 (2004), pp. 2-4. (p.4).

⁵⁴ Merton, Thomas, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 452. Merton refers to Heidegger in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 232 – 233 and in *Dancing on the Waters of Life*, pp. 54-55, (January 3, 1964). He refers especially to Heidegger's claim that the realisation and acceptance of death is the guarantee of authenticity in life as 'a very monastic intuition'. The focus on authenticity in Heideggerian thought, building on the problem caused by the 'enframing' of the world by modernity is a key theme in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* and for Merton it is connected with his understanding of his own vocation, as motivated by the emptiness of modern culture. He claims that the marginalised stance of the monk stands at opposite poles to the practice identified within modernity for man to flee from himself and desire in Heidegger's words 'to fall into the world'. (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 232).

⁵⁵ Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998). Merton begins by claiming that Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* offers 'Very good material – phenomenology of poetic experience. And he is not

face of psychological and physical disorientation, caused by the rapidly changing demographics and increased emigration of the war years.

Weil's two works *Waiting for God*, and *The Need for Roots*, written respectively in 1942 and 1943, but published posthumously, emerge from the loss of bearings generated by the war years and interrogate the relationship between a grounded human life and the transcendent.⁵⁶ Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, Thought* assembles a series of essays, including an exploration of the human dwelling place and mindful habitus in *Building, Dwelling Thinking* and *Poetically Man Dwells*, delivered as lectures in 1951, and provides a parallel focus on poetry and language in *The Thinker as a Poet, What are Poets For?* and *Language*. The focus on the nature of language and the need for linguistic mindfulness is developed further in *On the Way to Language* (1959).⁵⁷ Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1957) reflects on the value of home, of intimate spaces and their capacity to shape language. In a selective discussion of their thought, a contextual frame is provided for Merton's own attentiveness to the interactions between words and spatial elements.

Weil on arrival in New York, was stateless like Merton, so together they shared the experience of geographical displacement. Her exodus from Europe was as a Jewish refugee, escaping the Nazi Holocaust. She attended Mass at Corpus Christi Church, where Merton had been received as a Catholic. Weil claims that having roots is one of the vital needs of the soul. In seeking to rescue from neglect a concern for geographical, spiritual and cultural roots, she claims: 'every human being is rooted in an earth-bound poetry, which when it reflects the light of divine utterance provides a connection between concrete place and cosmic belonging.'⁵⁸ She

afraid of ontology either. I suppose not that the Catholics are abandoning ontology the secular thinkers they claim to be imitating will rediscover it', p. 295. 'Bachelard's intuitions are most fruitful psychologically. In his study on houses, rooms etc., he suddenly opened up a whole set of obvious questions for me', p. 296. 'Good as he is, subtle fascinating, Bachelard does not go deep enough. The spaces and houses, the attics and garrets, the cellars and homes are those of reverie and not of meditation. Centers of intimacy for the incubation of passion and poetry. And that is all right. But it is also all wrong if there is not a deeper discussion beyond reverie and poetry. A mere space for reverie, a phenomenological solitude, a house of imagination will eventually get corrupt', Oct 3, 1967, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, p. 298.

⁵⁶ *Waiting for God* (1950) and *The Need for Roots* (1949).

⁵⁷ Originally published as *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, (Pfullingen, Verlag Günther Neske, 1959). *On the Way to Language* (NY, HarperCollins Publishers, 1971), pp.57-108.

⁵⁸ Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: La Colombe, 1963), p. 137. My translations: 'Tout être humain est enraciné ici-bas par une certaine poésie terrestre, reflet de la lumière céleste qui est son lien plus ou moins vaguement senti avec sa patrie universelle.'

claims that without this connection, ‘there is a painful uprootedness’.⁵⁹ She hence identifies the vital importance of a connection between geography, eternity and an accompanying language. Attention to the materiality of physical surroundings is equated with attention to the divine: ‘It is essential to be aware of divine presence embedded in all external matter, without any exception.’⁶⁰ This attention entails being open to also being read by whatever is contemplated, thus subverting the subject to object hierarchy where the human objectifies and adopts a stance apart from what is being observed. Instead, ‘Thought is to be suspended, so as to leave it available, empty and penetrable by the object of one’s attention.’⁶¹ The model Weil provides is the biblical acquiescence of the natural world.⁶² In summary, Weil underlines the importance of a contemplative engagement with the world, a readiness to be shaped by what is disclosed and an acknowledgement of an incarnational perspective in which place and language are divinely indwelt.

Weil’s ‘earth-bound poetry’ reflecting ‘the light of divine utterance’ suggests a language which is located and revelatory. This understanding is echoed in Heidegger’s focus on place and on language as a partnership with a shared role in the discernment of truth. The titles of Heidegger’s essays are significant in tracking the direction of his thinking. The title *Poetry, Language and Thought*, chosen by the translator into English, to encompass a selection of essays, reflects a tripartite sequence through poetry and language to thinking.⁶³ Heidegger is thus shown to echo Rahner’s understanding of the primordial quality of poetry, mentioned in Chapter One.⁶⁴ The English title, however, fails to highlight the important accompanying focus on spatial reality, evident in the essays *Poetically Man Dwells* and *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*. The second title again highlights a tripartite sequence. It begins with a focus on the shaping of a spatial construct, passes through a living within, which leads to the shaping of the thought process. The use of the present participle suggests an ongoing event, rather than a finished product. This is reiterated in the title *On the Way to Language* which pinpoints the character of

⁵⁹ Weil, p. 137. ‘Le malheur est le déracinement’. ‘Uprootedness is deep unhappiness.’

⁶⁰ Weil, p. 14. ‘Il faut sentir la réalité de la présence de Dieu à travers toutes les choses extérieures sans exception.’

⁶¹ Weil, p. 76.

⁶² Weil, p. 92. Matt: 6 :28, Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin. N.R.S.V., p. 1,183.

⁶³ The whole sequence of essays includes: *The Thinker as a Poet*, *The Origin of a Work of Art*, *What are Poets For?*, *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*., *The Thing, Language. Poetically Man Dwells*.

⁶⁴ Chapter One, ii.v.c ‘Rahner and Poetry’, pp. 39-41.

language as something journeyed towards but not necessarily reached. Any insistence on a neat concluding formula belies the dynamic power within language to be constantly reaching further.

These parallels between spatial and verbal reality are captured in Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*: 'Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home.'⁶⁵ There is an overarching suggestion that language can build a form of sanctuary through a 'poetic' way of seeing, which allows truth to emerge.

When reflecting on human interaction with place in the modern world, Heidegger sees a different dynamic holding sway. Identifying technology as a defining and deforming feature of this exchange, he interprets the process of ordering the material world into systems of information as 'calculative' or 'technological' thinking,⁶⁶ which he terms 'enframing'.⁶⁷ For Heidegger such 'enframing' fails to listen to the material world and instead confines it according to *a priori* categories. Such compartmentalisation according to Heidegger impairs the ability of the individual to experience the world in its radiant fullness: it 'blocks the shining-forth and holding-sway of truth'.⁶⁸ To counter this limitation, he echoes Weil's appeal for attention and a yielding to what is attended to by proposing meditative thinking, accompanied by a 'letting-things-be' or a yielding to the time and place, termed *Gelassenheit*.⁶⁹ For Heidegger this practice facilitates mindful dwelling.⁷⁰ To mindfully dwell is to reject imposition of personal judgement, in effect, to refuse to 'enframe' and instead, to let things be as they are, in their located

⁶⁵ Heidegger, Martin, *Letter on Humanism*, originally published as *Über den Humanismus* in 1947. Citation from James Luchte with reference to a modified version of the text in Luchte, James *Mortal Thought: Hölderlin and Philosophy*, (London, Bloomsbury, 2016) *Letter on Humanism* in Chapter 11, "Heidegger's Poetic Turn," p. 149.

<<https://luchte.wordpress.com/heideggers-letter-on-humanism-a-reading/>> James Luchte Philosophy, [accessed 02/11/2020].

⁶⁶ Martin Heidegger and William Lovitt, *Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by W. Lovitt, Later printing edition (New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1977), p. 23.

⁶⁷ Heidegger and Lovitt, p. 14.

⁶⁸ Heidegger and Lovitt, p. 28.

⁶⁹ Merton demonstrates his familiarity with the term *Gelassenheit* in *Cables to the Ace, The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 452.

⁷⁰ Kristof Oltvai, 'Merton Contra Heidegger: Toward a Phenomenology of Contemplation', p. 4,

<https://www.academia.edu/19440235/Merton_contra_Heidegger_Toward_a_Phenomenology_of_Contemplation> [accessed 26/10/2018]. Heidegger, Martin. *Discourse on Thinking*. Translated by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund, (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 50. Heidegger reflects on a series of questions concerning mindful dwelling: 'Does man still dwell calmly between heaven and earth?' 'Does a meditative spirit still reign over the land?' 'Is there still a life-giving homeland in whose ground man may stand rooted?'

presence.⁷¹ In Heidegger's words: 'the basic character of dwelling is to spare, to preserve (...) dwelling itself is always a staying with things.'⁷²

We can recall a direct parallel in the *ressourcement* prioritisation of a way of knowing which in Guardini's words refuses to unpack, tear apart, take over and rule but which rather 'sinks into a thing and its context', 'to move within, to live with'. Further refuting human dominion over the natural world, Guardini continues: 'Mastery over nature is the abstraction of our world where everything becomes concepts and formulas', and 'in truth, nature begins to relate to us only when we begin to indwell in it.'⁷³

This stance demands at once a will for greater honesty in interpreting the world coupled with a simultaneous relinquishing of interpretation. The paradoxical nature of this stance is the focus of Ron Dart in his placing of Merton in the company of Heidegger, and other kindred thinkers,⁷⁴ including Ernesto Cardenal,⁷⁵ D.J. Suzuki and the Beat poets. For Dart such a stance represents the cusp of negotiating 'the tensions of contemplative-active'. On the one hand, he identifies a contemporary context of frenzied activity, defined by the 'frantic and driven American work ethic'. On the other, he signals a 'search for a deeper and more meaningful way of knowing' which aspires towards 'a contemplative, integrated, ecological and holistic life'. For these thinkers, the limitations of conditioned ways of thinking, dominated by the 'technical,

⁷¹ Barbara Dalle Pezze, 'Heidegger on Gelassenheit', *Minerva - An Internet Journal of Philosophy*, 10 (2006), pp. 94–122. Pezze outlines how the participant in the conversation moves from 'enframing' the world to 'dwelling' mindfully within it.'

⁷² Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), *Building Dwelling Thinking* 1954, pp. 150-155. Guardini's parallel reflections outlined in Chapter One, II.iii, 'The Negotiation of Paradox and Sacramental Vision', pp. 32-33, continue by claiming that without this indwelling 'Culture then develops and, bit by bit, nature is refashioned. We create our own world, shaped by thoughts and controlled not merely by natural urges but by ends that we set to serve ourselves as intellectual and spiritual beings, an environment that is related to us and brought into being by us.' Guardini, Romano *Letters From Lake Como* (Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), p.10.

⁷³ Guardini, Romano *Letters From Lake Como* (Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), p.10.

⁷⁴ Dart, Ron, *Thomas Merton: The Contemplative Dilemma Clarion Journal of Religion, Peace and Justice Feb 26 2008*, <https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2008/02/thomas-merton-t.html>. He begins with the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux and his understanding of the need of contemplatives to be engaged with the world. Dart claims that for Bernard, 'the contemplative should not retreat from the world into an enclosed and insulated piety'. In addition, 'the contemplative way had to be seen as the foundation, root and source of the active way'. Dart thus signals that the Cistercian tradition is shaped by this tension between active engagement and contemplative withdrawal.

⁷⁵ Cardenal, after two years at Gethsemani, 1957-1959 he returned to Nicaragua and started the community of Our Lady of Solentiname in 1965. Their correspondence published in *The Courage for Truth* (110-163) highlights how 'the contemplative path can be interpreted in a variety of directions once it is fleshed out in the world of politics and activism.'

calculative and even aggressive analysis' of 'enframing', or of philosophical rationalism, are set aside in favour of a more mystical and contemplative way of knowing.⁷⁶

Heidegger suggests a model for this approach to mindful dwelling by exploring the exchange between poet and poem. Poetic activity both inscribes the surroundings and is inscribed by it. It calls for a mutual attendance upon language and the surrounding space. Language thereby takes on the character of space by becoming a sanctuary in which to dwell. In parallel, place generates words to signal its own reality. Barbara Dalle Pezze develops this model further with reference to Heidegger's *Conversation* written between 1944 and 1945. Outlining how this process unfolds, she describes how through dialogue:

the interlocutors would let thinking emerge and would no longer impose their view' (and) gradually, give up their own standpoints and, with that, their accustomed form of thinking. By observing the dialogue, in *Conversation*, it is possible to witness both the transformed nature of thinking and the transforming process. The participant moves from 'enframing' the world to 'dwelling' mindfully within it.⁷⁷

Place is hence poetically re-enchanted. It becomes a meaningful space, releasing that 'shining forth of truth'.

Given Heidegger's association of language and place, this spatial re-enchancement is accompanied by a parallel re-enchancement of language, the focus of J.S. Porter's article on Heidegger, developing from his focus on a poetic documentary of Merton.⁷⁸ Porter suggests that for Heidegger the 'enframing' of the world into *a priori* categories does not simply reduce what is named. It also devalues the function of language by clothing language itself in calculative thought. We can recall the lament of the *ressourcement* thinkers against scholastic methodology, which reduced theology to formulaic processes. In so doing, it also forestalled language in its capacity to name what is beyond rational thought, the source of Lubac's frustration concerning

⁷⁶ Dart, Ron, *Thomas Merton: The Contemplative Dilemma*, Section 4: Merton, the American Beats and Catholic Anarchists.

⁷⁷ Dalle Pezze, Barbara, 'Heidegger on Gelassenheit', *Minerva - An Internet Journal of Philosophy*, 10 (2006), pp. 94–122.

⁷⁸ Porter who is both poet and literary critic provides a study on Merton locating him among other American poets: *Thomas Merton: Hermit at the Heart of Things* (Toronto, Novalis, 2008). Most recently he has published *Superabundantly Alive: Thomas Merton's Dance with the Feminine* (Kelowna, Wood Lake, 2018), <http://spiritbookword.net/word/thomas_merton_superabundantly.shtml> [accessed 03/11/2020].

the pigeon-holing of mystery.⁷⁹ As a remedy to the diminishment of language, Porter identifies how Heidegger calls for an attendance upon language which reflects the care for the land of a farmer. Language must be ‘tended, cared for, husbanded in its own essential nature’ as if it were the ground on whose fruitfulness we relied.⁸⁰ Again we encounter an alliance between the character of language and of place.

These various aspects of Heidegger’s thought on mindful dwelling, listening to language, the shining forth of truth and a custodian role are pinpointed in a pertinent survey Porter makes of common words deployed by Heidegger. With reference to the challenge of deciphering Heidegger’s thought, Porter highlights a paradoxical simplicity in the words most frequently used. The span of Heidegger’s words reflects that tripartite focus within Merton’s poetics of language, place, and divine indwelling. ‘Path’, ‘ground’, ‘earth’, ‘homecoming’ identify a concern for the locatedness of thinking and the importance of earth-bound realities. ‘Speech’, ‘word’, ‘saying’, ‘unfolding’ signal a parallel preoccupation with language and its organic character. ‘God’, ‘darkness’ ‘withdrawn’, ‘conceal’, juxtaposed with ‘clearing’, ‘lighting’ and ‘unconcealment’ reflect the paradoxical elusiveness and brilliance of truth’s self-disclosure.⁸¹ Finally, the remaining high frequency words include ‘shepherd’, and ‘caretaker’, which underline a humble attendance upon the various elements. Mindful dwelling invites a corresponding mindfulness of language. According to Porter, Heidegger insists that ‘it is necessary to yield to the accumulated wisdom of language. The human, rather than being the master of language is its servant’. (...) ‘We are held; we are called; we are possessed; we are spoken to.’⁸² In terms of an approach to theology, these elements dismantle the role of the theologian as master of the discipline. Rather, the theologian is called upon to adopt a caretaker role in which it is necessary to tread carefully, not only for the sake of theological content. It is also to avoid trampling upon and silencing language itself.

⁷⁹ Henri de Lubac *Causes internes de l’atténuation et de la disparition du sens du Sacré*, in *Théologie dans l’histoire: II Questions disputées et résistance au nazisme* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1990), pp. 13-30. (p.23), cited by Komonchak, p. 583. See Chapter One, II.i, p.25.

⁸⁰ Porter, J.S., ‘The Re-Enchantment of the Word’, *The Poetry Ireland Review*, Autumn - Winter, 1995, No. 47 (Autumn - Winter, 1995), pp. 50-59, (p.53), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25625086>> [accessed 02/11/2020].

⁸¹ Porter, J.S., ‘The Re-Enchantment of the Word’, p. 53.

⁸² Porter, J.S., ‘The Re-Enchantment of the Word’, p. 52.

This servant role allied with Weil's focus on attention and Heidegger's call to 'stay with things' resonate with archetypal monastic practices of contemplation and an anticipatory openness. The monastic vow of obedience furthermore replicates this need to pay attention and to listen. For Merton, this stance is bolstered by an understanding of how God is experienced. The fact that experience comes indirectly, irrationally and in an uncalculated way has a direct impact on an understanding of how truth is disclosed. The experience of God's self-disclosure underlines that there are different ways to knowing than the process offered by reasoning. The created world is understood as participating in such creative disclosure. To view the world therefore as a technological resource is a form of desecration. Instead through a poetic attendance upon the world, it is necessary to allow what is seen take control and disclose itself as a correlative to the self-disclosure of God.

Exploring this stance of anticipatory readiness, Bachelard in his phenomenological study, *The Poetics of Space*, interrogates the self-disclosure of the human habitat and its corresponding shaping of language. Leaving the panorama of a war-torn world, he turns to the contrasting places which invite poetic reflection, from wide vistas to domestic space.⁸³ Like Weil and Heidegger, Bachelard tethers together the poetic word with the materiality of space. Focusing on the very naming of home, he identifies an inherent mystery within its materiality. He elucidates this further by referring to the paintings of Rouault, like Maritain, and highlighting a soul-like quality in the depiction of interior space.⁸⁴ Reflecting on re-creation of interior space by poets, he claims that in seeking to name a dwelling place, it is the naming of a primordial quality which is sought.⁸⁵ He highlights how such a quality is granted to the very terms used to delineate a life: the path taken, the crossroads lingered at, the bench sat upon.⁸⁶ Places thus fill geographical space, but they also map a life and are hence permeated by human vitality. Bachelard thus identifies the meeting of geography, its spatial character and the sense given to it, those terms defining place: location, locale, and sense of place.

⁸³ Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'Espace* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1961), p. 24.

⁸⁴ Bachelard, p. 11.

⁸⁵ Bachelard, p. 32.

⁸⁶ Bachelard, p. 30.

The primordial quality in both words and place, and the reciprocity between finding words and the materiality of the space described, leads into reflections on how language and space create a phenomenological overlapping.⁸⁷ He thus echoes the process of inscribing and being inscribed between the poet and the poem, described by Heidegger. As dwellings are built out of text, an awareness of other created textual dwelling places creates resonance within the text, allowing for texts to live within texts.⁸⁸ Hence, spatial and linguistic reality intertwine, as ‘we ‘read’ a house, a bedroom’, or are offered by a writer their box of treasures to ‘read’.⁸⁹ The invitation to step within the textual construct generates the sense of reverence associated with the hospitality of home.⁹⁰

This entanglement of language and place is for Bachelard characteristic of all human space. Defining the human as a speaking being,⁹¹ Bachelard emphasises the human inability to be in a space which is free from language: ‘Everything that is specifically human in humankind is *logos*. We cannot reflect within a zone which came before language.’⁹² Bachelard hence invests the human dwelling place with a linguistic content. Place becomes space in which words find a meaning in so far as concepts of home, of intimacy and of belonging are grounded in the concrete realities of the specific place. As the space is a place where words take meaning, so text becomes a form of home, or a means of dwelling in language. In the face of this dynamic, Bachelard insists upon a receptivity to text and to place.⁹³

⁸⁷ Bachelard, p. 85.

⁸⁸ Bachelard, p. 85.

⁸⁹ Bachelard, p. 110.

⁹⁰ Jennifer Lynn Reek, ‘From Temple to Text: Reading and Writing Sacred Spaces of Poetic Dwelling. University of Glasgow’ (University of Glasgow, 2013), p. 12. <<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/4537/1/2013reekphd.pdf>> [accessed 28/12/2019]. This process is helpfully elucidated by Jennifer Reek, which I shall explore further in Chapter Eight. Reek identifies texts which take the place of architectural sanctuaries which have ceased to feel like home. These texts invite into divine presence thus becoming textual sanctuaries which rebuild a sense of home and belonging. Like Bachelard, she identifies language and place as closely enmeshed in the shaping of perception and in the mapping of material space.

⁹¹ Bachelard, p. 80.

⁹² Bachelard, p. 7, ‘Tout ce qui est spécifiquement humain dans l’homme est logos. Nous n’arrivons pas à méditer dans une région qui serait avant le langage.’

⁹³ Bachelard identifies a form of attentiveness which is situated on the cusp between place and language wherein language is in the process of emerging from the place’s materiality. It is necessary to attend to this self-disclosure of place which finds a way into words. Bachelard, p. 10. ‘La poésie met le langage en état d’émergence. Il s’agit de passer phénoménologiquement à des images invécus (...) il s’agit de vivre l’invécú et de s’ouvrir à une ouverture de langage’. (My translation : Poetry puts language

There are several common key elements to be drawn from these three thinkers in relation to the theme of place and to Merton. Firstly, each emphasises a more contemplative way of being before the world. Weil promotes the biblical docility of the natural world as model. Heidegger argues for *gelassenheit*. Bachelard underlines the need to give attention to the qualities within place which fashion spatial understanding. Each thus identify a reciprocity between the individual and their physical surroundings. Related to this spatial attentiveness, the second key element is an attentiveness to language. This allows for the merging of the concrete with the linguistic, to create a reconfiguring of perception, which is linguistically and spatially shaped. A third common element lies in the shared signalling of a numinous quality within place, the ‘shining forth’ of Heidegger and the inherent mystery in things and space of Bachelard. Of closest resonance with Merton is the incarnational quality of Weil’s communication of spatial reality, which overlays the attending upon language and place with a corresponding attendance upon God as integral to both.

The directives for use of language suggested by their combined thinking invite a language which builds upon contemplative attention and in which transcendence and immanence meet linguistically and spatially. As language builds place and places construct language, texts will emerge which create inhabitable spaces, and which can absorb other texts within their habitation. These deductions, I suggest, are intrinsic to Merton’s poetics of place and are met on the creative canvas of Merton’s primary texts.

III.ii The Literary Canvas

Merton’s personal geography straddles Europe, specifically British and French, and the United States. The former represents his native land, his earliest experiences of home, of school and his initial university education, the latter, his later university education, and eventual life as a monk. This provides the canvas for an overview of the literary landscape of place in the mid-20th century. I have chosen primarily to extract the most salient features provided by collective

in a state of readiness for growth. It’s a question of passing phenomenologically into the un-lived images, to stay with them and then be ready to receive the language which emerges).

critique, whilst citing in particular Henry Thoreau and Flannery O'Connor for their specific contribution to Merton's sense of place.

The polarities between 'enframing' and 'dwelling', 'uprootedness' and a sense of home, described by Heidegger, Weil and Bachelard echo the binaries and contradictions which, according to Neil Corcoran pervade post-war poetry.⁹⁴ Corcoran highlights the shared deductions of the various critics contributing to the exploration of 20th century English poetry, in particular how 'being painfully on both sides or having it anxiously both ways is something the modern poem characteristically does'.⁹⁵ The impact of such contradictions on the relationship between poetry and geography leads to a sense of spatial ambiguity.

According to Neal Alexander and David Cooper, in their study on space and place in post-war poetry, such ambiguity created landscapes torn between 'emplacement and displacement'.⁹⁶ The poetry of the period, hence, 'refuses a fixed location and shifts between places',⁹⁷ which dissolve 'landscapes, into murky indeterminacies, and spaces made and unmade by modernity's alterations, accidents, and disasters'.⁹⁸ This confrontation with the perpetually emerging and receding perimeters of place generates an anxiety concerning language as a medium for expressing what is seen. As a result:

much contemporary landscape poetry from Britain and Ireland displays a self-conscious awareness of its own implication in such processes, and of the limitations of language as a medium for representing experiences of space and place.⁹⁹

When the very relationship between words and place, where 'shifting territories are the norm', make the connections between place and language less certain, there arises a preoccupation with 'the relationships between material landscapes, linguistic signifiers and poetic forms'.¹⁰⁰ In the face of instability, the meeting of place and words in poetry asks that 'we attend more closely,

⁹⁴ Neil Corcoran, *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 4.

⁹⁵ Corcoran, p. 5.

⁹⁶ Neal Alexander and David Cooper, *Poetry & Geography: Space and Place in Post-War Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 5.

⁹⁷ Alexander and Cooper, p. 5, citing Ian Davidson from *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry*, p. 31.

⁹⁸ Alexander and Cooper, p. 5 citing Falci, *Place, Space, and Landscape*, p.201.

⁹⁹ Alexander and Cooper, p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ Alexander and Cooper, p. 13.

and in a spirit of self-questioning, to the issue of how we make and interpret the worlds we inhabit'.¹⁰¹ This demands a degree of reverence to place, and how it both moulds and is moulded by the words chosen. The combined criticism of place and the post-war context highlights a focus on walking, as a channel for capturing such reciprocity, and for naming emplacement within displacement.¹⁰² The sense of passing through highlights the transience of the encounter with place. It allows for the seeing and naming of the solid materiality of place, whilst also capturing its fleeting quality.

This theme of walking is not confined to the British and Irish mid-century poetic context but is also highlighted in a survey of the sense of place within French poetry of the period, relevant to Merton as a product of French, British and American education, but also resonating strongly with his own preoccupation with walking.¹⁰³ Poet and critic, Jean-Michel Maulpoix identifies walking as a means towards encounter with place. Poets turned to the familiar, stable, and visible as a temporary haven from wartime anxiety.¹⁰⁴ Their poetry became a walking through and conversing with the physical affront of place, enabling the possibility of pondering the signals towards infinite space. In this way a designated place became the channel for illuminating vision. The poet seeks to convey the motion back and forth between concrete and symbolic, between material stability and indeterminacy, between recognition and unfamiliarity. This pendulum resolves ultimately into an imaginative projection.¹⁰⁵

It is especially in the writing of Henry Thoreau that the theme of walking reaches a paradigmatic status, his essay on walking pinpointing this very process.¹⁰⁶ Merton was absorbed

¹⁰¹ Alexander and Cooper, p. 18.

¹⁰² Alexander and Cooper, p. 11.

¹⁰³ This is explored in Chapter Four, I.i 'Pre-World War II Europe', p. 91.

¹⁰⁴ Jean Michel Maulpoix, '*La Poésie Française En 1950*' <<https://www.maulpoix.net/Habiter1950.html>> [accessed 26/12/2019] Maulpoix refers to Yves Bonnefoy (1923-), André du Bouchet (1924-), Philippe Jaccottet (1925-), Jacques Dupin (1927-) and Lorand Gaspar (1925 -).

¹⁰⁵ Jean Michel Maulpoix '*La Poésie Française En 1950*'.

¹⁰⁶ Henry David Thoreau, *The Essays of Henry David Thoreau* (Washington D.C.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), p. 117. 'I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks — who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering, which word is beautifully derived 'from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going a la Sainte Terre, to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, 'There goes a Sainte-Terrer,' a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. Some, however,

in Thoreau's work during his early years at the monastery, evident in his self-portrait as 'Heading for the woods with Thoreau in one pocket'.¹⁰⁷ In Thoreau's reflection on the word sauntering, he identifies a nexus of holiness, geography and uprootedness. Sauntering he describes as being derived both from '*Sainte Terre*', Holy Land, meaning both sacred ground and the geographical territory, and '*Sans terre*', without land, suggests landless or having no home. Every place therefore needs to be attended to with the reverence of a home. Accompanying this reflection, Thoreau also refers to the language of place as a 'tawny grammar' which partakes of the same wildness as the material world.¹⁰⁸ This awareness shared between language and geography engenders a reverence which seeks to let place speak.

The particular challenge met in interrogating the geography within which a Catholic writer operates is addressed by Flannery O'Connor in her 1957 essay, *The Fiction Writer and His Country*. Merton held O'Connor in high regard and she reinforces Merton's American context, adding a specifically Catholic rendering to the socio-cultural and literary analysis. In addition, with a vocabulary centred around nature and grace, O'Connor echoes the *ressourcement* debate with scholastic dualism.¹⁰⁹ She begins by claiming that there is an assumption that a writer's identity is dependent on knowledge of his or her region. O'Connor

would derive the word from sans terre, without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere.'

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 141. This became in fact a mocking reflection on the construct of a monk fleeing the world presented in *The Seven Storey Mountain* but demonstrates nonetheless fascination with Thoreau's work.

¹⁰⁸ Thoreau, p. 137.

¹⁰⁹ In *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, p. 159, Merton will write 'with honour' of O'Connor: 'Now Flannery is dead and I will write her name with honor, with love for the great slashing innocence of that dried-eyed irony that could keep looking at the South in the face without bleeding or even sobbing'. John P. Collins outlines the mutual regard of O'Connor and Merton in J.P. Collins, 'The Idolatry of the Marketplace: Flannery O'Connor and Thomas Merton', ITMS Annual, 2016 <<http://merton.org/ITMS/Seasonal/41/41-2Collins.pdf>>: 'Although Thomas Merton and Flannery O'Connor never met or communicated, there was a deep mutual respect for one another, as chronicled by their editor Robert Giroux. In his introduction to O'Connor's *Complete Stories*, Giroux recounts several anecdotes about the shared admiration that existed between Merton and O'Connor. In 1959 Giroux travelled south and stopped by the Abbey of Gethsemani to visit Merton. Of Merton's interest in O'Connor, Giroux wrote: 'He gave me a presentation copy of the beautifully designed private edition of Prometheus: A Meditation to take to her.' Giroux goes on to describe Merton's interest in O'Connor's peacocks, and states: 'I could not tell Merton enough about them or about Flannery and her surroundings.' After leaving the abbey Giroux visited O'Connor at her Andalusia farm in Milledgeville, Georgia. She was curious to hear about Merton and his monastic life: 'Was Merton allowed to talk to me?' Yes, without restriction. I described our walks in the woods and the monastic routine of the day: first office (Matins) at two a.m. and last office (Compline) at sunset, followed by bed.' Sally Fitzgerald, a longtime friend of O'Connor and editor of her letters, likewise spoke of the writers' mutual admiration in her Thomas Merton Memorial Lecture at Columbia University on November 13, 1981. Sally Fitzgerald, 'Rooms with a View,' Flannery O'Connor Bulletin 10 (Autumn 1981), pp. 5-22.

states: ‘To know oneself is to know one’s region’,¹¹⁰ but continues ‘and to know oneself is, above all, to know what one lacks. It is to measure oneself against Truth, and not the other way around.’¹¹¹ This dual concern, not only to name place and self but to name it in relation to ‘Truth’, demands attention to where one is placed geographically, with a corresponding attention to where one is placed on an eternal landscape. According to O’Connor, the need for this dual interrogation for the Catholic writer is to avoid the dangers of abstracting holiness, by separating out nature and grace in scholastic fashion. She considers such a separation as not simply detrimental to nature, as it empties it of divine possibility, but it compromises an understanding of grace: ‘When there is a tendency to compartmentalise the spiritual and make it resident in a certain type of life only, the sense of the supernatural is apt gradually to be lost.’¹¹² O’Connor insists that Catholic writing, to be true to itself, is called upon to interweave the material and the spiritual: ‘If the Catholic writer hopes to reveal mysteries, he will have to do it by describing truthfully what he sees from where he is.’¹¹³

The task of the Catholic writer, therefore, according to O’Connor is to attend to ‘grace as it appears in nature’,¹¹⁴ thereby reinforcing ‘our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete observable reality’.¹¹⁵ This demands engaging with unpromising material reality: ‘Writers who see by the light of the Christian faith will have (..) the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable’.¹¹⁶ For O’Connor, this focus is not simply to embrace the ‘grotesque’, but to unearth the graced truth within it,¹¹⁷ thus producing a strange geography: ‘The writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location’.¹¹⁸ Her concern for identifying divine presence in unpromising materiality echoes Maritain’s locating of the divine in the brokenness of

¹¹⁰ Flannery O’Connor, *Flannery O’Connor: Collected Works* (New York: Library of American, 1988), p. 806.

¹¹¹ O’Connor, p. 806.

¹¹² O’Connor, p. 812.

¹¹³ O’Connor, p. 811.

¹¹⁴ O’Connor, p. 809.

¹¹⁵ O’Connor, p. 811.

¹¹⁶ O’Connor, p. 805.

¹¹⁷ O’Connor, p. 808. ‘What the fiction writer will discover (..) is that he himself cannot move or mould reality in the interests of abstract truth. The writer learns (...) to be humble in the face of what-is. What-is is all he has to do with; the concrete is his medium and he will realize eventually that fiction can transcend its limitations only by staying within them.’

¹¹⁸ O’Connor, p. 848.

marginalised figures. Similarly, it reflects Merton's admiration for the achievement of Blake in exploring the chaos from which sacred space can emerge.

III.iii Latin America Catholic Voices

Following these European and North American examples, a brief consideration of Latin American theological interrogation of place will complete a survey on key mooring points of Merton's geography, and represent Merton's empathy with the Latin American context, which I shall explore further in Chapter Four. The concern for naming the divine in unpromising materiality finds direct resonance in the thinking of Cuban theologian Roberto Goizueta, which is prescient of discourse, later developed in a South American context, on 'liberation theology'. In its foundations and continuing expression, 'liberation theology' is associated with the landscapes of poorest nations, especially those of South America. It is relating to this context which leads Goizueta to insist that theology cannot be understood purely metaphorically, and therefore it is essential to acknowledge the importance of material reality:

If we take seriously the concrete particularity of human praxis and therefore the option for the poor, we must take seriously the concrete particularity of the place where theology is done. If we do this, we are left with only one conclusion, a conclusion which modern theologians and scholars have largely evaded, namely that in its fundamental sense, the locus of theology is the physical, spatial, geographical place of theological reflection.¹¹⁹

His assertion arises from the physicality of oppression: 'in a society where barriers, spatial separation, isolation and distance are chief means of exclusion and oppression, (..) theology cannot ignore the importance of physical location or space as a theological category'.¹²⁰

In *Liberation Theology*, Gustavo Gutierrez focuses on biblical tropes of land as gift, where the alien, the orphan and the widow are not oppressed.¹²¹ Exploring concepts of God's localization, Gutierrez identifies a universal and a particular location.¹²² He places Christ as the

¹¹⁹ Robert S. Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesus: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1959), p. 191.

¹²⁰ Goizueta, pp. 191–92.

¹²¹ Gutiérrez refers to Jeremiah 7:6-7. 'If you do not oppress the alien, the orphan and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place (..) then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors for ever and ever', N.R.S.V., p. 947.

¹²² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (London: SCM Press, 1974), p. 193. 'On the one hand there is a universalization of the presence of God: from being localized and linked to a particular people, it gradually

pivot between the two worlds of transcendence and immanence. This leads into the assertion: ‘Since God has become man, humanity, every man, history, is the living temple of God. The *profane*, that which is located outside the temple, no longer exists.’¹²³

Gutiérrez’s *Liberation Theology* was published after Merton’s death, but as early as 1949 Merton shared with his students a preferential option for the poor,¹²⁴ and the editor of his recently published correspondence with Ernesto Cardenal, suggests that the letters propel Merton to the forefront of the liberation movement.¹²⁵ With reference to the same publication, Poks draws attention to the shared stance of Merton with Cardenal. She claims that they both stand on the border between the colonial and imperial matrix of power and the excluded victims of such power.¹²⁶

It is especially in Merton’s open letter to the poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra that this association is most apparent. Merton associates Latin America with a readiness to engage with the concrete, the affective and intuitive. He refers to Western triumphalism which he describes as

extends to all the peoples of the earth. (Amos 9:7; Isa. 41:1-7 and the entire Book of Jonah). On the other hand, there is an internalization, or rather an integration of this presence: from dwelling places of worship, this presence is transferred to the heart of human history. (...) Christ is the point of convergence of both processes. In him, in his personal uniqueness, the particular is transcended and the universal become concrete. Henceforth this will be true in one way or another of every man’.

¹²³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (London: SCM Press, 1974), p. 194.

¹²⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends* (London: Collins Flame, 1990), p. 317. ‘I believe sometimes that God is sick of the rich people and the powerful and wise men of the world and that He is going to look elsewhere and find the underprivileged, those who are poor and have things very hard; even those who find it most difficult to avoid sin; and God is going to come down and walk among the poor people of the earth, among those who are unhappy and sinful and distressed and raise them up and make them the greatest saints and send them walking all over the universe with the steps of angels and the voices of prophets to bring his light back into the world again!’

¹²⁵ In the online promotional comments of *Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal, From the Monastery to the World* (Counterpoint Press, 2018) <<https://www.counterpointpress.com/dd-product/from-the-monastery-to-the-world/>> [accessed 26/12/2019], Jessie Sandoval interprets Merton’s work as being prescient with the work of Latin American theologians of his own time and afterward. Sandoval claims that Merton’s correspondence with Cardenal ‘propels him to the front of the movement that became known as Liberation Theology’

¹²⁶ Poks, Malgorzata J., ‘Two Continents in Dialogue’, Review of *From the Monastery to the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal*, translated and edited by Jessie Sandoval, *The Merton Seasonal* 42.4 (Winter 2017): 33-35. 1997, <<http://merton.org/ITMS/Seasonal/42/42-4PoksRevMerton.pdf>>. Poks draws attention to the shared stance of Ernesto Cardenal, a priest whose liberation theology included supporting revolutionaries who radicalisation was gospel led: ‘Situated on the border between the First and the Third World, Cardenal and Merton think from the standpoint of the excluded, identify with victims of the colonial/imperial matrix of power’. Douglas Letson develops this connection further by locating the two poet-priests on a threshold between ‘a Bonaventurian affection for nature’ and ‘a liberationist thirst for social justice’. He discloses a further basis for this closeness to Cardenal in the shared impact of Cuba outlining that for Merton it was ‘the warmth of 1940s pre-revolutionary Cuba’ whilst for Cardenal it was the ‘community-mindedness of 1970 post revolution Cuba’. Douglas R Letson, ‘Foundations for Renewal: An Analysis of the Shared Reflections of Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal’, pp. 93-106. *The Merton Annual*, 3, <<http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/3/Letson93-106.pdf>>.

‘the more cerebral and mechanistic (..) which have tended to live more and more by abstractions and to isolate themselves more and more from the natural world by rationalization’. In contrast, he sees South America as ‘mostly oppressed and exploited’. In his view, this has engendered a ‘better understanding of the human reality’ and generated ‘a spiritual outlook which is not abstract but concrete, not pragmatic but hieratic, intuitive and affective rather than rationalistic and aggressive’.¹²⁷

These Latin American voices ask theology to find a language for the locatedness of the divine, but in a way which denies the possibility of enclosure of the sacred within the temple of scholastic theological definition. All places therefore become the locus for divine disclosure. The dichotomies within place of holy and profane are dissolved through incarnational and liberational thinking.

IV

Conclusion

The common factor emerging from all three outlines of socio-cultural, literary, and theological thinking, drawn from Merton’s various geographical mooring points, is that place participates in an understanding of transcendence and is bound to the use of language. Weil stands out as most closely representing Merton, in her incarnational interpretation of spatial reality as the container of ‘earth-bound poetry’, which reflects ‘the light of divine utterance’. Heidegger and Bachelard, whilst not representing a Christian perspective nonetheless highlight the importance of the numinous. Heidegger identifies an interplay between three elements: attention to language, attention to place, and a mindfulness of an intangible element he describes as a ‘shining forth of truth’, or that self-disclosure of place. Bachelard, similarly, refers to a soul-like¹²⁸ or primordial quality,¹²⁹ sought for in the naming of the quality of place.

The theme of place in mid-century poetry identifies parallels between the perception of place and of language. The theme of emplacement within displacement at once locates and

¹²⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 380.

¹²⁸ Bachelard, p. 11.

¹²⁹ Bachelard, p. 32.

dislocates. Language in its insufficiency reflects a parallel instability and ambiguity. The priority given to walking draws a link between the two, as it enables the pondering and finding the words which illuminate vision, emerging from the materiality of the place walked through. O'Connor's Catholic reflection reiterates an incarnational symbolism in which unprepossessing materiality is the locus of divine indwelling, which partakes of the linguistic. Prophetically anticipating Gutierrez as well as the contemporaneous thinking of Goizueta, Merton's poetics reflect their emphasis on located nature of theology, the need to recognise all places as potential ground for the sacred and the necessity for theology to engage with the particular location of the most marginalised. The nexus of language, place, and sense of the divine I have identified as shaping Merton's poetics, though rooted in the *ressourcement* context, hence finds resonance with a much broader contemporaneous field.

I suggest that Merton's achievement is the translation of this paradigm into a language for theology. His narration unfolds a way of seeing which binds theological understanding to locatedness. This poetics of place identifies the verbal nature of divine indwelling in which through the Incarnation, the *Logos* as Word and word, dwells in the materiality of the world. What emerges from this perception is an intermingling of the qualities of language and of place. Place speaks and discloses itself. Language creates texts which become spaces in which to dwell. Within this mutuality, incarnational vision underlines the tetheredness of both language and place to divine indwelling. Language hence creates places of sanctuary, whilst place elicits words to name the divine. All such exchanges, I suggest, inform the character of Merton's poetics of place. In my analysis of texts, therefore, I consider both geographical mooring places and textual, and will refer to the enmeshment of the various processes of exchange.

Chapter Three narrows this wide contextual framework to a close-up on features in Merton's early life and the distinctive circumstance of monastic living which impact upon his sense of place. I shall thus complete the framework offered in Part One of this thesis from which the analysis of primary texts in Part Two will spring.

Chapter Three

Place: Setting, Subject and Companion

This chapter outlines key biographical details which have shaped Merton's experience and perspective of place, beginning with a brief sketch of the years before Merton became a Trappist, followed by an exploration of the distinctive space of Trappist monastic life. After signalling how both contribute to the nexus of theology, geography and language that together constitute Merton's dialogical perspective on place, I conclude the chapter and Part One of this thesis by delineating my assessment of Merton's communication of place in relation to secondary critique of the theme.

I

Longing for Belonging

Elements within Merton's early life generated a relationship to place manifested as a longing for belonging. As a result, the clash between 'emplacement and displacement' which defined post-World War II poetry, outlined in Chapter Two, is also a defining characteristic of his work.¹

Merton's first twenty-six years were marked by the early death of both parents, followed soon after by the death of his maternal grandparents.² During this period he lived a nomadic life,

¹ Chapter Two, III.ii: 'The Literary Canvas', p. 67, Alexander and Cooper, p. 5.

² Merton was born in Prades France in 1915 to artist parents, Owen Merton, a New Zealander of Scottish descent, and Ruth Jenkins an American of Welsh descent. Due to World War I, they moved to the United States where his mother died when he was six. He then moved to Bermuda as his father became involved with Evelyn Scott, living with her and her husband until 1925. Owing in part to his son's evident dismay at this arrangement, Owen Merton took him back to France where he attended a boarding school in Montauban, living during the summer months with the Privat family in Murat. Aged 13 his father uprooted him again taking him to England, where, within a year his father became seriously ill, never fully recovering and would die within eighteen months. During this period, Merton is at boarding school and he is entrusted to a guardian, a friend of Owen's from New Zealand, Dr Tom Izod Bennett and is also given financial independence by his maternal grandparents. This enables him to travel independently to Strasbourg, Florence, and Rome, in 1931 and to Germany in 1932, aged 16 and 17. He gained a scholarship to Clare College Cambridge and continued to travel during vacations to France and Italy. At Cambridge due to his dissolute lifestyle, the fathering a child and the university's refusal to continue his scholarship, his mother's family decide he should leave Cambridge and continue his studies at Columbia University. His grandfather died in 1936, his grandmother in 1937. In 1938 he graduated, began a master's degree and in August attended Mass at the church of Corpus Christi in New York city. Three months later he was baptised a Catholic. In 1939 he began teaching at St Bonaventure college and applied to join the Franciscans. From April to May 1940 he visited Cuba. His application to join the Franciscans was rejected, then in 1941

divided between France, England, and America. He travelled extensively around Europe on his own, thanks to financial independence granted by his maternal grandparents, who, following his one year as an undergraduate at Cambridge, insisted he complete his studies in Columbia, due to their disapproval of his life-style.³ This meant further uprooting. In 1941 Merton visited Cuba, where the experience of a warm welcome offered a marked contrast to his previous life, and although his only visit, it left an enduring stamp on his dialogue with place. Months later, at the age of twenty-six, he entered the Trappist monastery in Kentucky, taking a vow of stability which would mean the renunciation of the geographical freedom he had known for the first half of his life.

The dislocation and sense of loss derived from so many deaths in quick succession and the resultant nomadic lifestyle was further exacerbated when his brother died in action two years later. The texts concerning these early years, to be explored in Chapter Four illustrate how such dislocation is accompanied by a powerful engagement with place as a surrogate companion. The attempt to dialogue with place appears to offset his orphaned state, his solitariness and the complication of his French-American hybridity, which rendered any sense of belonging to a specific place ambiguous. Merton grafts the psychological states of uprootedness and belonging onto the places he observes. I show in my analysis how, on the one hand, such states represent two distinct and polarised worlds. On the other, as Merton rediscovers emplacement within displacement, the polarity disappears. Such understanding of place as a *quasi*-companion nurtured his acute capacity to listen to place and to dialogue with it as a means of transforming alienation. Monastic life sharpened this ability further.

II

The Monastic Space

Trappism is the most ascetic branch of Cistercian monasticism. Whilst Dominicans and Franciscans might move from place to place, those under the rule of Benedict, which include

following an Easter retreat, he entered the Trappist monastery in Kentucky, 'Our Lady of Gethsemani' taking the monastic name of Fr Louis. The Cistercian vow of stability would mean the renunciation of the geographical freedom and nomadic lifestyle which had marked his first 26 years of life.

³ Robert G. Waldron, *The Wounded Heart of Thomas Merton* (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press 2014), 2014), p. 25. Waldron gives an account of Merton's 'debauched' lifestyle when he was a student of Modern Languages at Clare College Cambridge from 1933-1934.

Cistercians, stay through their vow of stability within the geographical confines of their monastery.⁴ Trappism demands a life committed to silence, manual labour, Marian devotions, silent contemplation, the practice of sign language, and a wide reading of mystical and patristic texts, all revolving around the ‘Liturgy of the Hours’ and *Lectio Divina*.⁵ These Trappist practices together nurtured Merton’s early propensity to attend to his physical surroundings.⁶ They also encouraged a parallel attentiveness to language. The distinctive nature of this life, I suggest, generated an understanding of the linguistic nature of materiality, the material nature of language, and the divine animation of both. Accompanied by Merton’s willingness to dialogue with place, a channel thus emerged to project an incarnational vision of capitalised Word and word, taking flesh, and dwelling in the world.⁷

II.i The Vow of Stability

A familiarity and intimacy with the physical contours of the monastic enclosure is a key consequence of the vow of stability. Merton’s early propensity to dialogue with place was concentrated within the confines of the monastery. The grounds would gradually become for Merton a source of companionship and encounter with the sacred. Cistercian Francis Kline, in his work *Lovers of the Place* identifies this process:

⁴ Benedictine monastic community Abiquiu, New Mexico, ‘The Holy Rule of St Benedict: Chapter IV, The Tools of Good Works’, *Monastery of Christ in the Desert* <<https://christdesert.org/prayer/rule-of-st-benedict/chapter-4-the-tools-for-good-works/>> [accessed 06/04/2020]. ‘The workshop where we are to toil faithfully at all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community’. ‘Chapter 4’, verses 46-end, Rule 78.

⁵ *Lectio Divina* is the daily practice of reading texts recognised as having a theological component.

⁶ Benedictine monastic community Abiquiu New Mexico, ‘The Holy Rule of St Benedict: Chapter 31: ‘The Cistercian Way’’, *Monastery of Christ in the Desert* <<https://christdesert.org/prayer/rule-of-st-benedict/chapter-31-qualifications-of-the-monastery-cellarer/>> [accessed 06/04/2020]. The Rule of St Benedict encourages a reverent attention to the materials of manual labour and an unconditional valuing of place, as evident in the instruction to the cellarer: ‘Let him regard all the utensils of the monastery and its whole property as if they were the sacred vessels of the altar.’ Chapter 31: ‘The Cistercian Way’. André Louf outlines: ‘whatever it is - the soil, clay, wood, water. metal, cheese or chocolate, the monk needs this simple material to measure himself against every day’. *The Cistercian Way*, 1983, p. 115. There is further discussion of the simplicity of Cistercian spirituality in Elizabeth Rimmer, ‘The Habit of Simplicity: An Introduction to Cistercian Spirituality’, *Burnedthumb.Co.Uk/Blog/* <<https://burnedthumb.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Habcist.pdf>> [accessed 06/04/2020].

⁷ Capitalised Word refers to the beginning of John’s Gospel. See Chapter One, III.iii ‘Merton’s Directives for Theological Genre’, p. 49. Pope Benedict offers a helpful interpretation of ‘Word’. He identifies this Word as ‘the Wisdom of God incarnate; he is his eternal Word who became a mortal man’. He continues to identify how Christ becomes the book of Scripture, thus merging Christ with the character of words, ‘As a Christian author was later to affirm: ‘The whole of divine Scripture constitutes one book and this one book is Christ, it speaks of Christ and finds its fulfilment in Christ’ (cf. Ugo di San Vittore, *De arca Noe*, 2, 8). Thus in the Incarnation there is a collating of Word and words. Pope Benedict XVI, ‘John an Eyewitness’, *30 Days*, 4 January 2009 <http://www.30giorni.it/articoli_id_20537_13.htm>, [accessed 20/06/2020].

Turning the heart requires a sense of place. It roots not just the mind to a set of principles, but also the body to a piece of land. Each has an important lesson to teach the other. Spiritual doctrine remains in the head and not in the heart unless it is lived out in time in a given place.⁸

According to Kline, the series of regulations which shape monastic living are magnified, by being contained and enacted within a given space, and are therefore more readily taken to heart. The reciprocity between regulation and practice brings the written rule to life. In his early years Merton claimed that ‘in making this vow, the monk renounces the vain hope of wandering off’, which leads to the realisation that ‘it does not much matter where we are’.⁹ The challenge of the vow temporarily subdued without ever quelling restlessness, encouraged a submissiveness in Merton to the materiality and character of the place, and an openness to being shaped by it.

II.ii *Lectio Divina* and the Liturgy of the Hours

The daily liturgies and the monastic approach to *Lectio Divina* developed Merton’s association between liturgical or biblical, and physical or geographical elements. Jean Leclercq, Merton’s friend and co-*ressourcement* theologian, in his study of monastic life, underlines how this association is wrought specifically by the monastic approach to scripture as opposed to the scholastic approach.¹⁰ This process, which demanded connecting the words read with their application in the specific space and time of the monk’s life, led to a layering of the written and read words upon an attendant silence, to allow the words, in effect, to inscribe the space. This process is further enriched, according to Leclercq, by the manner of learning associated with the medieval monastic tradition in that the verbal nature of its learning and liturgies have a physical element.¹¹ In meditating on scripture, the monks were encouraged to read aloud, even if alone: ‘The words were seen visually, pronounced physically, learned by heart – physical, emotional, intellectual activity’. Hence, they were less likely to read silently or simply with the eyes,

⁸ Francis Kline, *Lovers of the Place: Monasticism Loose in the Church* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2012), p. 49.

⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, pp. 9-19.

¹⁰ Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Mentor, 1961), p. 89.

‘In the School, scripture is studied for its own sake. In the cloister, however, it is rather the reader and the benefit that he derives from Holy Scripture which are given consideration. (...) The scholastic *lectio* takes the direction of the *quaestio* and the *disputatio*. The reader puts questions to the text and then questions himself on the subject matter. The monastic *lectio* is oriented toward the *meditatio* and the *oratio*. The objective of the first is science and knowledge; of the second, wisdom and appreciation’.

¹¹ Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, p. x.

but with the lips, pronouncing what they saw, and with the ears, listening to the words pronounced, hearing what is called the ‘voices of the pages’. (..) *Lectio* (therefore) means an activity which like chant and writing, requires the participation of the whole body and the whole mind.¹²

This very physical aspect to the daily practice gave embodied form to the words and the sacred content. It was not simply an intellectual or visual memory, but ‘a muscular memory of the words pronounced, and an aural memory of the words heard.’ The process ‘inscribes, so to speak, the sacred text in the body and in the soul’ and could similarly be inscribed into the monastic locality.¹³

The scholastic approach to *Lectio Divina* was to divide the task into four stages: read, meditate, pray, contemplate. In contrast, the monastic approach demanded a focus on listening and an openness to the possibility of exchange between different elements.¹⁴ The momentum of the text created a motion back and forth not only between self and the text, but between concrete, linguistic and transcendent. This breakdown of boundaries between different entities is highlighted by Robert Inchausti. He suggests that contemplative reading dissolves the boundaries between the individual and the sacred text, as the categories which separate matter and spirit merge. Inchausti refers to Merton’s own recognition of this process as the Christian way of looking: ‘The Christian view does not make an abstract division between matter and spirit. It plunges into the existential depths of the concrete union of body and spirit, which makes up the human person’.¹⁵ By applying this way of looking to the biblical text, Inchausti claims that in the medieval monastic tradition the gospels ‘are not to be decoded or systematized metaphysically so much as experienced and reiterated in and through prayer, community, and service’.¹⁶ There is

¹² Leclercq, p. 19.

¹³ Leclercq, p. 90.

¹⁴ Thomas Keating, ‘The Classical Monastic Practice of Lectio Divina’, *Bible in Transmission*, 3 (pp. 13–14). Thomas Keating outlines the process of *lectio divina* as ‘moving from one thought to another’, ‘there are no stages, ladders or steps in *lectio divina*, but rather there are four moments along the circumference of a circle. All the moments of the circle are joined to each other in a horizontal and interrelated pattern as well as to the centre, which is the Spirit of God speaking to us through the text and in our hearts’.

https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/uploads/content/bible_in_transmission/files/2009_summer/Bit_Summer_2009_Keating.pdf. Accessed 27/12/2019.

¹⁵ Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999), 45, cited Robert Inchausti *Thinking through Thomas Merton*, p. 83.

¹⁶ Robert Inchausti, *Thinking through Thomas Merton: Contemplation for Contemporary Times* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), p. 23.

therefore a unity between the text and life. Equally, the Bible, rather than being the proof text for dogmatic religion, became like the texts of Merton's monastic forebears, a 'literary and devotional classic to be entered into'.¹⁷ The result according to Inchausti is an emphasis on experiential understanding and a way of thinking, which allows for the dynamic within a biblical text, to be layered with the social, historical and geographical horizon of the present.¹⁸ Such elements have a clear resonance with my definition of a poetics of place, this enmeshment of theological truth with language and geography.

II.iii Mystical Texts

From his earliest years as a monk, Merton's diaries reveal his immersion in a breadth of works by patristic writers, the monastic fathers and mystics, reflecting his *ressourcement* interests.¹⁹ In the editing of Merton's later lectures on the Cistercian fathers, O'Connell suggests that Merton's notes demonstrate the extent to which Merton 'read and prayed' with the classical texts of the patristics, the founders of monastic orders and mystics.²⁰ Such scrutiny would bring a close familiarity with the linguistic strategies characteristic of these source materials.

Mystical language seeks to articulate an experiential knowledge of God, centred on the sense of union between God and the human.²¹ The challenge in seeking to name the meeting of immanence and transcendence has given rise to an archetypal theme of the ineffability of such

¹⁷ Inchausti, *Thinking through Thomas Merton*, p. 120.

¹⁸ Inchausti, *Thinking through Thomas Merton*, p. 2.

¹⁹ Confining a search simply to Merton's rewriting of his early diaries as a record of his initial years in the monastery: In *The Sign of Jonas* (London: Hollis and Carter 1953), there are many references to a varied spectrum of patristic and medieval sources as well as mystics: Origen, (184-253), p.286; Gregory of Nyssa (c.340-94), p. 167; Augustine (c.354-430), pp. 251,277; Benedict (480-547), pp. 105, 232; Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), pp. 251, 264, 103; Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), p. 103; Bonaventure, (1221-1274), p. 103; Aquinas (1225-1274), pp. 251,277; Duns Scotus (1266-1308), p. 26; Ruysbroeck (1293-1381),p. 18; Tauler (1300-1361), p. 251; author of 'The Cloud of Unknowing' (c.1345-1386), p. 251; Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), p. 26; John of the Cross (1542-1591), pp. 104, 105, 239, 251; Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897), p. 108; Elizabeth of the Trinity, (1880-1906), p. 27. Immediately following on from the writing of *The Sign of Jonas*, Merton's next prose work to be published was on Bernard of Clairvaux. *The Last of the Fathers: St Bernard of Clairvaux and the Encyclical Letter, Doctor Mellifluus*, (London: Hollis and Carter,1954). This work demonstrates his close study of the founder of the Cistercian order and his *ressourcement* endeavour to open up the teachings of 'the last of the fathers', in the light of the then recent papal encyclical: 'Doctor Mellifluus Encyclical of Pope Pius XII on St Bernard of Clairvaux, The Last of the Fathers', May 24, 1953.

²⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 8 (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2016), p. viii.

²¹ Alois M Haas, 'Reading Mystical Texts', *The Way* (2001), pp. 144-52, 'The language centres on the idea of a union between the human person and God'. <https://www.theway.org.uk/back/s102Haas.pdf>, [accessed 27/12/2019].

knowledge. There is tension in seeking to name what has been experienced when language is deemed to be an insufficient tool for the purpose. In this respect, we can recognise echoes of the ambiguous relationship between words and the content they seek to reveal, which has been identified earlier in mid-century poetry on place.²² Mystical writing tackles this tension by adopting certain linguistic strategies.

One widely recognised strategy is apophatic statement, saying what is not, rather than what is.²³ Ewert Cousins' work on the language of Bonaventure suggests that the very etymology of the word mysticism points to this struggle to assert through negation.²⁴ Alois Haas points out a corresponding characteristic which apophatic expression draws in. When language is seeking to name the idea of union between the human and God, on the one hand is the need for apophatic idioms, as God is always other than what can be said. On the other, language seeks 'ways of going beyond or going out (*excessus*)'.²⁵ The result can be a plethora of words. Cousins echoing Haas outlines the paradox this represents. Despite the deemed ineffability of mystical language:

²² See Chapter Two, III.ii 'The Literary Canvas', pp.77-78. 'Much contemporary landscape poetry from Britain and Ireland displays a self-conscious awareness of its own implication in such processes, and of the limitations of language as a medium for representing experiences of space and place'. Neal Alexander and David Cooper, *Poetry & Geography: Space and Place in Post-War Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.4.

²³ Andrew Louth, 'Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology' in Chapter V of *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism* ed. by Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 137-146. Louth provides a detailed discussion of mystical linguistic strategies can be found. 'The terminology of 'apophatic' and 'cataphatic' theologies, that is, the use of negation (apophasis) and affirmation (kataphasis) in our ways of talking about God, was introduced into Christian theology by the probably early-sixth-century author Dionysius the Areopagite. It had however, a long history. Human beings have always affirmed something of God, either as a result of speculation about the divine or as an affirmation of revelation about God. (...) (Such) affirmation of the divine has always been hedged about by a sense of the mysteriousness of the divine, leading to the negating of any affirmations about God, thereby bearing testimony to the inadequacy of any human conception of God'. Ming-Yu Tseng in 'Expressing the Ineffable: Toward a Poetics of Mystical Writing', *Social Semiotics*, 12.1 (2002), 63-82 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330220130377>>, highlights the importance of negation. He identifies 'negation as a heuristic means of spiritual ascent' with reference to Eliot's 'Four Quartets', [accessed 31/03/2020].

²⁴ Cousins, Ewert, H., 'Bonaventure's Mysticism of Language', in *Mysticism and Language* ed. by Steven T. Katz, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 236-257, (p. 236). Cousins outlines its Indo-European root of *mu* which means 'imitative of inarticulate sounds' and suggests that this developed into Latin, *mutuum*, dumb or mute, and the Greek *myein*, to close the eyes or lips. Katz then traces the origins of a thesis of ineffability to the treatise of Pseudo-Dionysius, 'The Mystical Theology', written around the 5th to 6th century, claiming that the author provided a mystical ascent to God by means of the systematic negation of language of all sense impression, images, words.

²⁵ Haas, p. 144.

mystics simply have not been silent. Many have spoken without restraint, and others have written voluminously. (..) In mystical discourse, language runs riot: it leaps, it vaults, it sings. No genre of writing can rival it for complexity, subtlety and linguistic virtuosity.²⁶

Emerging from the clash between such verbal excess and apophysis is the pre-eminence of paradox. Paradox allows for the breaking up of normative thought patterns in order to reconcile apparent contradictions, such as the nearness of what is beyond, the otherness within intimacy, the fullness of seeming emptiness and the blurring of any precise boundary. Holding the tension of paradox is assumed to be part of mystical seeing.²⁷ William Harmless, in a study where Merton figures alongside various writers identified as mystics, points out how Merton ‘often resorts to paradox, even oxymoron’, in his very definition of mysticism:²⁸ ‘(It is both) a kind of spiritual vision’, and ‘not vision because it sees “without seeing” and knows “without knowing”’. The knowledge it brings is ‘too deep to be grasped in images, in words, or even in clear concepts.’²⁹

Such familiarity with negotiating paradoxes shapes awareness of how knowledge is reached. Haas suggests that such experience generates an awareness that:

wisdom is not to be attained straightforwardly and without effort; rather it requires a process of initiation leading into the necessary dispositions. (..) Only then is nondiscursive, intuitive, contemplative knowledge possible.³⁰

The implication is that knowledge is better obtained obliquely.³¹

²⁶ Cousins, Ewert, H., ‘Bonaventure’s Mysticism of Language’ pp. 238-239.

²⁷ Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 3. Michael Sells and Ming-Yu Tseng together provide a helpful discussion of mystical linguistic strategies. Sells in focusing on the ‘unsaying’ characteristic of mystical language claims that as ‘Every act of unsaying demands or presupposes a previous saying. It is the tension between the saying and the unsaying that the phrase becomes meaningful’. Yu-Tseng Ming in ‘Towards a Poetics of Mystical Writing’, refers to an ‘iconic correlation’ of parallelisms and paradox’.

²⁸ William Harmless, *Mystics* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 36. Harmless claimed that Merton preferred to use the term contemplation, as the term mysticism ‘simply carried too much baggage. It also tended to be limited to peak experiences’.

²⁹ Harmless, p. 34. Merton *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p.1.

³⁰ Haas, p. 147.

³¹ Tseng. The idea of adopting the necessary dispositions leads into the further characteristic of mystical writing, which Tseng identifies as ‘the matrix of the journey’, as the means towards accepting clashing contradictions. Harmless, also identifies this theme in Merton’s account of the firewatch passage from *The Sign of Jonas*. He suggests that Merton ‘traces his journey not only through places, but through time, moving backward, for example, as he revisits the dark novitiate and is haunted by his ‘first days in religion’’. For Merton ‘the journey up to the bell tower is the soul’s upward journey to God; the night sky, a glimpse of God’s dark infinitude’. Harmless, p. 39.

Merton's immersion in mystical texts, therefore, generated familiarity with apophatic statement, with paradox, with a language of expansiveness, underpinned by an emphasis on wisdom as only achievable through effort. There is a constant exchange between the mysterious, the material and the linguistic, between place and unplaceability, between an abundance of words and ineffability. In my analysis of primary texts, I show how Merton echoes mystical linguistic strategies, even in his pre-monastic writing, suggesting that his later engagement with mystical texts developed an already established mode of writing. Once again there are echoes of the tripartite character of a poetics of place as mystical texts negotiate the created, the uncreated, and language.

II.iv Sign Language, Silence and Marian Devotions

Further Cistercian practices which also contribute to the connectedness of different and often paradoxical entities are sign language, silence, and Marian devotions. Sign language communicates through physical gestures, hence tethering the linguistic, the material and silence. This equation is also encountered as Merton identifies silence as a springboard for verbal inspiration. He claims that the best time to write is after the night office, in the great silence between four and five thirty, when 'Whole blocks of imagery seem to crystallize (...) in the silence and the peace, and the lines almost write themselves.'³² It is as if silence, accompanied by attending to his physical surroundings releases a language to name what is disclosed.

This interplay between materiality, contemplative silence and words is also met in the central role granted to Marian devotions in the Cistercian tradition, derived from the directives of Bernard of Clairvaux.³³ Every Cistercian abbey is dedicated to Mary and the singing of the *Salve Regina*, demarcates a specific moment of every day.³⁴ The prayer draws together words invoking

³² Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 389–90. 'After two or three hours of prayer your mind is saturated in peace and the richness of the liturgy. The dawn is breaking outside the cold windows. If it is warm the birds are already beginning to sing.'

³³ 'Doctor Mellifluus (May 24, 1953) | PIUS XII' <http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_24051953_doctor-mellifluus.html> [accessed 27/12/2019] par.31. 'Let not her name leave thy lips, never suffer it to leave thy heart. And that thou mayest more surely obtain the assistance of her prayer, see that thou dost walk in her footsteps'.

³⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 151. The name of the prayer is used by Merton as marking a time of day: 'The window looks nice at *Salve*'. The Cistercians are reputed to have chanted the *Salve Regina* daily since 1218. It is attributed to several authors including Bernard of Clairvaux. Snow, R.J. <<https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/christianity/roman-catholic-and-orthodox-churches-liturgy-hymns-and-prayers/salve-regina>>, [accessed 25/05/2020]. The complete text in English is: 'Hail Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, Hail our life, our sweetness, and our hope. To thee do we cry poor banished children of

Mary: ‘Hail holy queen’, with daily experience: ‘our life, our sweetness and our hope’, and an underlining of their locatedness: ‘this vale of tears’ which is a place of ‘exile’. A bridge is thereby created between the terrestrially bound life of the monks and the mysterious intercessional power Mary is meant to represent.³⁵ The praying of the Rosary can also challenge the dichotomy between the immaterial realm of abstract ideas and the experienced world of material objects. Synthesis is evident within the very nature of the prayer of the Rosary, with the materiality of the beads, language present both in the repeated prayers, in the recall of scripture, and the signalling of mystery. An ordinary and familiar verbal routine becomes encrypted with the extraordinariness of the biblical mysteries.³⁶

This brief sketch of biographical detail, and of the distinctive space of Trappist monasticism helps signal elements which impact upon Merton’s understanding and communication of place. The spatially defined experiences of alienation and belonging, as well as the various interactions between words with silence, place, and divine truth are key players in his interpretation of place. I suggest that this applies to his writing throughout his life. Within secondary critique, there are two standpoints concerning Merton’s relationship with place, which I now outline, one identifying a clear transition, the other an essential continuity. My interpretation identifies both transition and continuity.

Eve. To thee do we send up our sighs mourning and weeping in this veil of tears. Turn then most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy towards us, and after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus. O clement, O loving, O sweet virgin Mary.’ Tradition names Bernard of Clairvaux as a possible author of the prayer, but what is known for certain is that the *Salve Regina* was used as a processional chant at Cluny by 1135. Around 1218 the Cistercians adopted it as a daily processional chant and in 1251 as an ending to Compline, <<http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/BVM/SalveRegina.html>>, [accessed 24/06/2020].

³⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 200. Merton describes this blending of worlds in a pictorial way. ‘When we stand in our boiling tunnel and shout our *Salve* at the lighted window – the monks and brothers are dissolving in this humid furnace’.

³⁶ The association of divine mystery with a female presence is explored later by Merton in his 1964 prose poem, *Hagia Sophia*. With reference to this work, Christopher Pramuk explores Merton’s awakening to the feminine in his study, *At Play in the Universe*. An extension to this symbolism is identified in Luce Irigaray’s interrogation of the Marian tradition (1991), which resonates with the *ressourcement* aspiration for an embodied theology. Irigaray highlights the corporeality of theological understanding and identifies the particular power in Marian devotions to destabilise the scholastic polarizations of nature and grace. She thus emphasises that as a model of the missing feminine dimension of the Incarnation, the symbolism within Marian devotions, pinpoints the extent to which the fertile, corporeal, and maternal aspects of the Christian story have been neglected. Marian devotions in her view, engender a rich non-dualistic multi-dimensionality as a focus for contemplative prayer. Referring to the last chapter of Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). Cited by Tina Beattie, ‘Mary: Feminist Perspectives’, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2005 <<https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/mary-feminist-perspectives>> [accessed 27/12/ 2019].

III

Merton's Communication of Place: Transition and Continuity

The common assessment of Merton's relationship to place, as explored in Chapter Two, highlights a dualistic vision evolving into a greater sense of integration.³⁷ David Cooper, in describing Merton's stance before the world, typifies this judgement in which two faces of Merton are juxtaposed, the first being a 'petulant ascetic' of 'a monolithic vision', the second a 'radical humanist'.³⁸ Other critics, to counter the underlining of two distinct periods acknowledge an essential continuity in Merton's stance towards the world. The opinion Mott expresses in his biography is representative: 'For those who see so many inconsistencies in Merton's work and so many radical breaks in his life, there is another Thomas Merton who established an amazing consistency and who pursues an unbroken continuity'.³⁹ Critics prioritising this stance map this consistency through a common theme detected throughout his life. Such themes include the child's vision of the world as a place to play in and with,⁴⁰ the journey,⁴¹ a contemplative stance,⁴² inclusive vision,⁴³ the view from the margins,⁴⁴ authenticity,⁴⁵ or most significantly in terms of the focus of this study, O'Connell's and Mott's prioritisation of place itself.⁴⁶ I suggest that these approaches are not mutually exclusive. There is both a continuity and a significant transition. The continuity is twofold. Firstly, Merton's writing style, although distinctively developed through his conversion and his life as a Trappist, displays shared characteristic features evident throughout his writing career. Secondly, Merton's understanding of place as a locus for encounter with the sacred was evident even in his pre-

³⁷ I referred to the works on Merton's poetry by Sonia Petisco and Thérèse Lentfoehr; to Robert Waldron's statement concerning narrow-minded Catholic triumphalism, transforming into a compassionate, open-minded and wise tolerance; to Alan Altany's identification of a transition from dualistic compartmentalisation of the holy and the profane, to a perspective on place, as 'the very ground for the experience of the sacred'. Chapter Two, II 'The State of Dialogue Concerning Merton and Place', pp. 62-67.

³⁸ Cooper, *The Art of Denial*, pp. 12, 45.

³⁹ Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (San Diego, California: Harcourt Brace, 1993), p. xxiv.

⁴⁰ Gardner, Fiona *The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015),

⁴¹ Anthony T. Padovano, *The Human Journey* (New York; Image Books, 1984).

⁴² William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*; Waldron, *The Wounded Heart*.

⁴³ Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

⁴⁴ Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*.

⁴⁵ Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (SPCK Publishing, 2013), p. 19.

⁴⁶ Patrick F. O'Connell, 'The Surest Home Is Pointless': A Pathless Path through Merton's Poetic Corpus', *CrossCurrents*, 58.4 (2008), 522-44 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-3881.2009.00044.x>>. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. xxiv.

Trappist years. This understanding was buried due to his perceived obligation, on becoming a monk, to sacrifice his habitual yielding to the magnetism of place and adopt instead, a stance dictated by a dualistic reading of the world. The subsequent shift in understanding, I suggest, is the resurfacing and development of a former perspective, rather than the emergence of something new.

The dualistic interpretation, furthermore, I do not attribute solely to a shifting relationship with the scholastic stance. It is evident that the adjectives chosen by critics of Merton's dualism, 'monolithic', 'narrow', 'triumphalist', resonate with descriptions of scholasticism by *ressourcement* thinkers. Such dualism, however, was not confined to the scholastic divorce of nature and grace. In Chapter One, I identified a similar division in the French adoption of the principle of *laïcité*, which insisted upon separating religion and public life.⁴⁷ Similarly, in Chapters One and Two, I referred to the views of Guardini,⁴⁸ and Heidegger,⁴⁹ on the modernist tendency to compartmentalise or 'enframe' the world. Moreover, later discourse which explores 'theologies of place', to which I give attention in Chapter Eight, identifies a readiness to prejudge place. It highlights an unanalysed polarisation of space and place, as widely current within Western culture. One example will serve here to represent this viewpoint. John Inge in *A Christian Theology of Place* claims that the notion of a sacred place became shaped by the etymology of the word *sanctum*, a space set apart, quintessentially symbolised in the isolation of convents, monasteries and in Christian architecture with a gated sanctuary, or the iconostasis of Orthodox churches.⁵⁰ Consequently, compartmentalisation was not simply a product of a scholastic mindset but was shaped by a much wider context.

With all such elements impacting upon Merton's interpretation of place, compartmentalisation is more multi-layered. It is not a simple shift from scholastic dualism to the more world-embracing vision advocated by the *ressourcement*. I suggest rather that Merton resumes his ability to mindfully 'dwell' in a Heideggerian sense, by retrieving his openness to

⁴⁷ See Chapter One, II. iii, p. 32.

⁴⁸ Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, p. 43. Chapter One, II.iii, p. 32.

⁴⁹ Heidegger and Lovitt, p. 14. Chapter Two, III.i, p. 71.

⁵⁰ John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2003), p. 27.

the self-disclosure of place.⁵¹ He recovers that readiness ‘to move within and live with’ in the words of Guardini,⁵² that biblical passivity of the lilies, recalled by Weil, or that response to place and to text which is receptive and refuses to impose itself, proposed by Bachelard.⁵³

IV

Towards Part Two

In order to track such transition and continuity in Merton’s style and perception, the following four chapters of primary text analysis balance two periods of writing. The first two chapters cover the early writing, beginning in Chapter Four with selections from the unpublished *Fitzgerald File*, (1931), *Run to the Mountain*, Merton’s journal of 1939-1941, his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, (1948) and his adaptation of his journal covering his early monastic years *The Sign of Jonas* (1946-1953).⁵⁴ Offering a poetic parallel, and analysing texts which have generally received the most lukewarm or cursory attention, Chapter Five surveys the five volumes of poetry published between 1940 and 1949: *Early Poems; Thirty Poems; Man in a Divided Sea; Figures for an Apocalypse; Tears of the Blind Lions*. The second two chapters of primary text analysis cover Merton’s mature writing of the mid-1960s, with Chapter Six exploring *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, (1963) and Chapter Seven the prose work, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, (1966), with one extract from *The Asian Journal*, (1968), Merton’s final work. Whilst selective, this span of works encompasses the whole period of Merton’s published writings thus allowing for the detection of both continuity and development.⁵⁵

⁵¹ As explored in Chapter Two, III.i ‘The Socio-cultural Canvas’, for Heidegger, ‘enframing’ evades attending to the material world. Such compartmentalisation, in his view, impairs the ability of the individual to experience the world in its radiance, for it blocks the self-disclosure of place which Heidegger identifies as ‘the shining-forth and holding-sway of truth.’

⁵² Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, p. 43.

⁵³ Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l’Espace*, p. 1. ‘Un philosophe qui a formé toute sa pensée en s’attachant aux thèmes fondamentaux de la philosophie des sciences, qui a suivi, aussi nettement qu’il a pu, l’axe du rationalisme actif, l’axe du rationalisme croissant de la science contemporaine, doit oublier son savoir, rompre avec toutes ses habitudes de recherches philosophiques s’il veut étudier les problèmes posés par l’imagination poétique.’ (My translation: A philosopher whose thought is set on the fundamental themes of philosophy, who has participated enthusiastically in the rational approach of contemporary science, has to forget everything s/he knows, break free from philosophical research if s/he wants to study the challenge posed by the poetic imagination).

⁵⁴ Although all are prose-works, my analysis will include the one poem which appears in the body of Merton’s autobiography, as it serves with the ensuing passage of prose, to provide a fuller analysis of his perspective on Cuba.

⁵⁵ I have limited my choice of poetry to publications of the 1940s and mid-1960s. From 1949 to 1957, Merton stopped writing poetry, except for one short volume in 1957, *The Strange Islands*. The 1950s, therefore, does not so readily lend itself to a

There are several further factors underpinning my selection of texts. Firstly, I seek to respond to the various aspirations of Patrick O’Connell: that ‘the poetry needs to be recognised as an integral part and not a peripheral dimension of his work’, that it ‘reinforces and extends themes and ideas found in the prose’; that it ‘provides insights on some topics available nowhere else’.⁵⁶ Hence, I do not prioritise one genre over another but rather provide a parallel survey of poetry and prose to demonstrate such complementarity. Merton’s writing, however, exists on a spectrum in which the two forms meet and merge. The prose writing often expands the limits of sentence construction, by layering up clauses, prepositions, or sequences of ‘ands’, to create the sense of ever-expanding linguistic parameters. Equally, the flow of prose may come to an abrupt halt, thus demanding the lingering of attention normally associated with poetry. In Merton’s verse, similarly, there can be a similar stretching or breaking of rules to the extent that the language can become so fragmented, the linguistic parameters of verse collapse. It is within these loose categories that I explore the prose and poetry.

A second crucial factor determining my text selection is the invitation from O’Connell to explore Merton’s spatial attentiveness to demonstrate the ‘centrality and significance’ of place in his work, and ‘to encourage readers to continue to follow (the) thread for themselves’ as ‘a key which can be of value’.⁵⁷ With this in mind, the selection of texts includes varying angles of vision, to contain the span of Merton’s geographical landscapes. The first two chapters of analysis contain geographical landscapes familiar to Merton with Chapter Four including England, France, Italy, Cuba, and the monastic enclosure at Gethsemani. Chapter Five constructs

parallel exploration of poetry and prose. Similarly, although Merton wrote two further volumes of poetry: *The Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, in 1967 and 1968, there is not an obvious parallel prose text to explore alongside these two rich and complex works. In addition, although I would argue the paradigm of a poetics of place is highly significant to these two works, given I am in part seeking to address the neglect of Merton’s poetry, these two works have in fact invited in a rich and varied critical commentary. I refer for example to a chapter in Anthony Padovano, *The Human Journey. Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1984) and various articles: Malgorzata J. Poks, ‘Glimpses of Thomas Merton’s Abiding Frenchness in The Geography of Lograire’, *Academia.Edu*, 2014, <academia.edu/19484119/Glimpses_of_Thomas_Mertons_Abiding_Frenchness_in_The_Geography_of_Lograire>; Malgorzata J. Poks, ‘“Why I Have a Wet Footprint on Top of My Mind”: The World, the Text, and the Subject in Thomas Merton’s The Geography of Lograire’, *Publisher Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin.*, *Americascapes: Americans in /and Their Diverse Landscapes*, 2013, 69–81; Paul Pearson: ‘The Geography of Lograire: Thomas Merton’s Final Prophetic Vision’, *Merton Annual*, 3 (1990) <<http://www.thomasmertonsociety.org/Poet/Pearson.pdf>>; Gail Ramshaw>, ‘The Pattern in Thomas Merton’s Cables to the Ace’, *Merton Annual*, 1 (1988) <<http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/1/Ramshaw235-246.pdf>>.

⁵⁶ Patrick F. O’Connell, ‘“The Surest Home Is Pointless”: A Pathless Path through Merton’s Poetic Corpus’, *CrossCurrents*, 58.4 (2008), pp. 522–44 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-3881.2009.00044.x>>, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁷ Patrick F. O’Connell, ‘The Surest Home’.

landscapes from this familiar territory, with Merton establishing polarisations of the monastic enclosure set against America beyond monastic walls, and medieval or war-torn Europe set against contemporary America. The polarisations gradually collapse as contemplative seeing breaks down the boundaries Merton constructs. Chapter Six, by contrast, draws in landscapes outside Merton's own geographical experience, known primarily through reading. The canvas radiates from modern cityscapes of North America to Hiroshima in Japan, frontier checkpoints in China, Auschwitz in Poland, an interior in Nicaragua, as well as 12th and 13th century homes of Averroes in Spain, Ibn Arabi in Syria and centres of learning in medieval France. Chapter Seven returns to narrower contours, spotlighting small corners of the monastery grounds, intimately known to Merton, with one corresponding close-up on Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka from Merton's journey to Asia.

The chapter headings highlight this spatial focus. Chapter Four, entitled 'Early Moorings', explores Merton's initial surprised encounters, where place becomes a source of companionship, dialogue and fresh understanding. Chapter Five entitled 'From jails of movies to a heaven of naked air' tracks the shift from places of estrangement to the space of reconciliation. Chapter Six 'Opening a Place for Beauty' signals how quietude is textually constructed out of a cataclysmic alienation. Finally, the title of Chapter Seven, 'Contain All Divided Worlds and Transcend Them in Christ' highlights Merton's insistence on the theological underpinning of the search for meaning in spaces of alienation.⁵⁸ This final title moreover underlines the incarnational bond between words, Word and material realities, which animates Merton's poetics. In this chapter, the analysis shows how language marked by fragmentation, randomness and incoherence yields to the verbal crafting of stillness, which brings integration and offers transforming possibility.

Whilst an exploration of Merton's poetics of place could be applied more widely to his work, the concern to provide textual analysis, necessarily limits the works explored. Accordingly, one further mandate for this particular selection of works is provided by Merton. In a graph drawn up in 1967, he identifies *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *The Sign of Jonas*, *Thirty Poems*, *Tears of the Blind Lions*, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, and *Conjectures of a Guilty*

⁵⁸ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 21.

Bystander as his preferred works, all receiving his greatest accolade of ‘better’ than ‘good’.⁵⁹ They serve, therefore, as sound witnesses to his most representative voice.

These four chapters of primary text analysis demonstrate how a longing for belonging that marked Merton’s early life, together with the features of monastic life outlined in this chapter, developed an innate tendency to find in place a source of companionship, of dialogue and a path towards illumination of truth. These elements constitute the poetics of place I have identified. With Merton’s poetics as a prism, I demonstrate how Merton’s prose and poetry create a distinctive form of theological expression.

⁵⁹ Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work* (London: Collins Fount, 1981), Appendix II, ‘Thomas Merton’s graph evaluating his own books’ (1967), pp. 168-169.

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PRIMARY TEXT ANALYSIS**

Chapter Four

Early Moorings

In this chapter I focus on key geographical mooring points of Merton's early writing. I begin by mapping Merton's perspective on place, before becoming a Trappist, referring to experiences in Sussex, England where he spent his school holidays, his travels as a young adult to Rome,¹ and to Cuba.² Although on becoming a Trappist, Merton would return to neither Rome nor Cuba, nor indeed any part of Europe and South America, the two experiences profoundly shaped his vision. As Rome becomes symbolic of his conversion to Catholicism and subsequent vocation to monastic life, Cuba leads to a prolific correspondence with South American writers, and the bringing of their work to an English-speaking public through multiple translations of their work. The key features of Merton's engagement with place during this period are an awareness of its power to forge fresh understanding and to become a source of dialogue and companionability.

Following this analysis of extracts concerning pre-monastic mooring points, I then explore a sequence of narrative from his adapted diaries recording early life in the monastery, which trace his relationship to the space of monastic living. I demonstrate how, on entering the monastery, Merton seems compelled to adopt a more critical and less spontaneous stance in relation to his physical surroundings, evident in the emergence of a dualistic mindset, in which the monastery represents sanctified space, pitched at an opposite pole to the world outside. Merton thus adopts a scholastic sense of the holy, in which sanctity is necessarily set apart and enclosed.³ I track the shifts through this compartmentalising stance to a position which resumes and develops his earlier interpretation of place as a source of companionship. The extracts I have chosen for analysis are from the unpublished *Fitzgerald File*, (1931), his journal of 1939-

¹ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 105-108.

² Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 282-85.

³ Chapter One, II.i 'The *Ressourcement* Lament', pp. 17-26. It was a dualistic standpoint regarding the separation of human realities from dogma, and of nature from grace, which was the target of Lubac's antagonism to scholasticism in *The Mystery of the Supernatural* and of the wider antagonism within the *ressourcement* movement. This separation would result in an understanding of the supernatural as necessarily confined and set-apart. In Merton's case, the early poetry begins in this dualism by making a rigid division between what constitutes holy space and the profane space of the world. It reflects papal encyclical image of sacred teaching encased within a 'bulwark'.

1941, *Run to the Mountain*, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, (1948) and *The Sign of Jonas* (1946-1953).⁴ My analysis demonstrates how Merton's descriptions unleash a poetics of place through the language he uses.

I

The Mooring Points of Pre-Monastic Life

I.i Pre-World War II Europe

When Merton entered the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in December 1941, it followed multiple experiences of travelling to new places alone, during which each place became a companion to his solitariness. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton recalls the magnetism of being 'the child who walked all over Sussex' and the adolescent who travelled further afield:

Ever since I was sixteen, travelling all over Europe, some of it on foot by myself always by preference alone, I have developed this terrific sense of geography, this habit of self-analysis, this knack of getting along with strangers and chance acquaintances. (...) My instinct when I have been faced by any such problem has always been to go off and walk restlessly somewhere by myself.⁵

His memory gives the same importance to walking as that found among mid-century French and British writers, referred to in Chapter Two, for whom poetry would be shaped by a walking through and conversing-with.⁶ Equally it directly echoes the importance Thoreau grants to 'sauntering'.⁷

⁴ Although all are prose-works, my analysis will include the one poem which appears in the body of Merton's autobiography, as it serves with the ensuing passage of prose, to provide a fuller analysis of his perspective on Cuba.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 65.

⁶ Chapter Two, III.ii 'The Literary Canvas', pp. 78-80.

⁷ Thoreau, p. 117.

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Michael Mott, in his biography of Merton, highlights the intensity of this engagement with place, citing an unpublished extract from *Fitzgerald File*,⁸ in which Merton, aged sixteen describes how he practised walking and looking as silently as First Nations Americans:⁹

I went back down the slope to look (..) again and take it all into my eyes, so that I would never forget it. That was because I knew that when you had seen a place once, you would never see it exactly like that again; the light would be different and the air and sky and shadows and colours would be different and living things would have grown into different shapes and many old things would have perished and disappeared while new things would have grown into their places. (..) That light and that air and that water showed to me a rightness that you recognized often afterwards in strange places: in reading a book, in hearing a song, in seeing a movement in a dance, and not the least of all in churches.¹⁰

Merton's description reflects complete concentration on the change of light as if seeking to adopt the practice of his landscape-painter father in his observation of the landscape. He seeks beyond creating a word-painting, however, by his expressed desire to 'take it all into my eyes'. It is as if he seeks to be penetrated by it, so that he and the landscape may symbiotically contain the other. By merging with the landscape, his presence within it is experienced as 'rightness', as a sense of communion is unearthed through this close attention.

Even in this early piece of writing, defining characteristics of Merton's style are evident: a predilection for long sentences alongside repetition of short phrases and words, including frequent use of the word 'and'.¹¹ Here in a sentence of sixty-six words, there is only one comma, one semi-colon and seven 'ands', with further repetitions of 'that' and 'in'. The sequence referring to a generic light, air, sky, shadows, and colours becomes more emphatically identified with 'that light and that air and that water', encountered 'in reading; in hearing; in seeing'. On the one hand, Merton sharpens the focus. On the other, he seeks to capture a sense of

⁸ *The Fitzgerald File* which is found in the Thomas Merton Collection at St. Bonaventure University contains a broad spectrum of Merton's writings during the period prior to Gethsemani. This reference was found in: Timothy Shaffer, 'A (Not So) Secret Son of Francis: Thomas Merton's Franciscan Lens for Seeing Heaven and Earth', *ITMS Merton Annual*, 21 (2008), 67–90.

⁹ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 58.

¹⁰ Mott, p. 58. From *Fitzgerald File*, p.15.

¹¹ This tendency is identified in Merton, Thomas *The Intimate Merton*, p. 15, where the editors claim: 'We deleted his too-frequent use of 'And' to begin his sentences'.

amplification and movement, as thrice repeated 'different' observes the constant change, and elements of the landscape are seen to perish, disappear, and then grow.

It is significant that Merton equates the spaces met in textual form, 'in reading', with those met through geography, 'in strange places'. He thus identifies the space-defining function of words. Also significant is the equation of rightness he sees, in his integration of different elements captured within the space shaped by a church. Merton is already gesturing towards a layered understanding of place as containing matter, language, and some suggestion of immaterial presence.

In the next extract, from his autobiography, Merton gives an account of his second journey to Rome in 1933 at the age of eighteen. In this account, place is not simply an entity to attend upon in order to see in all its detail, but it is the locus of revelation where Merton is 'jolted' into fresh understanding. Before reaching this point, Merton describes how on his way, he longs for a stopping place: 'I was tired of passing through places. I wanted to get to the term of my journey where there was some psychological possibility that I would stop in one place and remain'.¹² A sense of arrival was reached above all in the churches which invited him into their space.¹³ Once in the church of St Cosmas and St Damian, the solemn simplicity of the mosaic of Christ in the apse invited him into a vivid representation of the Incarnation:

What a thing it was to come upon the genius of an art full of spiritual vitality and earnestness and power - an art that was tremendously serious and alive and eloquent and urgent in all that it had to say. And it was without pretentiousness, without fakery, and had nothing theatrical about it. Its solemnity was made all the more astounding by its simplicity - and by the obscurity (..) and by its subservience to higher ends, architectural, liturgical and spiritual ends which I could not even begin to understand, but which I could not avoid guessing, since the nature of the mosaics themselves and their positions and everything about them proclaimed it aloud.¹⁴

Merton in attending to the concrete materiality of the painting: 'a dark blue sky, with a suggestion of fire in the small clouds beneath', finds himself confronted with an experience of place, which speaks volubly about a presence beyond its material contours: 'the God of infinite

¹² Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 105.

¹³ Merton, p. 109.

¹⁴ Merton, p. 108.

power who had yet become man (..) implicit in every line of the pictures'.¹⁵ Thus, Merton captures how intimations of divine presence are tethered to language and located materiality, as he refers to a subservience that is 'architectural, liturgical and spiritual'. This enmeshment is underlined further as Merton recognises mystery as something 'I could not begin to understand', 'proclaimed aloud' through 'the nature of the mosaics and their positions'.

There is a breathlessness in Merton's description as if he relives the bewildered intensity of how the self-disclosure of place took him by surprise. The ineffability is shot through with ambiguity when it is 'proclaimed aloud'. The breathless surprise is captured by the formal strategies he adopts to communicate the experience. Reflecting the earlier extract, there is a sixty-four word sentence, single word repetitions,¹⁶ including twelve uses of 'and', and a sequence of adjectives: serious, alive, eloquent, urgent, as if trying to introduce more and more nuance into his description to capture the vivid expansiveness of the experience. This endeavour is heightened by a sense of hyperbolic statement met in such words as genius, full of, earnestness, power, tremendously, astounding, proclaimed aloud. Conversely, his description includes apophatic statement, as he identifies 'no pretentiousness, no fakery and no theatricality' and an ineffability through which no words are uttered, yet the place 'spoke' with 'solemnity and simplicity'. All such elements echo those linguistic strategies of mystical texts of apophasis and abundance outlined in Chapter Three.¹⁷

Beyond being a locus of revelation, Merton recognises something in the nature of place which from being named 'rightness' in the first extract, becomes in this account a powerful sense of belonging. He experiences a coming together of his own reality with the reality of the place, claiming 'I loved to be in these places. I had a deep and strong conviction that I belonged there'.¹⁸ Intimations of the infinite emerge from within this sense of belonging. Merton thus underlines a theological role for paying attention to place. He does not argue for it in the manner of later theologies of place, he simply recounts his experience.¹⁹

¹⁵ Merton, p. 110.

¹⁶ Examples: 'without pretentiousness, without fakery'; 'by its simplicity, by the obscurity, by its subservience'.

¹⁷ See Chapter Three, II.iii 'Mystical Texts', pp. 91-94.

¹⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 110.

¹⁹ In Chapter Eight, I explore various 'theologies of place' by John Inge, Philip Sheldrake, George Lilburne, Sigurd Bergmann.

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As Merton's account of this experience is in his autobiography where he outlines the stages of his conversion to Catholicism and to becoming a monk, Rome has to be given symbolic importance. The value of Rome for Merton, however, steps beyond this necessary recognition. Rome represents the invitation to dialogue and companionship within a place and the opportunity of revelatory fresh understanding for the person open to dialogue with it. This recognition gave Merton that way of knowing identified by Guardini, as sinking into a thing and its context, 'to penetrate, to move within, to live with',²⁰ and find a sense of belonging or rightness, in the midst of an underlying sense of dislocation and a longing for home. It recalls the emplacement within displacement of the mid-century poets, the places of alienating chaos in Blake which become the locus of redemption and creativity, the strange geography identified by O'Connor where time and place meet eternity. This experience which invites beyond geographical fixity into a more capacious landscape is reiterated and sharpened further by Merton's journey to Cuba.

I.ii Latin America

Merton's expressed affection for certain places is especially evident in relation to the whole of Latin America. Ephrem Arcement refers to his 'empathy for and attraction to the spirit of the Latin American poets',²¹ which is identified further by Poks as a 'consonance of voices'.²² Mott projects an explanation for such affection by describing Merton's holiday in Cuba, in April 1940, as offering an experience of Catholicism, which was 'warm and natural as well as supernatural'.²³ Although I focus on prose in this chapter, Merton's account of his visit to Cuba pivots around the poem 'Song for Our Lady of Cobre',²⁴ which is one of only two poems included in Merton's autobiography, the other being his tribute to his brother.²⁵ I include this poem in my analysis as it complements the ensuing prose commentary based on its earlier

²⁰ Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, p. 43. See Chapter One, II.iii, p. 32.

²¹ Ephrem Arcement, *In the School of Prophets: The Formation of Thomas Merton's Prophetic Spirituality* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015), p. 31.

²² Małgorzata Poks, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices* (Lublin, Poland: Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2003).

²³ Mott, p. 150. See also: *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 'I think it was in that bright island that the kindness and solicitude that surrounded me wherever I turned reached their ultimate limit p. 278.

²⁴ Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 283 See also *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1980), pp. 29–30.

²⁵ 'For my brother, Reported Missing in Action, 1943', Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 404 and *The Complete Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 35–36. This poem will be explored in Chapter Five.

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rendering in *Run to the Mountain*.²⁶ Together poem and prose sketch Merton's perception of place as a key player in theological revelation. They also reveal the foundation of his ongoing engagement with Latin America as a whole, thus underlining the power of a place to become inscribed into a life.

Merton had applied to become a Franciscan and was awaiting a response. The holiday offered a period of discernment concerning the step he was intending to take. Given his experience in Rome and his subsequent conversion, he is open to reading the place he is in as a possible source of dialogue and direction. Two factors in the writing of the poem suggest a deep connection with Cuban identity. Firstly, in its title, the poem offers Merton's devotion for 'Our Lady of Cobre'; a symbol which attracts affection and veneration from Cubans across ethnicities.²⁷ Secondly, before writing the poem, Merton writes that he had been looking for signs in the ceiba trees.²⁸ The ceiba tree is similarly a powerful symbol of Cuban identity possessing mythic status in pre-Hispanic times in several parts of Latin America.²⁹ Merton's respect for the inculturation which marks religious culture in Cuba will be significant in the development of his perception of the place and his affection and respect for the ancient indigenous cultures of Latin America.³⁰

²⁶ *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation The Journal of Thomas Merton*, Volume 1: 1939-1941 (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), pp. 217–18; Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 283-285.

²⁷ Our Lady of Cobre is a black Madonna, dating from 1612. Tradition claims that the statue was found by two indigenous Cubans and an African slave. They together with the Spanish governor of the village decided to build a shrine for the statue. The decision made by the three representatives of different ethnic identities in Cuba, the African, the American and the European has made of the statue a focus of affection and devotion across the ethnic divides. Catholic Radio TV Net, *Cuba: Our Lady of Charity, Mother of the Cuban People (Segment)*, 2012 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQio86MSDz0>> [accessed 27/12/2019]. A film made by the charity 'Aid to the Church in Need'.

²⁸ 'But while I was sitting on the terrace of the hotel eating lunch, *La Caridad del Cobre* had a word to say to me. She handed me an idea for a poem which formed so easily and smoothly and spontaneously in my mind that all I had to do was finish eating and go up to my room and type it out, almost without a correction. So, the poem turned out to be what she had to say to me. It was a song for *La Caridad del Cobre*'. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 283.

²⁹ The Ceiba trees is referred to as the 'Tree of Life' in parts of Yucatan, Mexico and Guatemala by the Mayans. Early Spanish settlers were aware of the native population's reverence for the tree in the Americas. As a result, they began using ceiba trees to mark colonial urban centres. Joseph Hartman, 'The Ceiba Tree as a Multivocal Signifier: Afro-Cuban Symbolism, Political Performance, and Urban Space in the Cuban Republic', *Hemisphere: Visual Cultures of the Americas*, 4.1 (2011), 16.

³⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994), pp. 81–82. Much later he will write that the ancient traditions at the core of Latin American culture have a deep significance. The actual setting of the shrine would be significant for Merton. The association of Our Lady with copper derives from the copper mine, managed by North Americans, which was near to the shrine. The original shrine collapsed due to mining activity and a new one was built in 1927. Through this association Merton's poem draws in the physical and political history of the shrine's location.

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Although there is relatively limited engagement with Merton's early poems, this poem has attracted critical attention. Critics have tended to underline its graceful sensuality,³¹ and its play of contrasts.³² Arcement claims that the 'poem became a symbolic expression of rapport in his dialogue with Latin Americans'.³³ I would add that the poem, together with his subsequent experience in the Church of San Francisco in Havana highlights the importance of an embodied and located theology communicated via a dance in the open air:

The white girls stir their heads like trees,
The black girls go
Reflected like flamingos in the street.
The white girls sing as shrill as water,
The black girls talk as quiet as clay.

The white girls open their arms like clouds,
The black girls close their eyes like wings:

Angels bow down like bells,
Angels look up like toys,

Because the heavenly stars
Stand in a ring:
And all the pieces of the mosaic, earth,
Get up and fly away like birds.

A sequence of antitheses and parallelisms suggests a balanced and harmonious performance: black, white; open, closed; bow down, look up; quiet, shrill. There is a similarly balanced sequence of terrestrial and heavenly elements with clay, water, trees and earth, meeting stars, heavenly bells, and angels. The statue of Our Lady is doll-like. The sense of the eternal feminine and the richness of the Marian tradition meets its antithesis in the smallness of a child's world as 'angels look up like toys'.

Accompanying the antitheses are images which draw in multiple connections in naming how faith is manifest. It is present in the beauty of nature, in biblical resonance and is embodied in the graceful harmony and movement of the scene. The reference to flamingos both underlines

³¹ Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), p. 115.

³² Thérèse Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1979), p. 6.

³³ Arcement, p. 31.

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the natural beauty and vibrant colour of the scene but also geographically locates the picture in Cuba, being characteristic of the island's fauna.³⁴ The similes of clouds and wings have biblical echoes of God appearing in a cloud,³⁵ and the protection of God's wings.³⁶ The choreography outlines graceful movement and patterns of colour through which the dance becomes an expression of faith performed by the whole body, suggesting the entwining of spiritual and corporeal. The physicality of the human and specifically female presence is underlined by the close attention to the movement of heads, arms, eyes, the alternating tones of skin, and by the actions of stirring, singing, talking, opening, closing, bowing and flying. The poem is redolent of that 'warm and natural as well as supernatural' expression of faith referred to by Mott.³⁷ The poignancy of the poem arises from the certainty for Merton that the surprise encounter met in visiting a new place, would have to be relinquished, like the nomadic wandering around Europe, due to his vocation to the religious life.

It is complementarity and the synthesising of difference which defines the structure and imagery of the poem. Both black and white women create a unity, making up part of Merton's experience of people on the island. He does however divide the actions differently between black and white. The white girls are depicted as more active, as they stir their heads, open their arms and are like bells bowing down. In contrast, the black girls are passively reflected. They close their eyes 'like wings' and are emptied of their humanity becoming like toy-dolls looking up. Whilst the differences are a subtle recognition of racial categorisation, in another way, they represent Merton's analysis of surface and depth in a place. Given he is about to enter a monastery, the passivity of being reflected and emptied of self, with closed eyes, hints at monastic life. The choice he is making is to metaphorically acquire wings by in effect becoming passive, reflective of a monastic stereotype, and in prayer closing his eyes. Such a paradoxical

³⁴ The flamingo of Cuba, *Phoenicopterus ruber* is known as the American Flamingo to distinguish it from the African or Asian *Phoenicopterus roseus*.

³⁵ Psalm 97:2 'Clouds and thick darkness surround Him'; Job 22:14 'Clouds are a hiding place for Him, so that He cannot see'; 'And He walks on the vault of heaven'; Exodus 13:21-22 'The Lord was going before them in a pillar of cloud'; Revelation 14:14 'Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and sitting on the cloud was one like a son of man, having a golden crown on His head and a sharp sickle in His hand'; 1 Thessalonians 4:17 'Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air'.

³⁶ Exodus 19:4 : 'I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself'; Psalm 91:4: 'He will cover you with His pinions, And under His wings you may seek refuge': Matthew 23:37: Jesus wept over Jerusalem, crying out, 'How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling'.

³⁷ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 150.

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underlay anticipates Merton's portrayal of the figure of Wisdom, in a much later work, *Hagia Sophia*, as a female principle living in the world of matter, who draws together multiple dualisms, upturns hierarchies and succeeds in overruling 'the dream of separateness', which takes hold of his perspective on becoming a monk.³⁸ This representation of a uniquely female presence anticipates his later endeavour to articulate a complementarity of gender, unconfined to a particular race, as a counter to the overt masculinity in the dominant model of God.

After writing the poem, Merton went to the church of San Francisco in Havana. The ensuing description echoes that sense of sudden awakening he experienced in Rome, where he was 'jolted' into new understanding. The more seismic terms of a thunderclap,³⁹ is drawn directly from the raw account of the experience in his journal.⁴⁰ At the point when the congregation begins to recite the Creed, Merton layers up a thunderclap, a thunderbolt, and a flash of lightning:

something went off inside me like a thunderclap and without seeing anything or apprehending anything extraordinary through any of my sense I knew with the most absolute and unquestionable certainty that before me, between me and the altar somewhere in the centre of the church up in the air (or any other place because in no place) but directly before my eyes, (..) was at the same time God in all His essence. (..) And so the unshakeable certainty, the clear and immediate knowledge that heaven was right in front of me, struck me like a thunderbolt and went through me like a flash of lighting and seemed to lift me clean up off the earth.⁴¹

The physicality of the experience is conveyed through the visceral description, 'went through me like lightning', and by the layering up of prepositional phrases, which suggest an earnest seeking to locate the divine in the materiality of the space around him.⁴² In parallel, Merton acknowledges a place beyond locatedness: 'as well as any other place because in no place', thus highlighting the coexistence of place and unplaceability. The words heard, '*Yo creo*', I believe, project into the materiality of the space, which itself signals towards invisible horizons. Reflecting on the experience, he claims that 'the first articulate thought that came to my mind'

³⁸ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 156.

³⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 218

⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation The Journal of Thomas Merton*, Volume 1: 1939-1941 (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), pp. 217-18.

⁴¹ Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation The Journal of Thomas Merton*, Volume 1: 1939-1941 (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), pp. 217-18; Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 284.

⁴² The sequence of prepositions includes: inside me, before, between, somewhere, in the centre, up, directly before, right in front.

was ‘Heaven is right here in front of me’.⁴³ Through such descriptions, Merton repeatedly underlines a nexus of the linguistic, the spatial and the transcendent, clearly encapsulating the paradigm I have identified as Merton’s poetics of place. This experience together with the open-air worship of the poem, with no clear tethering to Christian concepts suggests a recognition of how place speaks, unearthing the sacred. Later, reflecting on the poem, he underlines its importance to him especially in so far as ‘it opened the gate and set me travelling on a certain and direct track that was to last me several years’.⁴⁴

The impact of this period in Cuba is evident in certain key developments which characterise that ‘certain and direct track’, from which arose an ongoing connection with Cuba and a magnetism towards the whole of Latin America. The first track is Merton’s engagement with the Spanish language which he claimed to be dazzled by.⁴⁵ This would be in part derived from his French-Catalan heritage,⁴⁶ and from his close reading of the Spanish of John of the Cross, but it becomes geographically rooted in South America leading Merton to lay claim to a close affinity with South American writers and their poetic voices.⁴⁷ Poks offers a detailed study of the extent of Merton’s engagement with South America, outlining his relationship with the many poets he translated.⁴⁸ Stefan Bacui, a Brazilian-Romanian poet with whom Merton corresponded,⁴⁹ highlights Merton’s role not only in translating but as the ‘most accurate

⁴³ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 285.

⁴⁴ ‘It was as far as I was concerned something new and the first real poem I had ever written, or anyway, the one I like best. It pointed the way to many other poems; it opened the gate and set me travelling on a certain and direct track that was to last me several years.’ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 283.

⁴⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 255.

⁴⁶ Prades where Merton was born is in French Catalonia also known as the Roussillon.

⁴⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 241. Letter to Stefan Bacui, 21 May 1965: ‘First of all, I would like to say to you what I have said to others: that I feel myself clearly much more in sympathy with the Latin American poets today than with those of North America. I feel that though I write in English, my idiom (poetic idiom at least) is much more that of Latin America than that of the United States’.

⁴⁸ Małgorzata Poks, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices* (Lublin, Poland: Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2003). Poks explores Merton’s interest in the continent and, particularly, his connection with the poets he translated in *Emblems of a Season of Fury*. She surveys Merton’s relationship with Jorge Carrera Andrade, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Alfonso Cortés, Ernesto Cardenal, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Nicanor Parra, and César Vallejo. Merton included translations of these poets except Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Nicanor Parra in *Emblems of a Season of Fury*. Poks makes a connection between Parra and Merton’s anti-poetry as a response to a world which has lost its bearings.

⁴⁹ Stefan Bacui, ‘Latin America and Spain in the Poetic World of Thomas Merton’, *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, 41 (1967).

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spokesperson' of their creativity.⁵⁰ Marcela Raggio perceptively suggests that this engagement was especially shaped by his 'monastic vocation for dialogue'.⁵¹ From Merton's pre-monastic dialoguing with place, however, it seems evident that dialogue for Merton would draw in many dialogue partners. This would include grappling with the language. The task of translating and learning new languages was part of an undertaking, which emphasised the importance of listening closely and participating in the speech of another land.⁵²

A second track taken from Cuba, developing from his linguistic engagement, would be the need to listen reverently to the indigenous culture within a given geography. Merton discusses events in Cuba with the poet and friend Ernesto Cardenal. He writes of his great hope that 'the United States would listen to the voice that has so long been ignored (..) a voice of the Andes and the Amazon'.⁵³ Merton's conviction that Christ had been present in the ancient cultures even before the Conquest leads into the outline of a priestly mission for Cardenal:

rather than becoming purely and simply a conventional priest, you should think in terms of this strange kind of mission, in which you will bring to the Church knowledge of these peoples and spiritualities, she has so far never understood. (..) to enter into the thought of primitive peoples (..) bringing (it) into the light of Christ where indeed it was from the start without anyone realising the fact.⁵⁴

He thus underlines again that way of seeing, which invites whole-hearted engagement with a particular context and a seeking out of connections with Christian truth.

⁵⁰ Bacui outlines that Merton would become 'for two decades one of the constant and most accurate spokespersons for this realm through a series of translations without equal in the literature of the United States, or, for that matter, in world literature'. (Stefan Bacui, 'Latin America and Spain in the Poetic World of Thomas Merton', p.20).

⁵¹ Marcela Raggio, 'Merton's Americanism: A Study of His Ideas on America in His Letters to Writers', *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, 20 (2016), 21 p. 104. Raggio also outlines that 'the number of Latin American poets he translated is larger than that of poetic translation of other languages and/or cultures, surpassed in length only by his philological translations from the Chinese, a language he did not know', p. 94.

⁵² Merton translated poetry from French, Spanish, Latin, Greek, Portuguese, see *The Collected Poems*, pp. 821-1002. He also read Italian, beginning a first year of degree studies at Cambridge in French and Italian. He read Balthasar's work in German. Roger Lipsey study on *The Art of Thomas Merton: Angelic Mistakes* outlines his efforts in exploring Chinese and Japanese calligraphies. *The Asian Journal* demonstrates how Merton sought to master a wide range of vocabulary from Pali, Sanskrit and Tibetan. With the help of Louis Massignon, he mastered a complex mystical vocabulary of Islam which is discussed in Chapter Three, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and William C. Chittick, *Merton & Sufism: The Untold Story: A Complete Compendium*, ed. by Rob Baker and Gray Henry (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999).

⁵³ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 144.

⁵⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 143.

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A third connected development is the discussion in his open letter to the poet, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, in which Merton associates South America with such willingness to prioritise the concrete, the affective and intuitive, referred to in Chapter Two.⁵⁵ Such an admission directly echoes the experience of an embodied faith at Cobre. It also signals his awareness of the American commercial exploitation of the Cuban people.⁵⁶ Among his letters to South Americans, is a request to an Ecuadorian sculptor for a statue of the Black Virgin, ‘a statue that would tell the truth about God being ‘born’ incarnate in the Indians of the Andes. Christ poor and despised among the disinherited of the earth’.⁵⁷ This emphasis on the Incarnation and a faith embodied in the poorest recalls not only his own devotion for the symbolism surrounding the black Madonna of Cobre, but also the sense of being among the oppressed and exploited. We can recall that for Goizueta and Gutiérrez, this location is the prime site of theological disclosure.⁵⁸

A further layer to this experience, due to Merton’s friendships with Cardenal, Dorothy Day and Catherine De Hoeck is his recognition of the commitment to the poor of communists. This gave Merton a more nuanced understanding of communism than was evident in the adversarial stance adopted by church authorities.⁵⁹ In parallel, however, he also held that both

⁵⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 379-380. Merton’s open letter to the poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra associates Latin America with a readiness to engage with the concrete, the affective and intuitive. He refers to Western triumphalism which he describes as ‘the more cerebral and mechanistic cultures those which have tended to live more and more by abstractions and to isolate themselves more and more from the natural world by rationalization’. In contrast, he sees South America as ‘mostly oppressed and exploited’. In his view, this has engendered a ‘better understanding of the human reality’ and generated ‘a spiritual outlook which is not abstract but concrete, not pragmatic but hieratic, intuitive and affective rather than rationalistic and aggressive’. Chapter Two, III.iii ‘Latin American Catholic Voices’, pp. 82-84.

⁵⁶ Lisa Reynolds Wolfe, ‘American Business in Cuba’, *Havana Project*, 2011

<<http://www.havanaproject.com/2011/08/american-business-in-cuba-1898-1959-a-brief-overview/>> [accessed 17/04/2019].

There was a clear imbalance against Cuba in the reciprocal commercial agreements between Cuba and the US. Cuba was in effect a form of US colony integrated into the larger North American economic system and its concomitant consumption patterns. The period of Merton’s visit, Americans owned or dominated the majority of key manufacturing plants as well as the largest chain of supermarkets, several large retail stores, and most major tourist facilities. America owned 25% of all bank deposits, 50% of the public railway system and over 90% of the telephone and power industries. This article outlines further the extent of American commercial exploitation of the island.

⁵⁷ Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life*, ed. by Lawrence S. Cunningham, The Journals of Thomas Merton, (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 177.

⁵⁸ See Chapter II, III.iii ‘Latin American Catholic Voices’, pp. 82-84.

⁵⁹ Papal encyclicals throughout the 19th century voiced a strong opposition to socialism and communism in Catholic social teaching. *Nostris et nobiscum*, 1849 *Quanta nobiscum* 1849 and *Rerum Novarum* 1891. This continued with *Divini Redemptoris* in 1937 and a in 1949 Pope Pius XII proclaimed a decree which demanded the excommunication of Communist Catholics. Pope Pius XII, ‘Decree Against Communism’, *Montfort Associacao Cultural*, 1949 <‘Decree against communism’ Monfort Associação Cultural <http://www.montfort.org.br/eng/documentos/decretos/anticomunismo/> Online, 07/04/2020 às 05:18:28h>. Ross Labrie claims Merton upheld that Marxism brought a valuable contribution to the discussion on issues of social justice and that it is significant that ‘His final talk in Thailand, hours before his death, was on ‘Marxism and Monastic Perspectives’’. (Ross

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communism and capitalism were totalitarian in that they were addicted to a dualistic ‘enframing’ of the world, into one system or another.

Finally, the over-riding impact of his time in Cuba is a constant endeavour towards the dialogue and sense of wholeness and wholesomeness he encountered there. The island experience keeps reappearing in his work and is characterised by carefreeness and affection.⁶⁰ The flamingos of the poem reappear in his insistence on having the walls of the room where he was master of scholastics painted flamingo pink and it was called ‘The Flamingo Room’.⁶¹ In a prose passage from *Conjectures* to be explored in Chapter Seven, a calendar picture of flamingos suggests eucharistic presence.⁶² An affection for his fellow monks is illustrated when he describes them as ‘flame-feathered birds’, shouting ‘their litany in the savage tree’.⁶³

The trajectory of Merton’s subsequent thinking on multiple themes: social justice, poetry, incarnational vision, the character of a given language, the impact of colours, and the role of the Church in the world, demonstrates the extent to which, in Mott’s words and in terms of Cuba, ‘it would be hard to exaggerate the importance of place for Thomas Merton’.⁶⁴ From a single week’s visit, his deep entering into the Cuban identity engendered a profound attachment. Open to dialoguing with place, he not only saw deeply into its character, but would then excavate that vision for others in his subsequent writings.

Labrie, ‘Thomas Merton on Marx and Marxism’, *The Merton*, 35.4 (2010), 12, p. 6). This was later published. (Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New Directions Publishing, 1975), pp. 326-343) It clearly demonstrates Merton’s ongoing dialogue. Merton’s experience of the Cuban response to faith eroded the hostility that Western Christians in the middle of the twentieth century exhibited toward Marxism. His encounter with Cuba thus led him to a deep engagement with the struggles for justice in the face of aggression and oppression by Cold War tactics in countries of South America.

⁶⁰ Chapter Five, II ‘The Poems’, II.i *Early Poems*, pp. 138-146. I refer to *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 5 and 9.

⁶¹ Matt Torpey, a Cistercian to whom Merton was spiritual director recalls ‘The Flamingo Room’. Elizabeth Eisenstadt Evans, ‘Thomas Merton Had “a Most Lively Relationship with God”’, *National Catholic Reporter*, 31 January 2015 <<https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/thomas-merton-had-most-lively-relationship-god-fellow-monk-says>>.

⁶² Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 346.

⁶³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 74.

⁶⁴ Mott, p. 205. The final page of *The Seven Storey Mountain* lists the stations of the journey which had brought him to Gethsemani.

II

The Mooring Point of 'Gethsemani'

By becoming a Trappist and taking the vow of stability, Merton would have to renounce the cherished nomadic wanderings of his young adulthood.⁶⁵ Monastic practices and the close daily reading of mystical texts, subsequently inscribe Merton's perception of place, his use of language and his theological understanding. From a position where, as his earliest writings demonstrate, he was characteristically sensitive to the self-disclosure of place and saw channels into dialogue with his surroundings, monastic life and mystical reading would develop a sharpened sense of the enmeshment of location, divine presence and language. Initially Merton adopted or inadvertently absorbed a dualist vision, leading him to understand sacred space as necessarily set apart. This stance reflects variously the scholastic separation of nature and grace, the technological mindset identified by Heidegger, an archetypal understanding of what constitutes a holy place and the projections of secularism, in which what is religious is necessarily set apart from public life.

When Merton began to re-work the journals of 1946 to 1952, which are published as *The Sign of Jonas*, he had been a monk for five years at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. His characteristic spontaneity towards the suggestiveness of his physical surroundings is overlaid with nervousness, shaped by a newfound need to compartmentalise the holy. In the Church of San Francisco in Havana, Merton stood within a text as well as within a place, identifying the mutual interaction between words and place and their shared role in signalling divine immanence and transcendence. Similarly, as the Byzantine mosaics signalled towards the Christ of the Incarnation, so his imaginative projection of a dance in Cuba generated the sense of an embodied spirituality.

In contrast, during his early years of monastic living, Merton singles out the words of liturgy and spiritual reading and confines them to a very specific place, set apart from the materiality of the natural world. This divorce is a source of tension in the presentation of his early years in the monastery, being evident in admissions of fastidiousness and self-exhortation

⁶⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton*, p. 65. The 'travelling all over Europe' that chance to indulge his avowed 'terrific sense of geography', 'to go off and walk restlessly', the 'knack of getting along with strangers and chance acquaintances'.

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to prioritise that which is deemed most spiritual. It is only on his eventual intimation that such divorce could be a misnaming of experience, that Merton returns to a more spontaneous openness to the disclosure of place.

In the prologue to *The Sign of Jonas*, Merton describes his location as an ‘average Trappist monastery’ which is in ‘a quiet, out-of-the-way place’.⁶⁶ Within the monastic enclosure, however, there is a hierarchical underpinning to the place, with the church and in particular the sanctuary, representing the pinnacle of sanctity.⁶⁷ Merton shifts between a geographical focus and a symbolic reality, describing both the climate of Kentucky and its association with a biblical garden.⁶⁸ At this point, he perceives the geographical and the symbolic as distinct. He claims for example, ‘It did not occur to me to pray while I was writing,’⁶⁹ thus underlining a need to separate the specifically holy task from other activity. A similar fastidiousness is evident in his assertion: ‘What I wanted to say was I don’t think I like to walk in the fields with clothes smelling of incense’.⁷⁰ It is as if he perceives a clash in allowing the incense to be adulterated by the natural environment. He underlines his distance as a monk from the lay person: ‘I do not believe in myself as a layman at all. I was never definitely meant to be one’.⁷¹ He does continue to yield to the pleasure of naming his location: ‘I am sitting on a pile of lumber by the ruins of the old horsebarn. (...) There is a beautiful blue haze in the sky beyond the enclosure wall, eastward and over the brow of the hill. There is going to be a new garden there’, but he then reigns himself in, stifling his delight in describing his location with ‘I guess I will stop and read Origen’.⁷² The habitual desire to attend to the character of his surroundings stands at odds with such self-exhortation. He associates praying, incense, his monk’s cowl, and Origen with holiness, whereas the love of his surroundings is separate. Hence, although recognising that he dwells both in the geographical location of Kentucky and in the landscape of a biblical text, it is

⁶⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, pp. 1–2.

⁶⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, ‘The most important part of Gethsemani is the Monastic Church’, p. 4. ‘A young priest’s turn in the sanctuary is the hinge on which a whole season of his life will turn’, p. 5.

⁶⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 4. ‘Where does all this take place? ‘In a valley in Kentucky which is very hot in the summer and sometimes cold in the winter’, yet it is a place closely associated with a biblical garden: ‘Our monastery was not named in vain for the Garden of the Agony’.

⁶⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 13.

⁷⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, pp. 238–39.

⁷¹ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 26.

⁷² Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 286, March 21, Feast of St Benedict.

experienced as a dichotomy, as his observations separate out the material and functional from the spiritual.

Gradually through the course of the journal, however, it seems that Merton cannot forget his habitual companionship with place. He begins to reveal his attentiveness to details and to demonstrate knowledge acquired through close observation of the natural world, by naming many types of birds: bobwhite,⁷³ catbird,⁷⁴ hawk,⁷⁵ cardinal,⁷⁶ and multiple varieties of trees: cedar,⁷⁷ walnut,⁷⁸ locust tree,⁷⁹ dogwood,⁸⁰ sycamores and willows,⁸¹ loblolly pine, yellow poplar and short leaf pine.⁸² He also regularly comments on the weather and the gradation of light over the surrounding hills.⁸³ As the descriptions multiply, different entities begin to interweave. Landscape and the language of liturgy and sacred texts begin to be juxtaposed: ‘Through the window, the sun from a blue Kentucky sky pours onto the tomes of codices, big quartos and little duodecimos’.⁸⁴ The saying of worded prayers is equated with sunbathing: ‘Saying the *pater noster* is like swimming in the heart of the sun’.⁸⁵ At other times *Lectio Divina* plants a sense of newness which seems to spill over into nature:

By the reading of Scripture, I am so renewed that all nature seems renewed around me and with me. The sky seems to be a pure, a cooler blue, the trees a deeper green, light is

⁷³ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 55.

⁷⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, pp. 64 and 99.

⁷⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 103.

⁷⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 105.

⁷⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 60.

⁷⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 105.

⁷⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 47.

⁸⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 42.

⁸¹ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 300.

⁸² Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 334.

⁸³ A few examples: ‘Grey outside and snow falls lightly (..) all the days have been dark days so far’, p. 19; ‘Yesterday was a grey, muggy day and we were sweating in our winter robes, but this morning snow began to fall. (..) The snow has stopped. Now there is a bright sky full of clouds, chased by a wind that lashes the building and sounds cold. I have not been out in it yet’, p. 30; ‘The sun is bright. Catbirds sing with crazy versatility above my head in the tree. Fasting is easy in nice weather’, p. 48; ‘The sky is grey. The birds sing. Far away a bobwhite exults briefly in the fields where our wheat crop is rotting’, p. 55.

⁸⁴ Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 143. ‘Through the window and you see nothing but a little square of blue Kentucky sky and the sun streams in on the bindings of the codices and the big quartos and the little duodecimos and you are steeped in the presence of God and they were reading St Augustine in the refectory’.

⁸⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 194.

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sharper on the outlines of the forest and the hills and the whole world is charged with the glory of God and I feel fire and music in the earth under my feet.⁸⁶

This merging of words and nature is reiterated as the weather provides a counterpoint to his writing: ‘Yesterday with hailstones hitting the window like a war, I finished the pamphlet on contemplation’.⁸⁷ It is in *The Sign of Jonas* more than any text that Merton identifies the fusion of matter and words in what he sees:

I remember the misty afternoon (late October) when I was out in the woods behind Nally’s, walking uphill in the bare washed-out place where the oak trees were cut down and the stumps and roots are black in the wreckage of shale. I read St John’s poem over and over and tried to get it reign into the marrow of my bones.⁸⁸

With echoes of the Epistle to the Hebrews in which the word is ‘living and active, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow’,⁸⁹ Merton underlines the sense of a geography tethered to the dynamic of biblical and mystical texts. Descriptions in which landscape brings forth utterance become increasingly frequent:

And now my whole being breathes the wind which blows through the belfry, and my hand is on the door through which I see the heavens. Now the huge chorus of living beings rises up out of the world beneath my feet: life singing in the watercourses, throbbing in the creeks and the fields and the trees, choirs of millions and millions of jumping and flying and creeping things. And far above me the cool sky opens upon the frozen distance of the stars.⁹⁰

The characteristic sequence of ‘ands’ even to start a sentence, suggests an expansive and dynamic piling up of energy, which is reinforced by the adjectives of whole, huge, frozen, whilst the verbs imply energetic organic movement: breathes; blows; rises up; singing; throbbing; jumping; flying; creeping; opens. In contrast the stillness and relative smallness of his hand on the door draws the cosmic landscape into close proximity. This sense of a brimming over enthusiasm to name what he sees is also evident in the doubling of adjectives: ‘dim full moon;’

⁸⁶ Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 211.

⁸⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 97.

⁸⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 238.

⁸⁹ Hebrews 4:12, N.R.S.V., p. 1,423.

⁹⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 352.

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‘bare brown woods;’⁹¹ ‘low grey cloud,’ ‘jagged bloody wound’.⁹² Such strategies reflect Haas’s identification, mentioned in Chapter Three of mystical texts finding ‘ways of going beyond or going out (*excessus*)’.⁹³

In the face of this dynamism and the fusing of text and nature, corners of the landscape and his presence within it become etched with words:

I am going through the *Spiritual Canticle* again in Spanish out behind the horsebarn in a little corner behind the cedars where I can sit among the blackberry bushes out of the wind. (..) I feel like learning snatches of Saint John’s Spanish by heart – just snatches. It is inviting and easy. Phrases cling to you without your making half an effort to grasp them.⁹⁴

Through a sequence of prepositions, he seeks to precisely locate the experience.⁹⁵ The words snatch, cling and grasp conjure up a dynamic energy as language invades the material landscape, which itself reciprocally injects a material power into the words. Prayer gradually seems to need the landscape as an enriching and necessary adjunct, as the colours of grey, blue and red provide a background to his praying of the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary.⁹⁶ The sorrow buried in the landscape appears as ‘the edge of the dead vineyard’, with the resonance of ‘I am the vine, you are the branches’,⁹⁷ and reflecting the Passion of Good Friday. The wind blows his Trappist cowl onto the barbed wire to be torn. The image poignantly evokes the tone of Good Friday, the day holding the entire Sorrowful Mysteries, captured in the vivid materiality of white cloth on barbed wire.⁹⁸ It makes vividly present the interaction between prayer and life, as the challenge within the ascetic life of the Trappist monk is located within the biblical ‘Sorrowful Mysteries’.

⁹¹ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, pp. 336 – 337.

⁹² Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 239.

⁹³ Alois M Haas, ‘Reading Mystical Texts’, *The Way* (2001), 144–52 (p. 144.) ‘The language centres on the idea of a union between the human person and God’.

⁹⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 239.

⁹⁵ The sequence of prepositions includes out behind; in a little corner; behind; among; out of.

⁹⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 239. The Sorrowful Mysteries are ‘the agony in the garden’, ‘the scourging at the pillar’, ‘the crowning with thorns’, ‘the carrying of the cross’, ‘the crucifixion’.

⁹⁷ John XV:5, N.R.S.V., p. 1,300.

⁹⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 239.

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From a separating out of the material world, to this merging of the natural and supernatural, Merton finds a sense of homecoming: 'I feel as though I had never been anywhere in the world except Gethsemani (..) I love Gethsemani'.⁹⁹ It is a more effusive development of his sense of rightness in the landscape in Sussex, or the sense of belonging in Rome. This leads into an understanding of place as divine gift whether a place of communion or of struggle:

This is the land where You have given me roots in eternity, O God of heaven and earth. this is the burning promised land, the house of God, the gate of heaven, the place of peace, the place of silence, the place of wrestling with the angel.¹⁰⁰

Merton then advocates a necessary acknowledgement of the connection between divine mandate and a dwelling place: 'We do not realize our own setting as we ought to: it is important to know where you are put on the face of the earth'.¹⁰¹ Merton's conviction of a divine interference in man's very location is especially evident in his description of being night-watchman in the abbey. The boundaries of history, civilisation and geology merge with cosmic space in which sacred utterance is perceived as being embedded in stone:

The most poignant thing about the fire watch is that you go through Gethsemani not only in length and height, but also in depth. You hit strange caverns in the monastery's history, layers set down by the years, geological strata: you feel like an archaeologist suddenly unearthing ancient civilizations. (..)The meanings are hidden in the walls. They mumble in the floor under the watchman's rubber feet.¹⁰²

Mott suggests that in this description Merton voices 'praise for and loyalty to a place'.¹⁰³ Labrie outlines how in Merton discourse the passage figures as 'amongst the most powerful and eloquent' in which he presents that monastery 'like a bulwark against the world.'¹⁰⁴ I suggest that the text establishes much more than a sense of belonging, protection or loyalty and I question the term 'bulwark'. Merton's location becomes the ground of encounter with the sacred, not only in an incarnational sense, but as biblical landscape merges with the truth of ancient civilisations, he

⁹⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 335.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 337.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, pp. 197 – 198.

¹⁰² Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, pp. 346–47.

¹⁰³ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 267.

¹⁰⁴ Ross Labrie, 'The Unanswered Question in Thomas Merton's 'Fire Watch'', *Christianity and Literature*, 52.4 (2003), pp. 557–568, (p. 558.).

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recognises a syncretic truth which stretches beyond a specifically Christian foundation. This echoes Merton's own acknowledgement of the mythic quality of the ceiba trees in Cuba and the presence of Christ in the ancient pan-American culture. The sense of meaning hidden in the geological strata, in the walls and mumbling in the floor suggests the inherent animation of materiality by divine presence and language. It echoes incarnational reality and projects an understanding of the biblical creation myth as connected with a wider more pluralistic interpretation, albeit with a foundational Christian underpinning. The words 'in length, in height but also in depth', echo St Paul's letter to the Ephesians.¹⁰⁵ Rather than an inanimate man-made 'bulwark', material elements have numinosity buried within.

It is in this respect that Merton's perception of place can be translated into mystical understanding, which William Harmless, in his work on mystics across religious traditions, defines as 'seeing this world in a God-given light'. Harmless interprets this passage by Merton as a stepping into mystical vision:

For Merton, the journey to God is a journey through an ordinary, everyday landscape, but changed somehow, charged with the presence of God. It is also a journey that offers no easy answers. It is a journey through darkness. The mystic, Merton implies, is to be a watchman, to alert us to the fires, to the dangers in our world, helping us see things we do not see because we are consumed by sleep.(..) The mystic as fire watcher has another function: to help us recover our night vision, to see the beauty of our God-charged world.¹⁰⁶

In Merton's perception, the created and uncreated merge as the world meets the God-given light, but there is a third element. The centrality of language within that numinous materiality is primordial to his perception.

This power of language is especially evident in his description of the feast of Pentecost:

The mystery of speech and silence is resolved in the Acts of the Apostles. Pentecost is the solution (..) The Acts of the Apostles is a book full of speech. It begins with tongues of fire. The apostles and disciples come downstairs and tumble into the street like an avalanche, talking in every language and the world thinks they are drunk but before the sun has set they have baptized three thousand souls out of Babel into the One Body of

¹⁰⁵ Ephesians 3:18, N.R.S.V., p. 1,394.

¹⁰⁶ Harmless, p. 39.

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Christ. At Pentecost we sing of how they spoke. The antiphon *loquebantur* even now displays its sunlight cadences in my heart.¹⁰⁷

The description begins in a measured way in blunt simple sentences, their directness seeking to punctuate the weight of the content being communicated. The astonishing blending of a location on ‘the street’ with the sacred text, the liturgical feast, and the extraordinary reality of sacramental exchange is related through a long sentence with only one comma, suggesting an unstoppable surge of movement and the intoxication with language. It happens in place and in time ‘before the sun has set’, but in drawing together Babel (between 3,500 and 2,400 BC)¹⁰⁸ with Pentecost (c. 33AD) and the now, ‘at Pentecost we sing’, there is a conflating of time, place, with eternity and infinity. Once again, Merton’s description of an encounter with place suggests seismic movement. There is fire and an avalanche. The sense of overflowing abundance is met again in the ‘book full of speech’ and in the tumbling, being drunk, the enormity of 3,000 souls encapsulated in the *Loquebantur*. This prayer refers to a sequential response after the second reading at Matins for the feast of Pentecost, based on Acts 2:4.¹⁰⁹ The passage closes as he describes the words and melody as if etched into his being. Mystery is voiced and is materially manifest. Scripture takes on the elemental form of the material world. Merton has arrived back at the realisation in Cuba that ‘Heaven is right here in front of me’.¹¹⁰

The sequence of narrative from *The Sign of Jonas* shows how an interplay between language, materiality and transcendent reality becomes as if an article of faith. Language names the materiality bathed in a God-given light. Equally, materiality embodies the words of scripture. Furthermore, the understanding of scripture as divine revelation, invests words with divine presence. The three elements are caught up in a constant and reciprocal exchange.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, pp. 292-293.

¹⁰⁸ Paul H Seely, ‘The Date of the Tower of Babel and Some Theological Implications’, <https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/OTeSources/01-Genesis/Text/Articles-Books/Seely_Babel_WTJ.pdf>, Westminster Theological Journal 63 (2001) pp. 15-38, (p. 25), [accessed 24/06/2020].

¹⁰⁹ *Loquebantur* refers to Acts 2:1-11 and the mystery recounted of the Apostles speaking in several languages or being understood by different language speakers simultaneously. Verse 4: ‘All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability’. N.R.S.V. p. 1,309. An antiphon to these words is sung at matins on the feast of Pentecost. The translation of the Latin is ‘they were speaking’.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 285.

III

Conclusion

In this chapter I have illustrated how during Merton's pre-Trappist years, there was a distinctive quality to his engagement with place, characterised by seeing the location in which he found himself as a source of companionship and dialogue. On becoming a Trappist, this was overlaid with the acquisition of dualistic vision, in which his sense of the sacred had to be confined and set apart. Monastic practices and the influence of mystical texts cut through this compartmentalisation and created a layered complexity. Thus, Merton's theological understanding became marked by a spatial poetics in which language and place interweave and together signal the transcendent. Through such acknowledgement, Merton demonstrates how he relinquished 'enframing' in order to 'dwell' in a universally sacred geography. Towards the end of his journal, Merton claimed that the man who wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain* in which holiness was cordoned off, standing in judgement on the world, was now dead. He corrected the French proof and it felt alien.¹¹¹

Merton's alienation is etched much more deeply in the five volumes of poetry which he wrote in parallel. His steps towards contemplative unity are more turbulent and marked by a sense of desolation. Resonant with the confined location of John of the Cross in his *Spiritual Canticle*, a sense of anguish is evident from the start as he anticipates with foreboding the imprisonment monastic life will bring. As he moves into the reality of living within walls, any sense of consonance with his location is overlaid by dark bewilderment. The poetry reflects a sense of cataclysm in his loss of bearings and his confrontation with the pain of his past. It will take five volumes of poetry written over nine years, 1940-1949, to enable Merton to step fully into the tension of paradox and allow a sense of beauty to emerge in a seeming wilderness. This distinction between the mapping of place in the autobiography and the journals, with that provided in the early poetry, demonstrates the claim made by O'Connell, that the poetry should not be side-lined as it offers insights available nowhere else.¹¹² Chapter Five explores this poetic rendering of the same period.

¹¹¹ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 320.

¹¹² Patrick F. O'Connell, "The Surest Home Is Pointless".

Chapter Five

From Jails of Movies to a Heaven of Naked Air:

The Poems of the 1940s

This chapter focuses on the five volumes of poetry written between 1940 and 1949, when Merton's perspective on place orientates between dualism and a greater sense of integration. The poems illustrate the struggle contained in these respective standpoints as Merton plays with the question: how is it possible to find a sense of belonging in a world which fills with consternation and not be complicit in its destructive processes? The titles relay the perplexity: *Man in a Divided Sea* suggests the impasse the question provokes, through the impossibility of reaching a promised land; *Figures for an Apocalypse* suggest a bewildering sense of cataclysm and impending destruction; *Tears of the Blinds Lions*, citing Leon Bloy,¹ underlines the struggle to speak of God, but also the loss of an Edenic, majestic and primeval wildness. Titles and themes relay the polarising which emerges from the question, with hymns, saints, and medieval monastic landscapes of Rievaulx and Clairvaux, sharing the canvas with soldiers, airmen, poets, and philosophers set against the urbanscapes of New York, Harlem and Miami.

Merton negotiates options. One possibility is a rigid polarisation of sacred and profane and to adopt a position at a distance from worldly contamination. Another is to undo the polarisation, but maintain distance through contemplative practice, understood only as the preserve of a place shielded from the world. A third is to yield to the dismantling of divisions generated by contemplative processes, thus creating an interwoven complexity in which concepts of sacred and profane stand enmeshed. It is this third trajectory which in the course of the decade gradually becomes the preferred option, providing the means of confronting what Merton names the 'jails of movies'² and transforming them into 'a heaven of naked air'.³

¹ As an epigraph to the fifth volume, Merton cites Leon Bloy: 'When those who love God try to talk about Him, their words are blind lions looking for springs in the desert', Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 196.

² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 20.

³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 220.

I

Critical Response to the Poetry

We can recall from Chapter Two how the theme of place is identified as a key point of access to Merton's entire poetic corpus by O'Connell, Pearson and Poks.⁴ O'Connell probes further the function of place and provides an intricate summary of Merton's 'extraordinary attentiveness to the spatial dimension' in the poetry, through which place serves not simply:

as setting but as subject, as sacramental revelation of divine creativity; as symbolic manifestation of religious vision; as concrete representation of moral and spiritual alternatives; as objective correlative for interior states of mind and soul.⁵

He thus underlines how the multiple dimensions of place nurture a rich and distinctive way of seeing theologically and provide focal points for Merton's negotiation of his question. Poks also identifies this multidimensional potential through which a worded landscape invites into a transformative dwelling-place. The poetry becomes a place of 'endless inscription, a tale of liberation' and 'expanding horizons'.⁶

Such acknowledgement of the inventiveness of Merton as a poet stands at odds with an overly dismissive attitude, marking decades of Merton discourse, especially in relation to the poetry of the 1940s. This neglect is derived undoubtedly from the unenthusiastic tone of authoritative early criticism in which Merton is identified as a 'hit and miss poet', or as 'more

⁴ Patrick O'Connell designates Merton's awareness of the spatial dimension, as 'the most important point of access to Merton's poetic oeuvre'. (Patrick F. O'Connell, 'The Surest Home Is Pointless', p. 2). Paul Pearson emphasises the importance of a specific location, suggesting that the prologue in *The Geography of Lograire* voices a search for roots, in particular Merton's Celtic roots in Wales. (Allchin, p. 85). Malgorzata Poks, as identified earlier in Chapter Two, II 'The State of Dialogue Concerning Merton and Place', pp. 58-59, identifies the same work as 'a topoanalysis of the most intimate and the most dreaded spaces of his life', in which his intention is to 'to visit old grounds and listen into speech that which has been silenced or forgotten'. (Malgorzata Poks, '"Why I Have a Wet Footprint on Top of My Mind": The World, the Text, and the Subject in Thomas Merton's The Geography of Lograire', (Publisher Wydawictwo KUL, Lublin., *Americascapes: Americans in /and Their Diverse Landscapes*, 2013), pp. 69-81 (p. 70).

⁵ Patrick F. O'Connell, 'The Surest Home Is Pointless', p. 2. 'His extraordinary attentiveness to the spatial dimension, to place, (...) is a central aspect of many of his most fully realized poems, from all phases of his career, and provides an important, perhaps the most important, point of access for appreciating the foundation and evaluating the results of Merton's vast poetic enterprise'.

⁶ Malgorzata Poks, 'Thomas Merton's Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons', *The Merton Annual*, 14 (2001), pp. 184-222, (p.222).

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phenomenal than the poetry'.⁷ The sheer quantity of work is also identified as a deterrent.⁸ From this foundation, it became acceptable either to identify the early poems as a phase which Merton relinquished, as is the case with Petisco,⁹ Altany¹⁰ and Shannon,¹¹ or to include the poetry as simply one dimension within a wider thematic focus, as in the studies by Padovano,¹² Woodcock,¹³ Labrie¹⁴ and Kilcourse.¹⁵ Both approaches dilute or side-line critical assessment of Merton's achievement as a poet.

The early critique of the poetry is uncluttered by familiarity with work written after 1949. In Patrick Brewer's thesis on the five volumes published during the 1940s, he identifies a pessimistic and cynical stance towards the world, representing Merton's pre-monastic years, and a serene and Christ-like compassion as Merton becomes a monk.¹⁶ Brewer's study thus illustrates a binary assessment of Merton's poetry, a standpoint reiterated by subsequent critics. Whilst expressing reservations about the fourth volume, Brewer describes the final volume of the decade as the work of 'a confident craftsman', a rare judgement of Merton's achievement as a poet.¹⁷ A similar interpretation is found in a chapter devoted to the poetry in a 1951 thesis, by Sr

⁷ T.S. Eliot described Merton as 'hit or miss as a poet'. According to Michael Mott in his biography, such criticism devastated Merton, deeply shaking his confidence. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, pp. 242 and 254. Celebrated poet Robert Lowell saw Merton the man as 'more phenomenal than the poetry'. From Robert Lowell, 'The Verses of Thomas Merton,' *Commonweal*, XLII (1945), p. 240, cited by Paul E Brewer, 'A Study of the Style and Content of the Poems of Thomas Merton' (Loyola University, 1949).

⁸ Merton's friend Daniel Berrigan claimed, 'When Merton was alive, it would have been a service to say whoa! at times He needed a Pound to cut him to size', referring to the quantity and duplication met in the poems. Berrigan is alluding to Ezra Pound's editing of *The Waste Land*. Daniel Berrigan, 'The Seventy Times Seventy Seven Storey Mountain', *Cross Currents*, 27.4 (1977), pp. 385–93 (p. 93).

⁹ Petisco Martinez Sonia, *La poesía de Thomas Merton : Creación, Crítica y Contemplación* (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2003).

¹⁰ Altany, Alan, 'Celtic Monasticism as a Metaphor for Thomas Merton' <<http://www.thomasmertonsociety.org/altany1.htm>>.

¹¹ William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*, p. 218.

¹² Anthony T. Padovano, *The Human Journey* (New York: Image Books, 1984)

¹³ George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1978).

¹⁴ Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*,

¹⁵ Kilcourse, George *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1993)

¹⁶ Paul E. Brewer, 'A Study of the Style and Content of the Poems of Thomas Merton', Loyola University, Chicago, Master Theses 1949, p. 86, <<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/48598713.pdf>>, [accessed 24/06/2020].

¹⁷ Paul E Brewer, p. 3.

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Elizabeth of the Cross. She displays an unallayed enthusiasm,¹⁸ in which her use of capital letters sums up Merton's eminence as the 'Poet of the Contemplative Life'.¹⁹

Such enthusiasm is more nuanced amongst critics whose admiration for Merton's later works leads to a mere scanning of the early poetry, or that incorporation into a thematic focus, which seeks an emphasis other than the poetry itself.²⁰ Bonnie Thurston in an early overview of poetry criticism identifies a recurring need to establish a hinge to access the poetry, and she contrasts a dismissive attitude to the 1940s poetry, with an enthusiasm for Merton's final two poetic works, the focus of her own thesis.²¹ George Woodcock adopts a thematic approach in his 1978 study, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet*, which includes analysis of both poetry and prose, set within the huge themes of biography, monastic life and contemplation.²² Like Brewer,

¹⁸ Sister Elizabeth of the Cross, 'Thomas Merton, Social Critic of The Times' (1951), p. 16

<file:///C:/Users/HP/Downloads/DC53635.PDF> [accessed 27/12/2019]. The author recognises a three-fold thesis in each volume: 'his spiritual climb, his repudiation of modern materialism and his projection of contemplation as the antidote to the ills of modern civilization',

¹⁹ Sister Elizabeth of the Cross, p. 14.

²⁰ I refer to this tendency to identify an integrating principle in the exploration of the theme of place in Merton's work in Chapter III, p. 96. I point out how critics present a location from which Merton engages with the world. Examples include including marginality, the child-mind, journeying, seeking integration, prioritising his location. The following contains those listed in Chapter III: the child's vision of the world as a place to play in and with, Fiona Gardner, (*The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind*), the journey, (Anthony T. Padovano, *The Human Journey*), a contemplative stance, (William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*; Robert Waldron, *The Wounded Heart*), inclusive vision, (Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*), the view from the margins, (Inchausti, *Robert Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*), authenticity, (Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton*), or most significantly in terms of the focus of this study, O'Connell's and Mott's prioritisation of place itself, (Patrick F. O'Connell, 'The Surest Home Is Pointless': A Pathless Path through Merton's Poetic Corpus', *CrossCurrents*, 58.4 (2008), 522–44 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-3881.2009.00044.x>>). Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. xxiv.

²¹ Bowman Thurston, Bonnie 'Review of Criticism of Thomas Merton's Poetry', *The Merton Seasonal*, 9.2 (1984), 6–10, [accessed 27/12/2019]. 'Interestingly, it is the last two long poems, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, that have attracted the greatest number of explicators' p. 8. Bonnie Bowman Thurston herself focused on the later poetry of Merton in her thesis: *Flowers of Contemplation: the Later Poetry of Thomas Merton*, PhD thesis, University of Virginia, 1979. Anthony Padovano in *The Human Journey* devotes a chapter to these later poetic works. We can recall from Chapter Two, p. 58, how Paul Pearson presents the prologue in *The Geography of Lograire* as a search for roots, in particular Merton's Celtic roots in Wales. ('The Geography of Lograire: Thomas Merton's Final Prophetic Vision', Allchin, p. 85. Equally, we recall how Malgorzata Poks identifies the same work as 'a topoanalysis of the most intimate and the most dreaded spaces of his life'. (Malgorzata Poks, 'Why I Have a Wet Footprint on Top of My Mind': The World, the Text, and the Subject in Thomas Merton's *The Geography of Lograire*., Publisher Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin., *Americascapes: Americans in /and Their Diverse Landscapes*, 2013, 69–81, (p. 70).) Poks develops this with the latest poetry further with 'Glimpses of Merton's Abiding Frenchness in *The Geography of Lograire*', <<http://www.thomasmertonsociety.org/Journal/21/Poks.pdf>>. A further study of *Geography of Lograire* claims that Merton becomes the unwitting object of the writing rather than the author, (Dustin D. Stewart, 'Legacies of Reading in the Late Poetry of Thomas Merton', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 53.2 (2011), pp. 115–37). By 2011, Poks acknowledges that Merton's later poetry is receiving its due in terms of scholarly research. Poks, Malgorzata *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices* Lambert Academic Publishing, Saarbrücken, 2011, p. 3.

²² George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1978).

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Woodcock distinguishes two voices: a voice of praise in ‘poetry of the choir’ and an austere quietude in ‘poetry of the desert’.²³ He also identifies some positive features in the early poetry, including ‘concreteness and a sharp originality of imagery; a sensitive counterpointing of words; a quiet, sure rhythm; vision without pietism’.²⁴ This stands with an overriding claim concerning the poetry that Merton ‘wrote in haste and at worst his writing is very bad’.²⁵

Two works not tethered to a thematic emphasis which focus exclusively on the entire poetic corpus are the 1979 study by Thérèse Lentfoehr,²⁶ and a 2003 Spanish doctoral thesis by Sonia Petisco.²⁷ To explore all the poems within a single work is a significant challenge. Lentfoehr scans the early decade of poetry in a disproportionately short space,²⁸ with fragmentary analysis, summing up the works as ‘the beginnings of a poet’ in which Merton employs ‘a rich and abundant seasonal imagery of the Kentucky countryside’, with apocalyptic resonance.²⁹ Petisco identifies the early poems as representing Merton’s ‘flight from the world and abandon in Christ’,³⁰ a stance he would leave behind in later poetry. She hence provides a

²³ Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet*, p. 47. Woodcock does not define the categories but writing in 1995 in an introduction to Merton’s *Thoughts on the East*, he will again underline the persistence of these categories: ‘poetry of the choir’ as ‘poems of holy and collective celebration, full of triumphant noise and vivid, even gaudy imagery’; and ‘poetry of the desert’, ‘austere and quiet, celebrating the unity of simplicity and true knowledge as projected years ago by the ancient hermits of the Egyptian desert’. Thomas Merton *Thoughts on the East* Introduction by George Woodcock, (Burns and Oates Tunbridge Wells, 1996), pp. 8-9. Kilcourse pointing out the absence of a clear definition in *Merton, Monk and Poet* describes the poetry of the choir as ‘influenced by psalmody and typological and cosmological symbolism, sustained by tones of joy and songs of praise and structured around an invocatory manner, grammatical repetitions and ‘loudness’. Kilcourse identifies an apocalyptic note in the poetry of the desert as a ‘relatively small group of distinctive poems characteristic of ‘Merton’s eremitic urge’ and characterised by ‘spareness, control quite short lines, and a laconic manner that bows toward silence’, with reference to Woodcock *Monk and Poet* pp. 55-62., Kilcourse, *George Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton’s Christ* (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1993), pp. 43-45 and 75.

²⁴ Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet*, p. 37.

²⁵ Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet*, p. 21.

²⁶ Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*.

²⁷ Petisco Martínez Sonia, *La poesía de Thomas Merton : Creación, Crítica y Contemplación* (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2003). This thesis was published in English in 2016 as *Thomas Merton's Poetics of Self-Dissolution*.

²⁸ She gives prime attention to dates of writing, lists recurring imagery, (coins, jails, cages, ‘electric’ images, Spanish ambience, p.5; flying images, p.6; dental imagery, p. 16; notes a free style, p. 4; ‘cynical reflection on artificiality which is occasionally compassionate’, pp. 5-6.

²⁹ Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*, p. 11. Robert Daggy, ‘HurlyBurly Secrets: A Reflection on Thomas Merton’s French Poems’, *Merton Annual*, 21.2 (1992), p. 21 <<http://merton.org/ITMS/Seasonal/21/21-2DaggyReflection.pdf>>. Robert Daggy airs his frustration with the parameters of her critique claiming that ‘Beyond her usual effusion of "brilliant", "witty" and the like offers no critical analysis and little explanation’.

³⁰ Petisco Martínez, p. 84. This is the prelude to the ‘transitional’ poetry of the first half of the 1960s which she entitles ‘From Solitude to Solidarity’, p. 137.

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statement of a clear transition in Merton's work. Echoing O'Connell and Poks, however, she also acknowledges the theme of place as a key to the poetry's achievement, claiming that the poems overall offer a 'geography of the spirit'.³¹

Further statements of transition continue with Shannon's description of the early poems as a turning inward, 'through the eyes of a monk: the downcast eyes of his early flight from the world', in contrast to later works, which he claims, display 'the wide-open eyes of his later years, that looked out upon the world with love and compassion'.³² Altany identifies a similar sequence: 'an old corrupt world' is transformed 'into an apocalyptic new one'; 'traditional religious imagery' becomes a 'montage of impressions and anti-poetry'; 'a supernatural category of the sacred' is replaced by 'a direct, humanized and intimate experience of the sacred in the centre of the profane.'³³

This binary lens is developed by George Kilcourse in *Ace of Freedoms* (1993). A focus on Merton's Christology provides a thematic hinge through which Kilcourse expands on the categories established by Woodcock. Referring to 'the stale Merton style of the 1940s',³⁴ he overlays Woodcock's divisions with 'poetry of paradisaal vision' and 'poetry of the forest'. The former is identified as a 'complex of images, symbols, and metaphors of the paradise consciousness', associating the 'joy and psalmlike invocations of the best 'poetry of the choir' and the austere, ironic emptiness of the best 'poetry of the desert'.³⁵ The 'poetry of the forest' represents the surprised encounter with the true self, being identified as the self in Christ, which Kilcourse associates primarily with Merton's late poetry.³⁶

³¹ Petisco Martínez, p. 206. For this 'geography of the spirit', her emphasis is on the last two volumes of poetry.

³² William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*, p. 218.

³³ Altany, Alan, 'Celtic Monasticism as a Metaphor for Thomas Merton' <<http://www.thomasmertonsociety.org/altany1.htm>>.

³⁴ Kilcourse, "'The Paradise Ear': Thomas Merton, Poet", p. 108. Summer 1987 "The Paradise Ear": Thomas Merton, Poet George Kilcourse Bellarmine College - Volume 7 number 2 article 8.

³⁵ Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*, p. 44.

³⁶ The term forest relates to how Merton identifies the true self as similar to an unexpected encounter with a wild animal, roaming freely in the surrounding woodland. Kilcourse explores Merton's descriptions of deer in particular as representative of how the self is seen before God and is hence more symbolic of the true self: 'Shy Wild Deer: Personifications of the Inner Self in Merton's Poetry', Kilcourse, pp. 43-83.

Again, in the context of a wider thematic study, one critique dismantles the assessment of the 1940s poems as a single entity. Focusing on Merton's craftsmanship, Labrie introduces some differentiation between the different volumes of the decade. He claims the poems of the first volume *Early Poems* are undistinguished and derivative but 'in a tangled way, they point to some of the themes that would preoccupy him later on', whilst in the later four volumes, the poems are 'fresh and distinctive'.³⁷

These tendencies to categorise, to emphasise discontinuity, or to fix the poetry within an overarching theme, confine the early poems to a lukewarm, cursory reception, appropriate for an abandoned project. This stance has justified a wider side-stepping of the poems, and in the 2005 new edition of the poems,³⁸ the adoption of a thematic approach leads Jennifer Grotz to conclude that Merton's poetic style does not deserve attention.³⁹ A countervailing voice defensively will insist on the 'greatness' of certain poems,⁴⁰ or hint at the length of time taken for Merton's poetry to be given its due.⁴¹ O'Connell in 'Thirty Poems after Fifty Years', offers a rallying cry for the poetry as a whole, and takes issue with a too ready binary assessment of the poetry, and the chronological divisions.⁴² He insists instead that there are continuities and changes between the pre-monastic, early monastic and later years.⁴³ Whilst going no further in this article than simply listing titles and quoting occasional lines, the rich analyses in a parallel article calling for the poetry not to be peripheralised, cannot fail to demonstrate Merton's poetic achievement beyond thematic interest. O'Connell's analyses, however, are limited to only three poems.⁴⁴ A

³⁷ Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, p. 110.

³⁸ Thomas Merton, *In the Dark Before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New Directions Publishing, 2005).

³⁹ Jennifer Grotz, 'Microreview: In the Dark Before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton', *Boston Review*, 29 June 2012 <<http://bostonreview.net/poetry/microreview-dark-dawn-new-selected-poems-thomas-merton>> [accessed 27 December 2019]. The editorial choices - the poems are arranged according to theme, rather than chronology—undermine our ability to read Merton's development as a poet and suggest, perhaps correctly, that the most profitable way to approach Merton is for philosophical content before poetic artistry.

⁴⁰ Anthony Padovano refers to the 'great poems, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, (Anthony T. Padovano, *The Human Journey* (New York: Image Books, 1984), p.117.

⁴¹ In 2011 Poks will claim that 'Merton is also coming into his own as a poet', his poetry 'beginning to receive its due in terms of serious scholarly research'. Poks, Malgorzata *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices* (Saarbrücken, Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011), p.3.

⁴² He claims in particular that he sees no justification for Woodcock's 'poetry of the choir' and 'poetry of the desert'.

⁴³ Patrick F O'Connell, 'Thirty Poems after Fifty Years', *The Merton Seasonal*, 19.3 (1994), 5 (p. 5). 'We do not find much evidence, to use George Woodcock's terms.'

⁴⁴ Patrick F. O'Connell, 'The Surest Home Is Pointless': A Pathless Path through Merton's Poetic Corpus', *CrossCurrents*, 58.4 (2008), 522–44 (p. 2) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-3881.2009.00044.x>>, 'Grace's House', pp. 4-8; 'The Regret', pp. 8-10;

clear challenge in the critique of Merton's poetry lies in the richness of many individual poems, set alongside the sheer quantity.

Following the many thematic analyses, this challenge is addressed by Poks in an article tracking the development of the entire poetic corpus.⁴⁵ Rather than staying in the familiar contours of defining the poetry chronologically, and reiterating a lukewarm response to the early works, Poks places the early poems alongside Merton's final poem *The Geography of Lograire*, as the 'first and last stage' of the process of 'endless inscription'.⁴⁶ She insists that in tracking the poems, there is an evolution rather than a sense of rupture defining the chronology of the poetry,⁴⁷ echoing O'Connell's claim of continuity. In this way, it is possible to interpret that turning inward as reflecting a readiness to explore something new, which will constantly transpose itself. Hence, from his first poems, Merton can be understood as open to fresh encounter, manifest initially in the enthusiastic attention he gives to the novelty of monastic living. The sense of a fixity of vision is dismantled. Disorientation and reorientation co-exist, as Poks claims: 'The loss of the cardinal point of the compass (..) was in fact the prelude to a greater task - that of an eventual rebuilding of his geography, a reorientation.'⁴⁸ As an 'endless inscription' the poems will open recurringly to an alternative, like a palimpsest, through to the final inscribing of *The Geography of Lograire*.

Such freshness of approach continues as Poks locates Merton's poetry within a wider poetic tradition. This is particularly the case in Poks' later work on Merton's poems in translation,⁴⁹ but in her overview, she refers to the surrealism of some of the early poems. She identifies how surreality, from the second volume of the decade, yields to 'a heightened reality', product of growing contemplative and mystical awareness. According to Poks, Merton projects an understanding that both the mystical and the poetic can 'obliterate the distance between the

'The Fall', pp. 10-12. This is paralleled in Seal's detailed analysis of Merton's poetic prose though with a greater span of reference in which he confines his enquiry to works specifically on contemplation. This allows for close textual analysis which develops a highly original prism of focus for Merton studies.

⁴⁵ Malgorzata Poks, 'Thomas Merton's Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons', *The Merton Annual*, 14 (2001), pp. 184-222.

⁴⁶ Poks, Malgorzata, 'Thomas Merton's Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons', p.187.

⁴⁷ Poks, Malgorzata, 'Thomas Merton's Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons', p.185.

⁴⁸ Poks, Malgorzata, 'Thomas Merton's Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons', p. 222.

⁴⁹ Poks, Malgorzata *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices* (Saarbrücken, Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011).

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contemplative and the object contemplated,’ thus creating a channel towards ‘non-conceptual knowledge’.⁵⁰ In conjunction with the non-conceptual, Poks highlights a parallel emphasis on materiality, referring to the legacy Merton drew from patristic theology, in particular St Bonaventure’s understanding of seeing divine reality *per speculum*, or through the mirror of created things.⁵¹ This meeting of revelatory understanding with words and materiality is further bolstered by an immersion in the language of the psalms, as ‘the epitome of religious poetry’.⁵² With reference to Merton’s early collection of essays on the psalms, *Bread in a Wilderness*,⁵³ Poks identifies the psalms as a testimony ‘to God’s continuous intervention in human history’.⁵⁴ Her analysis thus signals a nexus wherein the verbal nature of poetry meets the material locus of human history, which are together animated by divine presence or non-conceptual knowledge, an encounter echoing the poetics of place underpinning my analysis. When this interrelationship breaks down and language fails to identify the divine stamp on creation, in Poks’ words, it loses its primary function.⁵⁵ Instead of signalling a deeper reality, it empties of meaning, becoming a mere sign. This awareness informs Merton’s earliest poems. Poks hence underlines the extent of Merton’s achievement in ‘accurately anticipat(ing) the postmodern crisis.’⁵⁶

As O’Connell’s very selective analysis of Merton’s poetry allows for detailed analysis of text, Poks adopts a selective approach in her work *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices*, which primarily, but not exclusively, gives close attention to Merton’s translations from Spanish and Portuguese. In this work, Poks locates Merton within the wider literary movement of Latin American modernism and signals Merton’s affinity with

⁵⁰ Poks, Malgorzata, ‘Thomas Merton’s Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons’, p. 189.

⁵¹ Poks, Malgorzata, ‘Thomas Merton’s Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons’, p. 190. Also ‘The Church Fathers at the centre of their theology is the concept of the divine image imprinted on God’s creation and distorted by the Fall’, p. 199.

⁵² Poks, Malgorzata, ‘Thomas Merton’s Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons’, p.191.

⁵³ Merton, Thomas, *Bread in a Wilderness*, (New York, New Directions, 1953).

⁵⁴ Poks, Malgorzata, ‘Thomas Merton’s Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons’, pp. 191-192.

⁵⁵ Poks, Malgorzata, ‘Thomas Merton’s Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons’, p.198. ‘Once the primal correspondence between the reality in the mind of God and man’s thought about it was broken, language has lost its primary function of communicating what exists. Originally revealed by linguistic signs, reality is now replaced by them, words have become our only reality.’

⁵⁶ Poks, Malgorzata, ‘Thomas Merton’s Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons’, p. 199.

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contemporary poets of North America.⁵⁷ She thus releases the poetry from a tightly defined theological, biographical, or chronological emphasis. Moreover, I suggest that the tropes Poks identifies as characteristic of a wider tradition, feature even in the early poetry.

Firstly, Poks highlights the theme of nature as a privileged theological place, picking up the thread of Kilcourse's paradisaical consciousness.⁵⁸ This resonates with Merton's re-creation in the early poems of the shock of conversion and a living forever in the echo of Edenic unity. Secondly, she identifies a series of dualisms: the conflict between contemplation and action;⁵⁹ the lucidity of madness versus the sanity of the world;⁶⁰ the marginalisation of the poet standing against a compromised culture;⁶¹ a poetic stance at odds with the abstractions of New Criticism.⁶² In conjunction with such dualisms, she pinpoints an emphasis on solitariness,⁶³ and homelessness.⁶⁴ In the early poems, these features are met respectively, I suggest, in the dilemma of to write, or to be the contemplative; in the images drawn from St Paul of the wisdom in madness; in the breakdown of geography and of language from which the early poems spring; in

⁵⁷ Poks tracks the character of Merton's profound engagement with the Latin American writers he translates and with the Southern Continent. In the final chapter, she aligns Merton with a trend in American poetry to stand against impersonal formalist poetry, promoted by the New Criticism which dominated American literary criticism in the mid-century. Gail Ramshaw in a study of Merton's *Cables to the Ace*, will also identify echoes with the poetry of North America, but she places Merton in the tradition of Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, and William Carlos Williams, <<http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/1/Ramshaw235-246.pdf>>, p. 235.

⁵⁸ Poks, Malgorzata, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices*, p. 13. This theme is explored in relation to the links between Merton and Jorge Carrera Andrade, the Ecuadorian poet. In Chapter III, Poks also refers to the 'poetry of the paradise consciousness', as a 'category well established in the Merton canon, in relation to the poetry of the Brazilian: Carlos Drummond de Andrade, p. 13.

⁵⁹ Poks discusses this dialectic in Chapter Five which discusses the poetry of in a discussion of the links between the Nicaraguan, Ernesto Cardenal and Merton, p. 14 and Chapter Five, 112 - 133

⁶⁰ Poks explores the notion of a 'prophetic madness' in relation to the Nicaraguan poet, Alfonso Cortes, in relation to the 'sanity of the mass society', p. 13, and chapter Four, *El Poeta Loco and the Secret Soul of Things*. pp. 82-89. This is of particular relevance in my exploration of *Emblems of a Season in Fury*, in relation to the sanity of Eichmann. See this thesis, Chapter Five, p. 139, for references to St Paul's epistles and Chapter 6, for references to Eichmann, p. 179-180

⁶¹ Poks refers to Merton's letter to South American poets, giving them the title of monks in the stance 'outside categories', 'useless in a world defined by profit and the efficiency principle', p. 8 with reference to Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 373.

⁶² Poks, Malgorzata, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices*, Poks outlines how Merton felt at odds with contemporary American trends, which he considered sterile and too concerned with technological and scientific virtuosity, p. 17. In the final chapter, Poks will underline how his stance against the prevailing trend within New Criticism was not unique and in fact represented a counter to this focus, p. 230.

⁶³ Poks, Malgorzata, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices*, p. 8.

⁶⁴ Poks, Malgorzata, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices*, p. 56. This theme is explored in relation to Jorge Carrera Andrade's exile in Paris.

poems representing embodied experience of Merton as a monk; in the picture of a life set apart, both locationally and within the unusual construct of elected silence.

Secondly and of particular interest is the signalling of Merton's search for a third way through the multiple paradoxes underpinning his position. The paradoxes are commonplace within Merton discourse:⁶⁵ the monk who renounces the world in order to rebuild it; the discovery of peace in restlessness; the finding of a voice in silence; the discovery of a pathway to other faiths within the austere confines of Trappism.⁶⁶ The way through the opposite poles according to Poks will 'tear down the barriers of division', 'emphasise that which binds', and through contemplation 'underline unitive knowing of ultimate reality'.⁶⁷

This forging through the tension of opposites is particularly apparent, I suggest, in the poems of the 1940s. It is here that Merton most clearly represents the austere discipline of Trappist life, not as 'an abstract concept' as Poks insists 'but an existential reality'.⁶⁸ From the ensuing threshold of struggle and disorientation, Merton finds a means of holding the tension, testing, yet ultimately rejecting the polarisation of one place and one way of life pitched against the world.

My analysis of Merton's poetry in Chapters Four and Five builds on the affirmation of Poks and O'Connell, concerning the distinctive contribution the poetry makes to Merton's entire oeuvre, and their identification of place for nurturing a rich and distinctive way of seeing theologically. Taking a further cue from their approach, my analysis, as outlined in Chapter Three is selective.⁶⁹ In the light of O'Connell's assertion that the poetry needs to be recognised

⁶⁵ Just a few examples including articles, conference themes and published works, which explore Thomas Merton as living a paradox:

Aguilar, Mario I., *Thomas Merton: Contemplation and Political Action* (London: S.P.C.K. Publishing, 2011).

Palmer, Parker J. *In the Belly of a Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Thought of Thomas Merton* (Pennsylvania, Pendle Hill 2014)

Rakoczy, Susan, *Great Mystics and Social Justice: Walking on the Two Feet of Love* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

Williams, Rowan, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2013).

Reilly Patrick 'Moses as an Exemplar: The Paradoxes of Thomas Merton' <<http://merton.org/ITMS/Seasonal/21/21-3Reilly.pdf>>, *Merton Seasonal*, pp. 12-18. Paradox and Mercy. Conference on Thomas Merton by Richard Rohr at The Centre for Contemplation and Action, Albuquerque, New Mexico, <<https://cac.org/paradox-and-mercy-2015-08-16/>>.

⁶⁶ Poks, Malgorzata, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices*, p. 5.

⁶⁷ Poks, Malgorzata, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices*, p. 9.

⁶⁸ Poks, Malgorzata, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices*, p. 8.

⁶⁹ Chapter Three, IV, 'Towards Part Two', pp. 99-100.

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as an integral part and not a peripheral dimension of his work', and in addition, that it 'reinforces and extends themes and ideas found in the prose' and 'provides insights on some topics available nowhere else',⁷⁰ I focus in this chapter on the five volumes written in the 1940s. This serves as a parallel to the prose explored in Chapter Four. Chapters Six and Seven offer a similar parallel analysis, focusing on the mid-1960s.

I acknowledge the challenge of the various obstacles in exploring these poems: the quantity, the unevenness, the random ordering, the occasional pious tone, the prophetic diatribes wrapped up in grim oppressive language, as well as an occasional clumsiness of imagery which contributes to the sense of strain in misplaced effusiveness.⁷¹ With place as a hinge of access, however, serving not simply as a theme but as a correlative to the poetic expression, Merton's achievement in the poetry of the 1940s is manifest. He creates memorable landscapes which track the full force of his own struggles concerning spatial and linguistic disorientation, tethered to the quest for belonging and to his vocation as a Trappist, who is also a writer. Loss of map and loss of language coalesce; hence place is characterised by that 'endless inscription', which seeks to expand the horizons, a struggle far less visible in the parallel prose works.

I proceed chronologically through the five volumes in order to clearly trace the interplay between disorientation and reorientation. I provide detailed analysis of specific poems, alongside some cursory exploration of salient features. The changing landscapes illustrate how Merton creates concrete representations of his shifts in perspective, mapping out steps towards oases of belonging. He excavates the sense of rightness of his early reflections in Sussex, the sense of belonging in Rome, the sense of integration in Cuba and in the monastic grounds in Kentucky, all emerging from within geographical, psychological, and spiritual alienation.

⁷⁰ Patrick F. O'Connell, 'The Surest Home', pp. 1-2.

⁷¹ Misplaced effusiveness and weak use of biblical imagery: 'Pray us full of marrow, Queen of Heaven', Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New Directions Publishing, 1980), p. 150. An over earnest attempt to describe a monstrance: 'the beams of this wonderful sun! / Created wisdom makes at best a metal monstrance, for His crown, / And those stiff rays look like no living light: They are no more than golden spikes and golden thorns, p. 51. The attempt at association of the metal forms and the story of crucifixion is too contrived to be convincing. Significantly this strain is found in the poems where Merton follows a tighter form of verse, with rhyme and relatively regular line length and where the imagery seems stale. See final verse of 'The Holy Sacrament of the Altar', p. 51.

II The Poems

II.i *Early Poems (1940-1942)*

The collection *Early Poems* was written between 1940 and 1942.⁷² The dominant mooring points include trench warfare in France, and a construct of a modern industrialised nation, shaped by commerce, militarism, and technology, which Merton identifies with the place America. The over-riding focus on an alienating geography is underlined by the epigraph:

Geography comes to an end,
Compass has lost all earthly north
Horizons have no meaning
Nor roads an explanation:⁷³

The closing colon is significant in that the verse serves as the springboard not only for the first volume, but for Merton's entire poetic corpus. These four lines also open the last verse of the volume which, by returning full circle frame the random sequencing of the intervening poems within this absence of bearings. Paradoxically, the absence of geography is in fact a location marked by disorientation.

Accompanying the loss of geography, language is similarly caught up in the breakdown of known parameters:

Rhetoric had gone dead,
Logic had failed
Music was without speech.
Painting stood inarticulate,
history amazed,
tragedy taken aback
mimes all tied up

⁷² Lentfoehr outlines how the poems came to be gathered together beneath the heading of *Early Poems*. 'These early poems had been kept by a friend who in the summer of 1968, at Merton's instigation sent him copies, from which he made a selection of fourteen, which he had xeroxed and circulated privately. It was this manuscript that became the text of *Early Poems 1940-1942*, a handsome edition with a foreword by Jonathan Green, published at the Peter House, Lexington, Kentucky, in 1971.' Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*, pp. 3-4. '

⁷³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 2 and 24.

comedy mum.⁷⁴

The straining in the adjectives to find another word for silenced: ‘without speech’, ‘inarticulate’, ‘tied up’, ‘mum’, symbolises language’s failure.

The canvas Merton creates offers a bleak montage of urban and wartime landscapes with graveyards, docks, hospitals, streets, elevators, office-buildings, and apartments providing a background to violent and lonely deaths with images of earth, loam, frozen ground, sepulchres, tombs, and disembodied body parts. Three poems counter this gloom, two of which look towards Cuba, its sunshine and religion of the open air, with colourful syncretic fiestas,⁷⁵ the other to Italy, as a place of carefree happiness and belonging.⁷⁶ They together recall Merton’s earlier experiences of the companionship of place on his travels to Cuba and Rome.⁷⁷ The landscapes of the Bible which animated the canvas in *The Sign of Jonas* are present only in a poem entitled ‘Tower of Babel’, significantly an archetypal symbol of the compromise and debasement of place, language, and religious belief.⁷⁸ In Babel ‘words have no essential meaning’ but are simply ‘means of locomotion’, ‘along an infinite horizontal plane’.⁷⁹ Being stuck on a horizontal plane suggests that any sense of divine origin and divine animation has been forgotten.

The montage of places meets a parallel montage of poetic styles thus reflecting the grafting together of geography and language. Some poems contain rhyme, some regular verse patterns, others mix free verse and rhyming lines. There is description, declamation, and invocation presented via startling shifts of tone from humorous, morbid, lyrical, devotional, and poignant, with an occasional posturing which can sound hollow.⁸⁰ The intoning of lament and

⁷⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 14.

⁷⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 5 and 9. The image of a proud Caribbean jazz dancer recalls his journey to Cuba in 1940. The dancer’s acceptance of a relationship with the cosmos in his dialogue with the sun and moon is a counter to cosmic alienation. See also ‘*La Comparsa en Oriente*’.

⁷⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 7 ‘In the City’s Spring’: The ‘air is full of courtesies’. Even the rain is playful. The playful rhyme echoes the carefreeness of a song in summer and recalls his visit to Italy: ‘The walls that wept with arrowy rain, /Turn a new presence to the sun. /Flowers and friendly days are in. /The bended lanes are loud with cries /And are become our Italies /And bring sweet songs and strawberries.’

⁷⁷ Chapter Four, I ‘The Mooring Points of Pre-Monastic Life’, I.ii ‘Latin America’.

⁷⁸ Genesis, 11: 1-9.

⁷⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 21-22.

⁸⁰ Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 24. ‘O flaming Heart /Unseen and unimagined in this wilderness, /You, You alone are real and here I’ve found You. /Here will I love and praise You in a tongueless death.’ The exaggerated images of

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diatribe juxtaposed with lyrical invocation jars and disorients the poetic voice. The sense of verbal fragmentation is further reinforced by the many echoes of other writers which create a complex intertextuality. Within Merton discourse, there is criticism for this borrowing of the voice of another, with comments such as ‘dull, daunted and reminiscent of Eliot’ or ‘shoddy, second-hand and forced’.⁸¹ I suggest that the echoes of other writers form an integral part of Merton’s multi-dimensional vision, which not only creates original landscapes, but engages earnestly with those created by other poets. Merton, hence, implicitly announces his own experience of the place-making function of literature.

Such intertextuality is immediately evident in the opening poem, ‘The Philosophers’,⁸² which demonstrates the characteristic breadth of engagement with the writing world underpinning Merton’s entire oeuvre.⁸³ In four verses, Merton echoes Gerard Manley Hopkins, Walt Whitman, John Keats and Jules Laforgue.⁸⁴ The use of bathos, as the gravitas of

wilderness and tongueless death fail to ring true providing weak references to the real challenge of the ascetic life. Similarly, the effusive invocation sounds insincere.

⁸¹ Cited by Lentfoehr, p. 27. Lentfoehr provides a summary of negative critique, including John Logan’s review in *Commonweal* describing Merton’s poetry as ‘dull and daunted’ and to Donald Hall’s denunciation of ‘shoddy’ in *Saturday Review*.

⁸² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 3. ‘The Philosophers’.

⁸³ To simply outline one example of Merton demonstrating the place-making power of literature it is worth highlighting certain echoes of T. S. Eliot. Merton’s constructs of desecrated landscapes invite parallel reflection on the landscapes of ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, ‘The Waste Land’, and ‘Ash Wednesday’ which were respectively published in 1915, 1922 and 1930. There are significant resonances as Merton appears to sound out, dwell within and develop Eliot’s images and landscapes of modernity. Firstly, Merton’s descriptions of human presence on the landscape being reduced to dislocated anatomical body parts, echoes Eliot’s descriptions. Eliot refers to guts, skull, liver, bones and a corpse beginning to sprout in ‘The Waste Land’, whilst in ‘Ash Wednesday’ there is an anatomical dissection of man and beast with ‘gullet of shark/ old man drivelling’. (Eliot, *T.S. Collected Poems 1909-1962* London: Faber and Faber, 1983 pp. 97, 65). Secondly, Merton’s preoccupation with words echoes Eliot’s deductions of language as an ambiguous vehicle towards meaning and as bound to materiality: ‘The token of the word unheard, unspoken! / ‘Til the winds shake a thousand whispers from the yew’, (*ibid* Eliot: p. 101). Thirdly, Merton’s exploration of a sense of lost innocence, the loss of Eden and the images of the sea, echoes Eliot’s: ‘lost lilac, lost sea voices, lost sea smell, (*ibid* Eliot p. 104). Fourthly, Merton’s sea-bed images of conch shells and weedy streets recalls Prufrock thinking ‘I should have been a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas’. (*ibid* Eliot p. 15) Finally, Merton even copied particular turns of phrase of Eliot. In ‘The Waste Land’ the month of April is described as ‘breeding lilacs out of the dead land’ (*ibid* Eliot p. 63) whilst for Merton April is ‘breeding the happy swordlight of the sun’. (*The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 62). The fecundity of April for Merton, however, is more beguiling and more carefree with a hint of the resurrection image of angels in guard at the tomb dressed in shining white, John 20:12. In addition, ‘The Waste Land’ begins preoccupied with the need to turn again, (*ibid* Eliot p. 69) whilst Merton asks ‘if no more men will learn to turn again And run to the rainy world’s boundaries’, ‘what if the last man will no more learn, and run?’ Patrick Brewer claims that this influence is apparent throughout the early poems, and that Merton adds nothing to the ‘conception of modern civilization as presented in ‘The Waste Land’ by T. S. Eliot’. (Patrick Brewer, ‘A Study of the Style and Content of the Poems of Thomas Merton’, pp. 33 and 40.)

⁸⁴ Merton studied French and Italian for one year at the University of Cambridge, UK and English at the University of Columbia, US. He wrote a master’s thesis on William Blake and planned a doctoral thesis on Gerard Manley Hopkins. In his diaries of 1939 when he is 24, he expresses a particularly strong appreciation of French poetry of the late 19th early 20th century, especially the poetry of Jules Laforgue: ‘I think the best modern poetry is being written in France, has been for the last fifty years. Between

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metaphysical questioning is brought down to earth by an unheroic setting, recreates the poetic canvas of Laforgue, in which bathos leads to a free flow of odd juxtapositions, where the concrete and familiar clash with the abstract and esoteric.⁸⁵ In Merton's poem, the mystical location announced by the opening epigraph: 'Geography has come to an end' is confounded, as the narrator muses over the nature of capitalised beauty and truth, whilst seemingly half-asleep in the non-descript location of a city park. This juxtaposition of metaphysical with material continues with echoes of Hopkins' words: 'send my roots rain',⁸⁶ in 'Waiting for Easter rains'. Similarly, Whitman's exaltation of the body and the material world is echoed in 'dreaming in the earth, enfolded in my future leaves'.⁸⁷ Any hope of romantic idealism, however, is thwarted as the body is not sleeping, but dead, its inanimate materiality captured in the anatomical reference, 'into the tunnels of my ears'. An increasingly unmitigated materiality is reinforced as the roots needing spiritual rain are met strangely as two mandrakes, plants whose forked roots are identified for resembling the human form and symbolically associated with fertility and magical properties.⁸⁸ They are discussing truth and beauty in the surreal oddness of the poet's head, which is described as 'the other room', overlaying an architectural quality to the space of thinking.⁸⁹ The mandrakes are brothers, which has a prophetic hint of pathos, as at this stage Merton still has close family in his brother, John Paul, who is in military service and will become

1880 and 1920 perhaps the only good poetry was being written there. This week for the first time I read the *Complaintes* of Jules Laforgue: or some of them. They are very fine and very moving, more moving than anything in English since then, except by Yeats'. Laforgue is 'utterly formal, impersonal, terrific in its restraint. So, anyone thinking it flippant and irrelevant would be quite misguided – the apparent flippancy and lightness of the burden only add to the poignancy (...) they express a complete hopelessness, a profound tragedy'. Thomas Merton, *Journals of Thomas Merton: Run to the Mountain* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), pp. 66-67.

⁸⁵ Jules Laforgue *L'Imitation de Notre Dame La Lune, Les Fleurs de Bonne Volonté*, (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1979). A few examples of Laforgue's juxtapositions with my translations : Lunes bénies des Insomnies (Blessed moons/Insomnia), p. 19 ; Certes ! L'Absolu perd ses droits, Là, où le vrai consiste à vivre. (Idealism/Domesticity: The Absolute loses any rights, where reality means to just get on with life), p. 45. Jules Laforgue, *Les Complaintes*, <http://www.laforgue.org/comp.htm> 'La lune en son halo ravagé n'est qu'un œil mangé de mouches': (The halo of the moon/ An eye devoured by flies) from *Complainte des voix sous le figuier bouddhique* ('The Lament From the Voices Beneath the Buddhist Fig-tree').

⁸⁶ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, Penguin Poets, ed. by W.H.Gardner (London: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 67. Final line of 'Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend'.

⁸⁷ This is a likely echo of Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* in *Leaves of Grass*, first published in 1855. 'I lean and loafe at my ease Observing a spear of summer grass. (...) The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves". Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself* Penguin 60s Classics (St Ives: Penguin Books, 1986), pp. 1-2.

⁸⁸ Symbol Dictionary, 'Mandrake (Mandragora)', *Symbol Dictionary*, 2020 <<http://symboldictionary.net/?p=1350>> [accessed 27/12/2019]. The mandrake is mentioned in Genesis when Rachel makes use of the plant to conceive a son. Tradition also associates it with the blood of the condemned and it is said to grow beneath gallows.

⁸⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 3.

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the focus of a poetic obituary two years later.⁹⁰ A further juxtaposition of romantic idealism and cynical realism is met in the words of the mandrakes: 'Body is truth, truth body' and 'Beauty is troops, troops beauty' ironically echoing Keats' lines in 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'.⁹¹ Acerbic humour and an understated poignancy establish the mood for the volume in which a bleak geography dominates.

Throughout *Early Poems* the images of death, decay, burial, and desolation, highlighting a preoccupation with war, are grafted onto Merton's foreboding at the prospect of becoming a monk. In 'Two British Airmen' the soldiers are 'buried never thought to have found such strange companions, underground,' and they are lost in 'speechless exile' with 'old strangers'.⁹² The image suggests the enclosure of the monastery and the vow of silence. The bleakness of the location is reflected in a corresponding language which can only articulate the emptiness of official grief where anguish at the soldiers' deaths is relayed as a mere formality voiced by church representatives: 'the Parson's voice who values at too cheap a rate these men', and the 'deacon's voice: None but perfunctory prayers were said'.⁹³ The rhyming couplets: arms/farms, glory/story, said/dead, here/bier create a jingle-like quality recalling the language of the advertising world. It suggests an aloof inanity in the words chosen to grant meaning to life.

'Nombriil Walketh on the Loam' continues the theme of burial and a loss of language. The image of a *nombriil*, a French word for a navel suggests disembodied anatomy scattered through the sterile soil of trench warfare and tethering an image of birth to death.⁹⁴ The snippets of French *Dieu me sauve*, God help me, and incorrect plural use of *monsieurs* hint at the attempted use of French by English speakers fighting in France offering their desperate and fevered last words.⁹⁵ The reference to taking away the soldiers' boxes of keepsakes which offer a memory of home is grafted to Merton's own foreboding, as he voices a fear that he will be forced to give up writing: 'Can you write no better verse /They'll take away your pencils', and

⁹⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 3. 'For my Brother Reported Missing in Action'.

⁹¹ John Keats 'Ode to a Grecian Urn', *The Penguin Book of English Verse*, ed. by John Hayward, (London: Penguin Books, 1956), p. 296.

⁹² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 4-5.

⁹³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 4-5.

⁹⁴ Another echo of Laforgue in the poem 'Litanies des derniers quartiers de la lune', 'Vortex-nombriil,' p. 65.

⁹⁵ Correct plural: messieurs.

‘Meanwhile I snatch your writing pen’.⁹⁶ Merton thus merges his own sense of disorientation at the prospect of life in a monastery with life on the battlefield. Such an admission in the poetry stands in sharp contrast to the serenity expressed in the prose, where Merton addressing God exults in the monastery enclosure as ‘the place you have given me roots in eternity’.⁹⁷

This association of the monastic vocation with renunciation and barrenness is reiterated in the poem ‘Dirge for the world that Joyce died in’. A dystopic landscape reveals land violently torn apart by evil, and where love is mechanised, running ‘like life in copper wire’. Images of body parts, ‘eye-string’ and ‘jaw’ are devoured by worms. The grimness is made even more disturbing as Merton appears to become the broken human caught up in the nightmare, ‘receiving dumb to prayer the ascetic blade’ anticipating his projected future as a monk.⁹⁸ A further sense of deep apprehension is evident in the reference to ‘bullying words’ which will again make the same request to give up writing. The use of jingling rhythm and rhyme, uncommon throughout the collection of poems, stridently mocks his desire to write.⁹⁹ To confound the sense of the death that he is entering into, ‘Poem’ describes an apocalyptic nightmare where trees are forged of iron, lightning races across the western world, a woman runs ‘from the staring sky’, suggestive of planes preparing to kill, and in the midst of ‘cold and hunger’ he knows that he’ll ‘find her dead’.¹⁰⁰ The place Europe, that had been Merton’s home, is occupied and is seen as being terminally ill: ‘Paris is in the prison house and London dies of cancer’.¹⁰¹ There is a stark statement of loss of a place that was once loved and his vocation figures on the same canvas.

The alternative face of America is caught up in meaningless celebration. In contrast to the glimpses of Cuba which suggest a whole-hearted engagement in skilful dance,¹⁰² New York

⁹⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 23.

⁹⁷ Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Volume 2; 1941–1952, ed. by Jonathan Montaldo, (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 473.

⁹⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 3–4.

⁹⁹ Better sing your snatch of song / Before that ostrich voice is dumb: /Better whack your share of gong /Before the sounding brass is mum: /Tomorrow, tomorrow Death will come /And find your epics unbegun; /There’ll be no statues on your tomb, /And other bards will occupy /Your seven-fifty sitting room!, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 10, and 11-12.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 20.

¹⁰² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 9-10. ‘*La Comparsa En Oriente*’.

instead is asked to 'let the excitement of your somewhat crippled congas/ Supersede the waltzes of more shining Capitals that have been bombed'. The city is stuck in the manufactured decaying sweetness of commerce: 'Rich as a cake, common as a doughnut' and it is dehumanised. Lifts are cages, people are monkeys. A robotic unthinking absurdity underpins the landscape as America is a mechanised and anaesthetised clinical world which glosses over horror:

O lock us in the safe jails of thy movies!
Confine us to the semiprivate wards and white asylums' (..)
But never give us any explanation, even when we ask,
Why all our food tastes of iodoform –
And even the freshest flowers smell of funerals.¹⁰³

This refusal to give an explanation and the creation of a word crossing iodine and chloroform tethers verbal confusion to the urbanscape.

The grandeur of classical myth, reflecting the inanity of verbal response, is constrained into modern clothes, and it is 'dock officials' who read the necessary poems, honouring the dead.¹⁰⁴ Their words are relayed over loudspeakers, suggesting a fabricated voice, described as 'particularly mediocre'.¹⁰⁵ The primeval energy and aesthetic possibilities within language of a bygone world represented by classical myth have been silenced through the death of rhetoric. The distortion of language continues as in the face of another mythical sacrifice, the officials 'swept the air with speeches of farewell /At which the military police would fire /A *feu de joie* upon their ultramodern rifles'.¹⁰⁶ Hence, language has been emptied of meaning and sacrificed to mechanistic and militaristic processes.

Countering the dismay within this landscape Merton voices a poignant plea for the kindling of a shared compassion:¹⁰⁷

Bend, bend, my pretty boughs

¹⁰³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 13-19.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁷ 'From the Second Chapter of a Verse History of the World'. This is resonant of Psalm 86: 'Incline your ear O Lord, and answer me', N.R.S.V., p. 688, and Psalm 40, 'I waited patiently for the Lord. He inclined unto me', N.R.S.V., p. 657. All 150 psalms are normally recited during a two-week period, so the vocabulary and rhythms would be familiar and gradually imprinted into the memory of the monk.

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And throw my sighs away like leaves.
Scatter upon the land my tears like rain.
Soften the hard earth where no pity lives.
Bend, bend my pretty boughs
And throw away my sighs like leaves.¹⁰⁸

The biblical resonance with Ezekiel of transforming hearts of stone, and the lulling repetitive lines introduces hope onto the canvas.¹⁰⁹

The final two poems of this collection also offset the bleak landscape as the poet resorts again to invocation: ‘Close, eyes, and soul, come Home!’¹¹⁰ The capitalized Home and the imperative gives weight to a possible alternative to the all-pervading alienation. Again recalling Ezekiel and the reanimation of dry bones, Merton asserts that love, ‘Unseen and unimagined in this wilderness’ will ‘Rise and unfold the flowers of (an) everlasting spring’.¹¹¹ The final cadence of the collection looks towards the unconfined geography of a biblical landscape as a possible source of invigoration.

The landscapes in this first volume of the decade reflect profound dislocation and vividly represent both Merton’s deep sense of foreboding concerning his monastic vocation, his dismay at the war in Europe and his alienation from America. The glimpses of Italy and Cuba, and the hope drawn from biblical landscapes provide faint oases to counter the gloom in geography and text. The exhortation to turn away and ‘come Home’, emphasises a longing for belonging. In the prose written in parallel, Merton does voice his struggle between his vocation as Trappist and his

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁹ Ezekiel 36:26, A new heart, I will give you and put a new spirit I will put within you; I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh, N.R.S.V., p. 1061.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 23.

¹¹¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 24.

desire to write,¹¹² and also admits to a sense of homelessness.¹¹³ It is however through the concrete representations of his poetic landscapes that the full force of his alienation can be appreciated.

II.ii *Thirty Poems* (1944)

In contrast to the loss of bearings which launched the first volume, Catholic tradition provides the compass for *Thirty Poems*. The work is dedicated to ‘The Virgin Mary, Queen of Poets’ and the poems contain multiple references to Mary,¹¹⁴ to the sacrament of the Eucharist,¹¹⁵ to saints,¹¹⁶ to biblical themes,¹¹⁷ and to the Liturgy of the Hours.¹¹⁸ Two classical landscapes provide further places of anchorage, the story of Ariadne, who faces a labyrinth in order to save her life,¹¹⁹ and of Iphigenia, who has to sacrifice herself for the greater good.¹²⁰ Together they underline the challenge and renunciation associated with the process of discernment for Merton which seeks to retrench in recognisable parameters.

¹¹² Towards the end of *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton outlines this conflict: ‘There was this shadow, this double, this writer, who had followed me into the cloister (..) He rides my shoulders, sometimes, like the old man of the sea. I cannot lose him. He still wears the name of Thomas Merton. Is it the name of an enemy? (..) Maybe in the end he will kill me, he will drink my blood. Nobody seems to understand that one of us has got to die’, pp. 148-149. There is a similar sense of placing the conflict within a dramatic confrontation, but the admission seems inflated and melodramatic, when compared with the images of chill interrogation which fill the landscape of the first book of poems suggestive of a paralysis of tortured and unrelenting thinking. Merton's increasing anxiety about this conflict comes to a head in *The Sign of Jonas*, when he decides to stop writing it, in April of 1950. In parallel, by the end of the decade, there is a period of eight years without writing poetry.

¹¹³ In *The Seven Storey Mountain* composed during the mid to late 1940s and the journals written more than 20 years later, homelessness is a recurring theme: ‘I became vaguely aware of my own homelessness’ *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 324. Later on October 7, 1967: ‘My own stupid lifelong homelessness, rootlessness,’ Merton, Thomas *The Intimate Merton: Thomas Merton's Life from His Journals* ed, by Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 1999), p. 376.

¹¹⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*. ‘Song for Our Lady of Cobre’, pp. 29-30; ‘The Virgin Mary Compared to a Window’, pp. 46-48; ‘The Flight into Egypt’, pp. 27-28; ‘The Evening of the Visitation’, pp. 43-44.

¹¹⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, ‘The Holy Sacrament of the Altar’, pp. 50-51; ‘Holy Communion: The City’, pp. 39-40; ‘The Communion’, pp. 40-41.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, ‘St Agnes’, pp. 54-55; ‘St Jason’, pp.31-32.

¹¹⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, ‘Prophet’, pp. 28-29; ‘The Vine’, pp. 42-43; ‘The Sponge Full of Vinegar’, pp. 57; ‘Bethlehem’, pp. 39; ‘Cavalry’, p. 57.

¹¹⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, ‘Dark Morning’, p. 29; ‘Aubade : Lake Erie’, p. 35; ‘The Evening’, pp. 41-42; ‘Lent in a Year of War’, p. 27; ‘The Winter's Night’, p. 38.

¹¹⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 48.

¹²⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 37.

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These poems were primarily written during his early years in the novitiate. Temporarily, America slips off the map.¹²¹ Europe too remains largely as a backdrop, being implicit in the poem dedicated to Merton's brother.¹²² The monastery which was depicted only as a place of imminent foreboding in the *Early Poems* is now more vividly present, in the references to rooms that are tombs, to locked doors and to the monastery of 'Gethsemani' as the biblical garden of sorrow.¹²³ A sense of comfortless and oppressive confinement fills the poetic canvas, characterised by hunger, cold, illness, interrupted sleep and a penetrating dampness which destabilises all solid structures. To offset the pervading desolation, 'Gethsemani' is also the place of keeping watch. Within its enclosure, the eaves are blessed, and the beauty of the natural world offers potential to rekindle hope in the restoration of Edenic communion with God.

The meeting point of Catholic faith and of desolation is initially channelled through bitter irony in a transposition of the liturgical script of the *Exsultet* which is sung at the Easter Vigil. Such adaptation of the *Exsultet* also figures prominently in the 1963 collection of poems, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, as I demonstrate in Chapter Six. Whilst the *Exsultet* proclaims 'This is the night' and unfolds the joy of the resurrection, the poem, 'The Dark Morning' relays deep distress:¹²⁴

This is the black day when
Fog rides the ugly air: (..)
Then rain, in thin sentences,
Slakes him with danger, (...)
This is the dark day when
Locks let the enemy in
Through all the coiling passages of
(Curled ear) my prison!

The darkness is framed in spatial and linguistic terms. An intimidating surrealistic landscape contains the fear of interrogation of a prisoner of war. The images suggest both physical,

¹²¹ There is a brief passing reference to Haarlem, Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 39.

¹²² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, Pre-war France, p. 29; Germany at war, p. 32; Spain at war, p. 44; France at war, pp. 4 and 31. John Paul was killed in action as a pilot in 1943.

¹²³ All Cistercian monasteries are dedicated to 'Our Lady'. The monastery in Kentucky is dedicated to 'Our Lady of Gethsemani'.

¹²⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 29. 'Water wades among the buildings /To the prisoner's curled ear.'

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spiritual, and verbal paralysis as water wades among buildings, rain falls in sentences, coiling through his inner ear, like tortuous unpeaceful thinking. Merton becomes himself the prisoner in the last line as the ‘thin sentences’ and the image of liquification suggests both the pain and dulled hearing of an ear-infection, as well as mental anguish. The poem captures what is glossed over in *The Sign of Jonas*: a protracted illness during his first winter in the monastery and the chill of the dormitories.¹²⁵

‘The Night Train’ initially seems to signal a possible escape into fond memory as ‘France blooms (...) And runs to seed in a luxuriance of curious lights’, with the sense of a wild reclaiming of derelict land, but:

..... polished rails branch off forever
The steels lament (...)
We wake and weep the deaths of the cathedrals
That we have never seen,
Because we hear the jugulars of the country
Fly in the wind and vanish with a cry.¹²⁶

Merton emphasises the violation of his native land and people. Within this nightmare, language once again reflects the menacing character of the landscape as the loaded words of the secret police are written ‘in big terrible print’.¹²⁷

The desolation of spiritual darkness and physical discomfort is exacerbated by recalling the more distant experience of the early loss of his parents. Echoing the *Exsultet* once again, the poem, ‘Saint Jason’ begins ‘This is the night’, planting joyful expectancy but the ensuing images of stone doors, prisons and terrifying speech suggest a nightmarish landscape conspiring to violate innocence and resurrect Merton’s orphaned state: ‘What does it mean sunlight weeps in

¹²⁵ Merton was ill for a prolonged period during his first winter in the monastery. In *The Sign of Jonas* he refers to sleeping on boards and straw and ‘my first days in religion, the freezing tough winter...the smell of frozen straw in the dormitory under the chapel’, but this is immediately counteracted by ‘the deep unexpected ecstasy of Christmas—that first Christmas when you have nothing left in the world but God’, thus reducing that sense of immense discomfort which is caught in the poem. *The Sign of Jonas*, p.352.

¹²⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 30-31.

¹²⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 31.

your door like an abandoned child?’¹²⁸ The same bleakness continues in ‘The Regret’ with ‘We did not come to wonder who picked the locks of the past days and stole our summer.’¹²⁹

The mingling of Merton’s personal life with the experience of spiritual darkness reaches its height in the poem to his brother. The interruption of sleep which dominates the monastic night as well as the physical discomfort of the dormitories pales in the face of the anguish of losing the final member of his close family.

Sweet brother, if I do not sleep
My eyes are flowers for your tomb;
And if I cannot eat my bread,
My fasts shall live like willows where you died.
If in the heat I find now water for my thirst,
My thirst shall turn to springs for you poor travellers
‘a desolate and smoky country’
Come in my labor find a resting place.
And in my sorrows lay your head.¹³⁰

The antitheses: wakefulness/sleep; fasting/bread; thirst/springs; travelling/resting place, looks to the monastic practices of his own life as a means of redemption which resolve into the cadence of ‘like bells upon your alien tomb? Hear them and come: they call you home’. Merton uses the imperative again as in the closing of *Early Poems*. The question of how to live, how to be at home, without being complicit with the world’s destructive processes becomes all the more pressing when such processes have deprived Merton of the last member of his close family. Monastic practices offer a fragile solace, but the call homewards restates the longing for a possible building of a home in the midst of alienation. The plea alone signals that understanding of brokenness as the locus of redemption, that Merton later identified in Blake.

¹²⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 31-32. ‘What does it mean sunlight weeps in your door /Like an abandoned child? /-It means the heavyhanded storm, /Whirling and ploughing the wet woods, /Has filled with terrible speech / The stone doors of my feast.’ Linked with Merton’s a personal experience of abandonment, there is perhaps a hint of his own sense of contrition concerning his abandonment of the child he fathered and was to die in the London bombings of WWII with the mother. This is not mentioned in his autobiography, (Mott, Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*), p. 87.

¹²⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 33.

¹³⁰ To recall Merton’s early encounters with death: Merton’s mother died in 1921 when he was 6. He then lived with his maternal grandparents. Returning with his father to France and then to England, his father died in 1931 when he was 16. His maternal grandfather died in 1936 and his maternal grandmother 1937, his brother John Paul Merton died in action with the Canadian Air Force, the RCAF in 1943. ‘For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943’, pp. 35-36.

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As poignancy offsets the desolation, there are various other counterpoints to bleakness: the resilience of the child's mind, the companionship and witness of his fellow monks and the impact of monastic practice, especially Marian devotions. Transforming the image of childhood destroyed, 'The Winter's Night' begins with children 'weeping' unfinished letters to their patron saint.¹³¹ Although without a saintly or fairy-tale figure sweeping in to make all things well, there is a hint that the natural world, through a beauty which reflects the daily renewed trust of the child's mind, might ease into joyful expectancy.¹³² Similarly hopeful, Merton's descriptions of his fellow monks introduce a note of serene humour on the surrounding landscape. As the monks are wrapped in cowls and in silence, Merton compares them to trees, oddly imprisoned in their silence.¹³³ They represent images of flight as by loosening the fetters of materiality,¹³⁴ they settle into their elective silence.¹³⁵ Merton locates the monks variously in the abbey grounds, at the altar or amid the mundanity of the monastery plumbing and tools of their daily work, suggestive of how they serve as mediators between heaven and earth.¹³⁶ A final counterpoint to the anguish is created in an elegiac recalling of Good Friday: 'The Trappist Abbey Matins', which integrates biblical time with the present. Stepping into a place freed from geographical and temporal limitations, it hints at a restoration of wonder. Loss of bearings begins to point in the direction of the new-found freedom of mystical expectancy.¹³⁷

¹³¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 38.

¹³² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 38. There are strong echoes of 'The Christmas Oratorio' by W.H.Auden: O those who have seen The Child, however dimly, however incredulously, The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all. For the innocent children who whispered so excitedly Outside the locked door where they knew their presents to be. Grew up when it opened. Now, recollecting that moment We can repress the joy, but the guilt remains conscious; Remembering the stable where for once in our lives Everything became a You and not an it. W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), p. 399. 'The moonlight rings upon the ice as sudden as a footstep /Starlight clinks upon the dooryard stone, too like a latch, /And the children are, again, awake, /And all call out in whispers to their guardian angels.

¹³³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 33. 'The Regret', 'But now here is no speech of branches in these broken jails (...) / And here we stand as senseless as the oaks, /As dumb as elms.'

¹³⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 40. 'O sweet escape! O smiling flight! /O what bright secret breaks our jails of flesh?'

¹³⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 41. 'Our souls walk home as quiet as skies.'

¹³⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 39-40. 'Holy Communion: The City', 'O you who come with looks more lowly than the dewy valleys, /And kneel like lepers on the step of Bethlehem /Although we know no hills, no country rivers, /Here in the jungles of our waterpipes and iron ladders. /Our thoughts are quieter than rivers /Our loves are simpler than the trees /Our prayers deeper than the sea.'

¹³⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 46. 'Now kindle in the windows of this ladyhouse, my soul / Your childish, clear awakeness /Wake in the windows of Gethsemani, (...) /Wake in the cloisters of the lonely night.'

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Marian devotions offer key points of orientation. ‘The Evening of the Visitation’ is reflective of Ignatian meditation in which the geography of a biblical text converses with the actual geography of the reader. In this poem, the house of Zachary meets the barns of the monastery gardens.¹³⁸ In another Marian poem, the boundaries between material and spiritual dissolve as Mary blesses the rooms, windows and doors to which there are many references, demonstrating her intimacy with divine and material reality.¹³⁹ Merton is thus explicitly outlining the symbolism rooted in Catholic teaching, which claims that Mary is pre-eminent in drawing mankind to God,¹⁴⁰ and is strongly associated with the transfiguring dynamic of the Eucharist.¹⁴¹ Echoing Hopkins,¹⁴² Merton highlights Mary’s mediating role, comparing her to a window, through which she is ‘Slain in the strong rays of the bridegroom sun’ and ‘Like the host, the bread becoming the body of Christ, Mary dies by transubstantiation’.¹⁴³ Reminiscent of the whole-body worship of the young women in ‘Song to Our Lady of Cobre’, there is a sense of elemental power in Merton’s description, in which materiality and divine grace coalesce: ‘Truth upon our tongues; Grace moving like the wind with armies of wheat and Faith sitting like

¹³⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 43-44. ‘The Evening of the Visitation’. ‘Go, roads to the four quarters of our quiet distance, /While you full moon, wise queen, /Begin your evening journey to the hills of heaven, /And travel no less stately in the summer sky /Than Mary, going to the house of Zachary. /The woods are silent with the sleep of doves, The valley with the sleep of streams, /And all our barns are happy with peace of cattle gone to rest.’ In Ignatian Meditation the ‘Second Prelude’ for each meditation asks for ‘a composition, seeing the place’. It demands close attention to the details of a biblical passage, including geography, sights, sounds and smells and to enter into the story as if merging the biblical with personal reality. <<https://sacred-texts.com/chr/seil/seil18.ht>>, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, [1914], at sacred-texts.com, [accessed 19/06/2020].

¹³⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 46. ‘The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to a Window’, ‘I live to give my newborn Morning to your quiet rooms /because my will is as simple as a window’, (*ibid.*, p. 38); ‘The frost cracks on the window /A star sang in the pane. /Starlight clinks upon the dooryard stone like a latch’. ‘He is bright heaven’s open door’, (*ibid.* p.50); ‘While all our windows fill and sweeten’, (*ibid.* p.44); ‘uncurtained trouble /And windows weep’, (*ibid.* p.37). ‘France blooms along the windows’, (*ibid.* p.30); ‘the windows of your wound’, (*ibid.* p.31). In all these examples the window in Merton’s poems represents openness to divine encounter.

¹⁴⁰ ‘The Virgin is more powerful than all others as a means for uniting mankind with Christ’. Pius X, ‘Ad Diem Illum Laetissimum’, 1904 <http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_02021904_ad-diem-illum-laetissimum.html> [accessed 16/04/2020] par.8.

¹⁴¹ Paul VI, ‘Mysterium Fidei’, 1965 <http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_03091965_mysterium.html> [accessed 27/12/2019]. Pope Paul VI underlined the unbroken link existing between Mary, and Christ as physically present in the Eucharist ‘May the Most Blessed Virgin Mary from whom Christ Our Lord took the flesh which under the species of bread and wine ‘in contained, offered and consumed,’ may all the saints of God, especially those who burned with a more ardent devotion to the Divine Eucharist, intercede before the Father of mercies so that from this same faith in and devotion toward the Eucharist may result and flourish a perfect unity of communion among all Christians’, par. 75.

¹⁴² Gerard Manley Hopkins, pp. 54–58. ‘The Blessed Virgin compared to the air we breathe’.

¹⁴³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 46-47. ‘The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to a Window’,

fire'.¹⁴⁴ The synthesis of landscape, prayer and words are a powerful counterpoint to the sense of menace on the landscape.¹⁴⁵ Here the rooms that would be tombs fill with clarity from the window which is Mary. Such transparency symbolises her mediating role between divine and human and the ease of divine entry into the material world through the event of the Incarnation.

The tone of 'The Holy Child's Song' on the closing pages of the collection encapsulates the tempering of distress through awareness of a threshold where the material and the divine meet and merge. The Incarnation is presented as a joyful unfolding of familial relationship,¹⁴⁶ which leads into a transforming serenity.¹⁴⁷ By such a conclusion, this volume of poetry reflects a growing capacity for a transforming contemplative quietude. The recognition of such power within monastic practices suggests a possible dissolving of boundaries between the sanctuary of the monastery and the world beyond. When Merton accepts this non-dualistic stance, he writes with a greater lyricism and signals the possibility of a less alienating terrain.

II.iii *Man in a Divided Sea* (1946)

The third volume of the decade steps more fully into the paradox of finding the divine in unpromising reality. The very title sums up a paradoxical location. The biblical divided sea offers a passage through.¹⁴⁸ This title, however, suggests an incapacity to emerge fully in the promised land, thus underlining the sense of a lived dichotomy and a standing in the divide. The juxtaposition of contrasting landscapes continues, with a nightmarish wasteland on the one hand, and a beguiling strangeness on the other, reflecting respectively lives in thrall to finite processes or in a tenuous communion with the divine. Although these two stances continue to be represented as the world versus the monastery, there are dawning intimations that transformation

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 40.

¹⁴⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 47. 'Therefore, do not be troubled at the judgements of the thunder. /Stay still and pray, still stay, my other son /And do not fear the armies and black ramparts /Of the advancing and retreating rains: /I'll let no lightning kill your room's white order.'

¹⁴⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 55. 'When My kind Father, kinder than the sun / With looks and smiles bends down /And utters My bodily life, / My flesh, obeying, praises Heaven like a smiling cloud /Then I become the laughter of the watercourse / I am the gay wheatfields, the serious hills/ I fill the sky. /And when my Mother /Takes Me upon her lap, I laugh with love /O then what songs and what incarnate joys /Dance in the bright rays of My childish voice.'

¹⁴⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 56. 'The Holy Child's Song'. 'I shall transform all deserts into garden-ground /And there the peaceful trees, /All day say credos, being full of leaves- /And I will come and be your noon-day sun, /And make your shadows palaces of moving light.'

¹⁴⁸ Exodus 14, N.R.S.V., pp. 65-67.

of the wasteland is dependent not so much on being a monk, as upon contemplative witness. Merton has yet to openly state that contemplation is not the reserve of a small group, but the prerogative of every Christian, as he will do in 1950.¹⁴⁹ In these poems, by creating landscapes which symbolically represent contemplative vision, Merton provides an unusual canvas for illustrating such understanding ahead of pronouncements in his more discursive prose works.

The opening poem 'Song' introduces a tentative partnering of the mystical with the material, which will continue throughout the volume:¹⁵⁰

The bottom of the sea has come
And builded in my noiseless room
The fishes' and the mermaids' home.

The focus on images of rooms, doors and windows met in *Thirty Poems* is developed here, with the juxtaposition of the depths of the ocean with the confines of a room. The antithesis is reinforced by its antimetabolic patterning: 'my room, the sea; my sea, the room'. The absence of clear perimeters in mystical understanding and the corresponding expansion of the room beyond its physical confines is evident in the cross over imagery: 'curtaindeep'; 'heavy hanging sea'; 'unroom sleep'. The image of mermaids playing coral violins suggests the immateriality of fantasy, which through the liquidity of the sea merges with the materiality of the room. The alliteration of the letter 'm' and 's' suggest an onomatopoeic murmuring and whispering. As the music is muffled by water, the disrupted syntax 'Where waters most lock music in', 'unroom sleep some other where', suggests a similar dissolution of clarity in the power of words. Labrie

¹⁴⁹ 'Why do we think of the gift of contemplation, infused contemplation, mystical prayer, as something essentially strange and esoteric reserved for a small class of almost unnatural beings and prohibited to everyone else? It is perhaps because we have forgotten that contemplation is the work of the Holy Spirit acting on our souls through His gifts of Wisdom and Understanding with special intensity to increase and perfect our love for Him. These gifts are part of the normal equipment of Christian sanctity'. 'The seeds of this sublime life are planted in every Christian at Baptism'. Thomas Merton, *What Is Contemplation?* (Cambridge: Ravenio Books, 1978), pp. 8, 16 and 23.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 61. Full text of the poem: 'The bottom of the sea has come /And builded in my noiseless room /The fishes' and the mermaids' home /Whose it is most, most hell to be /Out of the heavy-hanging sea /And in the thin, thin changeable air /Or unroom sleep some other where /But play their coral violins /Where waters most lock music in: /The bottom of my room, the sea /Full of voiceless curtaindeep /There mermaid somnambules come sleep /And there, there lost orchestras play /And down the may quarterlights come /to the dim mirth of my aquadrome/ The bottom of my sea, the room.'

aptly outlines the achievement of the ‘syntactical dislocation’ as conveying ‘a sense of suspension. The images float like apparitions to dramatic and exciting effect’.¹⁵¹

This dreamlike surreality continues but in a more disturbing manner. The designation in the titles of the poems as songs, hymns and dirges overlays the landscape with music but it is of a kind where unpeaceful silence merges with anguished sound and a longing for meaningful utterance. The music echoes the biblical loveless clanging cymbal, named by St Paul.¹⁵² Merton describes a long succession of mechanical and eerie music-making which reflects a modern-day *danse macabre*:¹⁵³ ‘The silent stars drive their wheeling ring’, ‘to hear the swanworld sing’,¹⁵⁴ emerging from ‘speechless earth’, with ‘voice thin’, where ‘towns flare like tongues,’ ‘but no voice prophesies’.¹⁵⁵ This sound-picture continues with ‘the music that jangles in empty doorways’,¹⁵⁶ ‘the hand drums like locusts, the flute pours out its endless thin stream, clatter of sticks upon wood-blocks’,¹⁵⁷ and ‘the lutanist’s thin hand picks the spangling notes off from his wires’.¹⁵⁸ The sense of an orchestra of skeletons places the emphasis on a macabre physicality, where the soundwaves are agitated air mechanically pushed around, and the musical instruments become man-made machines. The sense of disorder and mechanical inanity in this music is captured in the thinness of voice, as ‘girls with eyes of wicks of lights, thin as the rushes (..) make in their minds uncertain shapes of music and slyly string their phony harps with twine’,¹⁵⁹ and ‘I am a box, my voice is only electric’.¹⁶⁰ The music of the world has become perverted into a desolate mechanical speech. The vitality associated with the human and the animal world is reduced to a broken dissonance with sinister jeers of the ‘fleering fife’, the madness of the’

¹⁵¹ Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, p. 116.

¹⁵² 1 Cor 13: ‘If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal’. N.R.S.V., p. 1,373.

¹⁵³ A *danse macabre* is an artistic genre of allegory of the Late Middle Ages. It represents the universality of death thus including all divisions of society, rich and poor. Its aim was a reminder of the fragility of life. < <https://www.britannica.com/art/dance-of-death-art-motif>>, [accessed 26/05/2020].

¹⁵⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 61.

¹⁵⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 62.

¹⁵⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 62.

¹⁵⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 63.

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 63.

¹⁵⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 64.

¹⁶⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 65.

trumpet's raving', laughter like 'a broken monument' and an animal cry of anguish as the 'bugle neighs'.¹⁶¹ Even the wind and birdsong are mechanised, with the birds singing as if their beaks are manipulated by a puppeteer.¹⁶² The religious implications of instruments becoming heralds of hell is highlighted as the drums and bells exchange handfuls of bright coins and scatter their music like pennies over the air. The image conjures up the betrayal of Judas, marking the complicity of this rhythmic interruption of silence with the betrayal of the sacred.¹⁶³

Overlaying the musical dissonance are images of imprisonment, loss of innocence and dystopian dynamics. The landscape resembles a penal colony,¹⁶⁴ peopled by fugitives,¹⁶⁵ subject to the fate of a naked traveller with his throat cut.¹⁶⁶ The anatomical materiality of the body, void of its own humanity, crowds the background with 'tackle of nerve and vein', 'experimental flesh', 'blood and lymph'.¹⁶⁷ The body as victim to an ongoing surgical experiment is reinforced, as the human adopts the mechanistic forms of commerce, tearing up the paradisaical nature of the earth where even 'children trade their pennies for the sun, ripping the rind of Eden, monkey-handed', and where adults 'rewind the manners of the firmament to fit tricks of our clockwork treachery'. As the mystery of resurrection is trapped in 'our dancehall arteries', love is vanquished by clockwork: 'the tick in my heart is not my brother's keeper',¹⁶⁸ recalling Cain's murder of his brother.¹⁶⁹ Ambiguously it also recalls the death of Merton's own brother, as he remains alive as a monk, shielded from military service.

As in *Thirty Poems*, one redeeming dimension to this landscape is monastic witness. A poem about St Alberic, one of the founders of the Cistercian order, suggests that manual work in a monastic context can alone resurrect a biblical landscape in the world. The poem refers to the

¹⁶¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 70. 'Someone who hears the bugle neigh will know /How cold it is when sentries die by starlight.'

¹⁶² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 70. 'The treacherous wind, lover of the demented /Will harp forever in the haunted temples (/What speeches do the birds make / With their beaks, to the desolate dead?'

¹⁶³ Matthew, 26:15, N.R.S.V., p. 1,208.

¹⁶⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 65, 70. 'Tropics'; 'Crusoe'.

¹⁶⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 67.

¹⁶⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 67.

¹⁶⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 68.

¹⁶⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 69.

¹⁶⁹ Genesis 4:1–16, N.R.S.V., p. 4.

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tools of farming,¹⁷⁰ which, through the work of the Trappists, create something new on the barren landscape.¹⁷¹ Such work, however, is forced to the very edges of the world, a place of deep vulnerability. The set-apartness of monastic witness is evident in the ship and ocean imagery, in which the monastery is symbolised as a lone white ship sailing in the ocean,¹⁷² or a shipwreck washed up from the ocean's depths.¹⁷³ The monks are described as appearing shipwrecked like bedraggled sea-creatures.¹⁷⁴ The depths of the mystery to which the monastery is bound is reflected in the geographical reference to the Sargasso Sea, a region of the North Atlantic formed into an oceanic whirlpool of currents and which, unlike all other regions called seas, has no land boundaries. This inimical geography means there is always danger of floundering in 'the dark Sargassos of an intolerable dream and never be heard of again'.¹⁷⁵ The disorientation of no land boundaries symbolises that profound uprootedness which launches the entire poetic corpus.

Continuing the antitheses in the opening poem 'my room, the sea', the seascape is matched by a more confined and recognisable location. There is a sense of intimacy as the monks are met in the comforting familiarity of rooms and gardens, or as they recall the fishermen and farmers who were disciples of Christ. They live in 'simple rooms', 'charmed with sun', in 'whiter coats than God's disciples'.¹⁷⁶ They stand easily at the meeting of the material and spiritual as gardening and praying merge: 'Body and Spirit tilled and gardened with our penances and death'¹⁷⁷ and 'Singing our other Office with our saws and axes'.¹⁷⁸ By being

¹⁷⁰ A toothed instrument for crushing flax and hemp or for breaking up large clumps of earth.

¹⁷¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 99. 'When your loud axe's echo on the ponds, at early morning, / Scared the shy mallard from the shallows grey as tin, /~the glades gave back your hammers' antiphons – / The din of nails that shamed the lazy spring, /Striving like Adam, with the barren wildwood, /and with the desolation of the brake, /you builded, in a reedy place /A cloister and a Ladychurch.'

¹⁷² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 108. 'It is not yet the grey and frosty time /When barns ride out of the night like ships: /We do not see the Brothers, bearing lanterns, / Sink in the quiet mist.'

¹⁷³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 74. 'The white ship /Rides like a petal on the purple water /and flings her clangorous anchor in the quiet deeps.'

¹⁷⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 79. 'See how through the waterthrash of surf and reef /The mind fights homeward to the beach, /Works loose, half dead, from the huge seas, /And lets its poor, mute mask be lifted to the light, / So sleep can leak away, and leave the water-dazzled eyes /To wake and wonder!'

¹⁷⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 81.

¹⁷⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 93.

¹⁷⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 100.

¹⁷⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 96.

washed up from the ocean's depths, but also being met in rooms, the monks stand in a liminal place. Their tenuous relationship to the world is evident in the absence of vitality,¹⁷⁹ manifest in the shroud-like whiteness of their robes, their slow and silent procession in cowl-enveloped heads and their somnolence during liturgies.¹⁸⁰ Their lack of vitality is energised by expectancy as they wait upon infinity and eternity,¹⁸¹ but even their singing signals their lostness on the earth: 'Your thoughtful eyes were always full of exile'.¹⁸² In this ambiguous zone, they appear as 'stern aliens',¹⁸³ and slightly mad, having thrown 'five wise wits away'.¹⁸⁴ In so doing, they stand as fools for Christ, echoing St Paul.¹⁸⁵

The writings of St Paul underpin these poems providing a companion text to the landscape. Merton shares the themes of a world void of love, sounding like a clanging cymbal,¹⁸⁶ the monks as fools for Christ,¹⁸⁷ and the shock of conversion, describing the voice which stopped him in his tracks.¹⁸⁸ Also like St Paul, Merton will associate Adam and Christ.¹⁸⁹ While the monks dig like Adam, there is an expectation of redeeming possibility in the arrival of Christ in their garden:

Now all our saws sing holy sonnets in this world of timber (...)

¹⁷⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 67. 'Then the sleepers, Prisoners of a moonward power of ties, / Sit up in their graves, with a white cry.'

¹⁸⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 94. 'The men that cut their graves in the grey rocks /Go down more slowly than the sun upon their dusty country /White as the wall, the weepers leave the town /To be the friends of grief.'

¹⁸¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 88. 'The four white roads make off in silence /Towards the four parts of the starry universe. / Time falls like manna at the corners of the wintry earth. /We have become more humble than the rocks, /More wakeful than the patient hills.'

¹⁸² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 100.

¹⁸³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 101.

¹⁸⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 101. These images of his fellow monks resonate strongly with the imagery in the work of Jules Laforgue, *L'Imitation de Notre Dame La Lune*, in which the figure of Mary is on the same canvas as the Pierrot who like the monks has eyes lost in exile and who exhibits somnolent and wistful movements. Merton recreates the canvas with a Catholic and monastic overlay.

¹⁸⁵ 1 Cor 4:10, N.R.S.V., p. 1,366.

¹⁸⁶ 1 Cor 13:1, N.R.S.V., p. 1,373.

¹⁸⁷ 1 Cor 4:10, N.R.S.V., p. 1,366.

¹⁸⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 96. 'I locked my eyes, and made my brain my tomb, /Sealed with what boulders rolled across my reason! /I saw the Voice that struck me dead.'

¹⁸⁹ Paul associates Adam and Christ in 1 Cor 15:22 'For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive', N.R.S.V., p. 1,375. Also, in the letter to the Romans, the presence of Adam's sin is outweighed by the pouring out of grace. Romans 5: 20. 'but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more', N.R.S.V., p. 1,352.

Walk to us Jesus, through the wall of trees.¹⁹⁰

The Adam-Christ typology, like that juxtaposition of ‘my room’ and the sea, identifies a boundless beauty in a confined brokenness. Merton thus not only revives this typology but extends the beauty in brokenness theme by gradually unfolding redeeming possibility within disfigured landscapes.¹⁹¹ Thinking back to his troubled pre-conversion past, Merton can see a life unknowingly filled with the presence of Christ. Companionship with place has now taken on a deeper dimension. Recreating St Paul’s conviction that it is Christ in whom ‘we live and move and have our being’, human locatedness is shot through with the truth of the Incarnation.¹⁹²

As Merton develops further themes, previously encountered in *Thirty Poems*, there is increasing recognition of divine presence permeating the material world and of Mary as instrumental in eliminating the divide between divine and material. Merton begins to depict nature and the soul as connatural: ‘How like the swallows and the chimney swifts /Do your free souls in glory play’.¹⁹³ Similarly, Mary’s words draws the surrounding landscape into kinship. She is presented as the first contemplative whose voice animates the natural world with its invitation to prayer.¹⁹⁴ In ‘Communion’ the sanctuary bells announce the transubstantiation of the ordinary,¹⁹⁵ whilst ‘*La Salette*’¹⁹⁶ recalls the apparition of Mary in South East France in 1846.¹⁹⁷ The natural world ‘quicken through words’¹⁹⁸ signalling the Incarnation and the Annunciation. Capitalised Word and words blend with materiality to signal a world beyond the

¹⁹⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 96.

¹⁹¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 104. ‘Christ from my cradle I had known You everywhere /And even though I sinned, I walked in You and knew /You were my world: /You were my France and England, /My seas and My America: /You were my life and air, and yet I would not own You.’

¹⁹² Acts 17:28, N.R.S.V., p. 1,331.

¹⁹³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 116.

¹⁹⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 100. ‘Her salutation /Sings in the stone valley like a Charterhouse bell.’

¹⁹⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 83-84. ‘Bellsong falls out of Heaven with a sound of glass. /Her slow words move, / (Like summer winds the wheat) her innocent love: /Desires glitter in her mind /Like morning stars: /Speech of an angel shines in the waters of her thought like diamonds /Rides like a sunburst on the hillsides of her heart, /and is brought home like harvest.’

¹⁹⁶ Merton refers to an apparition of the Virgin Mary, on 19th September 1846 in the countryside around Grenoble. These poems were written during the centenary.

¹⁹⁷ The poem was written during the year of the centenary celebrations. The conflating of the present back into the biblical past together with the parallel catapulting forward of biblical figures beyond their historical context allow for the breakdown of rigid compartmentalisation.

¹⁹⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 72-73.

purely terrestrial,¹⁹⁹ with sound from belfries merging with bird song, and the liturgy of communion echoing in the fields of hay and barley.

Overall, the landscapes in *Man in a Divided Sea* are dreamlike and spectral. They float rather than assert their presence, offering haunting glimpses of an alternative to a land laid waste. One early critic Will Lissner, saw a distinctive quality in this volume of poetry. Writing in 'Catholic World' 1948, he saw Merton as the 'Toast of the *Avant-Garde*', for a work of 'striking power, haunting beauty and extraordinary promise'.²⁰⁰ His words resonate with the descriptions of floating apparitions, left suspended, mentioned by Labrie, with reference to the opening poem.²⁰¹ I suggest that the poems of this volume demonstrate an arresting and memorable quality within Merton's map-making. As the canvas becomes more nuanced, he lingers less in dualistic vision and enters more fully into identifying the enmeshment of multiple elements.

II.iv *Figures for an Apocalypse* (1947)

The prophetic diatribe against the world found in *Figures for An Apocalypse* relocates the poetry firmly within a rigid dualism. There are several voices in this collection. The most strident carves the world in two, as Merton the monk shouts at a landscape of apocalyptic devastation. It is in this volume, that the voice of a 'narrow-minded triumphalist', 'a man disdainful of the world',²⁰² and the 'petulant ascetic',²⁰³ described respectively by Waldron and Cooper can most piercingly be heard. The second voice emerges from Merton's confrontation with his past arising from the parallel undertaking of writing his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. This voice is one of angry bewilderment with his compromised childhood. A third quieter voice is preoccupied with contemplative vision and how to map it, making for a canvas replete with

¹⁹⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 72-73, 'April', 'These lights (..) /sing across the air (..) /to disappear, unpublished, in the reeds, /Where their words are quenched, the world is quickened: /The lean air suddenly flowers, /The little voices of the rivers change; /So that the hunters put away their silver quivers, /Die to the level of river and rockbrim, And are translated, homeward, /To the other, solemn, world.'

²⁰⁰ Will Lissner, 'Toast of the *Avant-Garde*: A Trappist Poet', *Catholic World*, CLXI (1948), 424. Cited in Brewer, 'A Study of the Style and Content of the Poems of Thomas Merton', p. 20.

²⁰¹ Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, p. 116.

²⁰² Waldron, p. 3.

²⁰³ Cooper, pp. 12, 45.

geographical, architectural, and topographical vocabulary, alongside a parallel tentative map emptied of possible waymarks.

All three voices are underpinned by ambiguity. Is there a hint of parody in taking on the role of prophet against the world or the earnestness of a monk in search of mystical encounter? Given the censorship Merton was experiencing in the writing of his autobiography, as I shall later outline, there is perhaps the beginnings of Merton's airing of what will become a deep frustration with the sanitised image imposed onto him as a saviour of Catholic monasticism. Merton will, in fact, later mock the image presented in this work of a monk 'heading for the wood, (..) the Bible open at Apocalypse'.²⁰⁴ Parody or not, there is an element of fabrication and an overblown earnestness which fails to ring true. In my analysis I consider each of the three voices in turn: Merton's disdain of the world, his angry bewilderment, and the mapping of contemplative vision. Merton's personal disorientation is more rawly exposed in these poems than in the more measured synthesis he was outlining in his autobiography.²⁰⁵

II.iv.a. The First Voice: Worldly Disdain

The image presented in Chapter One of scholastic dualism, in which the Church is represented as a bulwark against the world, is recreated in Merton's polarisation of place in *Figures*. There are two distinct landscapes: urban decadence and monastic sanctuary. Kilcourse describes these poems as urbanscapes that 'grate and force violent images of decay and moral torpor,' which 'collapse into abstractions', and in which 'the theme of the world's wickedness' is portrayed in 'pyrotechnic images', alongside the 'halcyon monastic refuge'.²⁰⁶ Kilcourse's words imply an overblown declamatory language which fails to convince. A similar recognition of vacuous exaggeration is also evident in Brewer's otherwise mostly complimentary study of the poems of the decade. He summarises *Figures* as 'trite and stale rhetoric' in which eighteen out of twenty-five poems are 'marred by the rhetorical habit of exclamation, exhortation, and pious

²⁰⁴Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 141.

²⁰⁵ Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* was first published on October 11, 1948.

²⁰⁶ George Kilcourse, "'The Paradise Ear": Thomas Merton, Poet', *The Kentucky Review*, 7.2 (1987), 25 (p. 107).

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questionings which convey, not real feeling and conviction, but the trappings of false sentiment, rendered insipid by a superficial piety'.²⁰⁷

The sense of a cataclysmic event which will separate the righteous from the unrighteous is evident from the epigraph to this collection of poems from Matthew 25, the story of the wise and foolish virgins. It is a story which can justify a dualism which divides the world into two unambiguous parts.²⁰⁸ The invocatory tone of the opening words 'Come down, come down Beloved'²⁰⁹ echoes 'The Song of Songs', and hints at mystical witness, yet, there is no accompanying sense of anticipatory joy for those who are prepared and expectant. Rather, the focus is on the ugliness in the response of the foolish virgins. Similarly, the landscape, instead of the rich sensuality of 'The Song of Songs' is disfigured with industrial furnaces. Earth has become a commodity to be pillaged of its resources. The mountains and seas are made of rubber, tin, and steel, which spill out their commodities in complete absence of any reverence for creation. Industry has created unpassable gateways, fireproof rocks, and adamantine banks. Merton suggests that in such a world the Incarnation would become one more means of making money: 'The eyes that will not coin Thy Incarnation figured in every field and flowering tree'.²¹⁰ In the face of such violation of the Earth's landscapes, Merton adopts the harsh intransigence of those psalms which call for retribution on enemies.²¹¹

In keeping with the character of a prophet to pinpoint wrongs, Merton names the streets and hotels of New York, Haarlem, Pittsburgh, and Ohio, with their factories, entertainments, and jails. He pitches such cityscapes against the medieval abbeys of Clairvaux in France, Rievaulx in Yorkshire, and Tintern in the Wye Valley, with the associated sacred topographies of deserts, islands, harbours, and rural sanctuary. This angry juxtaposition is relayed through an inchoate divulging of impressions, which exhibits both carelessness and a voyeuristic lingering in gory scenes, where sinew, marrow and blood take the foreground.²¹² Whilst there is resonance of the theme of martyrdom within Christian history, the references appear coldly clinical, more for the

²⁰⁷ Brewer, 'A Study of the Style and Content of the Poems of Thomas Merton', p. 60.

²⁰⁸ 'And at midnight there was a cry made: Behold, the Bridegroom cometh, go ye forth to meet Him.' N.R.S.V., p. 1,207.

²⁰⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 134.

²¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 136.

²¹¹ Psalm 109, N.R.S.V., pp. 705-706; Psalm 35, N.R.S.V., pp. 652-653.

²¹² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 150.

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purpose of shocking an indifferent world, and for allowing the poet's righteousness to bask in the martyr's heroic shadow. The unanalysed compartmentalisation reflects the measure in which Merton's voice can approach those described biblically as 'Pharisaic', exemplifying the illusion that holiness exists within rigid confines, uniquely associated with rightful and measurable behaviour.²¹³

There is a brief respite from the tirade against the world as Merton reflects on writer friends, Robert Lax and Edward Rice. There is a sense of genuine warmth, humour, and a belief in companionship as he places these men with himself among the wise virgins.²¹⁴ The ensuing landscape, however, develops a nightmarish and manic quality. The moon in a sinister fashion, 'giggles in the stream', a wild-dog bites an ankle and knives a prophet's shoulder,²¹⁵ as a woman nails her high-heeled shoes into the poor, an implicit reference to the crucifixion. The virulent misogyny presents woman as the sole crucifier, accomplice of the dog who buries the prophet's meatless shin.²¹⁶ The numbing grimness within this description is briefly allayed in a flash of lyricism, as Merton imagines the city becoming green again, reclaiming its urban desolation.²¹⁷ He rapidly closes the door on this lyricism, however, as the birds of the natural world take on the

²¹³ The term 'Pharisaic' is restricted here to its association in the biblical sense with individuals and groups who show themselves to be over concerned with personal righteousness and who prefer to emphasise what they are against rather than what they are for. This typology is also associated with a love of stating and restating personal conviction, with the addiction to polarising and compartmentalising as in Luke 18:11 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector'. This is the tone in Merton's polarisation of the world. A third association is for a greater concern for law than for the human. Merton's construct of world versus monastery is anaesthetised from the human and from contemporary reality. He is caught up in abstractions. His confining of monasticism to its medieval foundations keeps it unadulterated by modernity. Within this rigid construct any notion of unearned righteousness based on inherent grace and the compassion of God is an aberration. Fourthly, in his angry dumping of negativity, Merton demands that others meet him where he is at, rather than mindfully attending to his audience. He insists the readers meets him in his anger and his judgement. This includes a readiness to speak against what he deems himself not to be. A woman cannot be a Pharisee so biblically were ready prey for their Pharasaic pronouncements. Similarly, Merton's commodification of the world, turns with ease to women, second only to the world as a whole in naming evil. There is no parallel attention given to men. With men, in the third section, Merton is gentler, more tolerant, almost indulgent towards their unpreparedness and places himself with, rather than apart, the friends whom he seeks to warn.

²¹⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 140.

²¹⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 142.

²¹⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 143.

²¹⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 145. Merton names different elements suggesting a desire to linger in the abundant variety of the natural world, referring to an invasion by ivy, wild-grape, fragrant flowers, wild rose, hawthorn, doves' nests and hives of bees. Instead of Park Avenue and the Grand Central arises 'a little hill clustered with sweet, dark pine' where a farmer plants an acre and a hermit builds a cell with the stones of the city hall and 'all the caved-in subways turn to streams /And creeks of fish Flowing in sun and silence'.

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colour of commercialism and violent aggression, recalling scenes of martyrdom: ‘all the birds with golden beaks’, ‘Stab at the blue eyes of the murdered saints’.²¹⁸ It is something of a relief for the reader to reach the end of this sequence, which gives the answer to the opening invocation as ‘Gates as wide as canticles offer Diadems of liturgy’. The poem’s effusive elation cannot cut through the numbing quality of the diatribe and the bombardment with images of butchered anatomy.

An attempt to bring together the material world and the spiritual is evident as the poet addresses the sheaves to resurrect the biblical landscape in the now.²¹⁹ Similarly, the poet turns to a pond with the plea: ‘*asperges me*’,²²⁰ a liturgical rite of cleansing associated with repentance and sung in Gregorian chant through all seasons except Easter.²²¹ The tone however of affected piety is a reiteration of a separation, a development of that fastidious anxiety about the smell of incense on his clothes when he is out in the open in *The Sign of Jonas*.²²²

Merton’s determination to distance his righteousness from the profanity of the world is particularly evident in the caricature of women in these poems, in which he adopts the indignation of the biblical Pharisees in their perception of the sinful state of women.²²³ This standpoint is in stark contrast to the picture of an embodied faith in the poem, ‘Song For Our Lady of Cobre’, (1941) or the later stillness of *Hagia Sophia*, (1963) wherein Wisdom as a female principle unites all subject-object dualisms. Instead, the women who figure in these poems take on the very character of the money obsessed and superficial world as they are shown with ‘bangles’ on ‘jewelled bones’.²²⁴ Immoral and debauched, the city has ‘dressed herself in

²¹⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 147.

²¹⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 149, ‘Landscape:Wheatfields’, (rise like) ‘kings and prophets from the pages of an ancient Bible /And blind us with the burnish of your message in our June, /Then raise your hands and bless us.’

²²⁰ Sung in every season except Easter: *Asperges me, Domine, /Hyssopo, et mundabor/Lavabis me, /Et super nivem dealabor./ Miserere mei, Deus, /Secundum magnam misericordiam tuam /Gloria Patri, et Filio, /Et Spiritui Sancto./Sicut erat in principio, /Et nunc, et semper,/Et in saecula saeculorum. /Amen. Cleanse me, O Lord, /With hyssop, and I shall be made clean /Wash me, and I shall be made whiter than snow. Have mercy on me, O God /According to Your great mercy/ Glory be to the Father, and to the Son,And to the Holy Ghost/ As it was in the beginning/Is now, and ever shall be/ World without end. Amen.*

²²¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 188.

²²² Chapter IV, II ‘The Mooring Point of Gethsamani’.

²²³ Luke 7: 36-50. The anointing of the feet of Jesus, N.R.S.V., p. 1,251.

²²⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 137.

paper money (..) with nickels running in her veins. She was as callous as a taxi; Her high-heeled eyes were sometimes blue as gin, And she nailed them all the days of her life'.²²⁵ Merton's angry and unrestrained invective set against his own personal piety is clearly a factor in the antipathy of critics. This depiction of women is also a key factor in the second voice of these poems, which I suggest provides a channel for the deflected pain emerging from the confrontation with his past in the writing of his autobiography.

II.iv.b. The Second Voice: Angry Dismay

Anthony Padovano, in his study of transition points in Merton's life, claims that at this stage, with six years in the monastery, 1941-1947, and fully engaged in writing his autobiography, Merton felt 'so bruised and betrayed by the secular world' that he called for 'the whole world to cease being the world and to become a monastery'.²²⁶ Merton hence constructs a polarised geography, with America representing commercialism, ecological indifference, the triumph of industry and inauthenticity, relayed through associative images:²²⁷ wells of blood, hell, smiles as raw as scars, billion gallon silences, electric teeth, cancers of love, roots of steel; phony sunset.²²⁸ France in contrast represents the medieval monastic world with a sense of sacred destiny,²²⁹ and devotion to prayer.²³⁰ Such polarisation, Mott will claim is characteristic: 'it was as if he could not ground his enthusiasm for the one without damning the others'.²³¹ 'His sense of geography led him to set up pairs of places and to treat one as the opposite of the other on the emotional scale'.²³² I suggest that Merton's characteristic sense of place, as evidenced in his early prose is dislodged by confrontation with his own anger at a compromised childhood, unearthed as he works on recounting his life.

²²⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 144.

²²⁶ Anthony T Padovano, 'The Eight Conversions of Thomas Merton', 7, (p. 11).

²²⁷ America is present in the names of cities and states: Kentucky; Kansas, Missouri, Lexington; Pittsburgh, Ohio, Cincinnati.

²²⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 153.

²²⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 156. 'Oh! Since I was a baby in the Pyrenees, When old St-Martin marked me for the cloister from high Canigou'.

²³⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 55. 'We were begotten in the tunnels of December rain / Born from the wombs of news and tribulation/ By night, by wakeful rosary'.

²³¹ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 68.

²³² Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 37.

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In his autobiography, Merton's description of his mother emphasises her critical gaze.²³³ His words implicitly attack the rigid and critical methods of bringing up children of the early 20th century, which his own mother adopted.²³⁴ Aside from this comment, Robert Daggy's work on the original manuscript of the autobiography identifies how in the ensuing description of his childhood following her death, when he moves with his father to Bermuda, there are various passages deleted from the initial draft.²³⁵ Such passages refer to Merton's experience of indifferent parenting by his father and 'step-mother' in Bermuda, an island which he would claim in the deleted passages, 'fed me with more poisons than I have a mind to stop and count'.²³⁶ The experience indirectly recounted in the poems is at an opposite pole to the humanity and warmth met later, in the very different island experience of Cuba. These poems provide a powerful illustration of how Merton's poetry provides sharper insights to those met in the prose by revealing an uncensored picture of the deleted anguish of his life in Bermuda.²³⁷ They rework sentiment sanitised or glossed over in his autobiography.²³⁸

In *Figures* Merton excavates the coldness of his mother, the indifferent parenting of his father, the intense dislike of his 'step-mother', Evelyn Scott and his childhood experience of uprootedness and neglect, all of which he deleted from his autobiography. He begins with hints at the desolation of his lonely nights, as he hears his 'stepmother' 'crabbing in the unquiet noises

²³³ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 5. 'My mother was an American. I have seen a picture of her as a rather slight, thin, sober little person with a serious and somewhat anxious and very sensitive face. And this corresponds with my memory of her — worried, precise, quick, critical of me, her son.'

²³⁴ Kimberly Deavers and Laura Kavanagh, 'Caring for Infants Then & Now, 1935- the Present', *75 Title V Anniversary Celebration*, 2010, p. 4 <<https://www.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/ourstories/mchb75th/mchbcaringinfants.pdf>> [accessed 16/04/2020]. The view of child rearing which his mother adhered to was fashionable at the time. A government publication titled *Infant Care* published in 1914, playing with children was considered to be indulgent and would spoil the child, p. 128. The wilfulness of the child was to be corrected by rigid regularity with strict adherence to schedules, p. 129.

²³⁵ Robert E Daggy, 'Birthday Theology: A Reflection on Thomas Merton and the Bermuda Ménage', *The Kentucky Review*, 7.2 (1987), 29 (pp. 69 – 86).

²³⁶ Daggy, p. 70.

²³⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 137. 'We have stood in the late light/ Of the most lonely afternoons./And counted all the hours that accused us /Cutting to the division of the marrow and the spine.(...) We had not planned to have so great a Lent/ Bind us and bite us with its heavy chain.'

²³⁸ Robert Daggy and David Cooper provide a detailed discussion of material deleted from Merton's biography. With reference to descriptions given of the child Tom by Evelyn Scott and by her son. Robert Daggy suggests that Merton endured considerable bullying and neglect. Evelyn is described as punishing him for crying, (Daggy, p. 83.) labelling him a 'morbid and possessive kid,' (Daggy, pp. 69-86.) ever ready to accuse him of some failing, and according to her son, taking delight in this, whilst admitting openly and repeatedly how she hated his dead mother. Cooper points how Evelyn drew his father into her disapproval of his regularly disrupted sleep caused by teeth grinding, he laughed at his son's behaviour, a habit which his father describes as British, thus setting his son apart from himself and Evelyn, (Cooper, p. 82).

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of the dawn'.²³⁹ His intense dislike of how Evelyn possessed his father's affections is evident in 'Grey artificial Shebas, spurious queens,' who as 'stepmother city'²⁴⁰ is equated with the shallowness of modernity. Underlining her coldness and artificiality, he orders: 'Fasten no more these pilgrims to your clock-work heart'.²⁴¹ Stepmother city is an 'unlovely relative' with 'imitation arms', and a diseased 'candy kiss'.²⁴² The image of seas of candied poison echoes this sentiment and delineates clearly the frontier of the Atlantic.²⁴³ The whole of America thereby becomes a place of artificiality and deception which readily sugars over the sense of sin.²⁴⁴ The sense of estrangement of the child is particularly strong where Merton pictures a den, a door and sunshine, but it is overlaid with his orphaned state: 'Alone, alone sitting in the sunny den-door'.²⁴⁵ When the relationship collapsed, Evelyn placed the blame on nine-year-old Tom.²⁴⁶

This period provoked a looking back in anger against constant geographical uprooting and the cruelty of aloof and inattentive parenting. Merton speaks bitterly of the effect of instability on children: 'how many have grown like weeds on any dung they could find to put their roots in!' and the very particular struggle of an orphan: 'what is left for the hundreds of thousands of orphans left to stray and fight for a living like little wolves in the jungle of bombarded tenements?'²⁴⁷ His assertion is spatially framed through his references to a weed-filled wasteland, absence of roots, a jungle and bombarded tenements. The image captures unhappiness framed as intense physical dislocation.

The facile polarisation caused by such disorientation significantly reduces the quality of Merton's poetic landscapes. Rakoczy notes the deep irony of Merton's position, in entering the

²³⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 137.

²⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 189.

²⁴¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 189.

²⁴² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 189.

²⁴³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 153.

²⁴⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 156. 'My sins (..) /Would there have been immune, /Or learned to keep their coats of unreality/From the deep sea's most patient candying?'

²⁴⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 168.

²⁴⁶ In a further deleted passage, David Cooper in *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (University of Georgia Press 2008), p. 87, outlines how Merton associates the experience of being raised among strangers, with the feeling of being unwanted and even disliked. The number of alterations suggest that in the autobiography, he was forced to project a more sanitised version of his life, emptied of such raw dismay.

²⁴⁷ From the original draft of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, cited by Daggy, p. 71.

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monastery on December 7th 1941, the day that Pearl Harbour is bombed.²⁴⁸ In the face of this destruction, Merton was set against America beyond his own monastic confines,²⁴⁹ the monastery becoming the sole authentic place, the ‘only real city in America’.²⁵⁰ In contrast to the safe, clean harbour of the monastery, America is a place where the rhythms ‘upset my silences’ and where only a ‘pennyworth of prayer’ is spent in the ‘clamour of the Christless avenues’, among the ‘walls of traffic’, ‘the wheels of that unhappiness’.²⁵¹ Venturing into the local town, Louisville, plants only tedium and alienation,²⁵² a place of ‘useless concerns’ and ‘tedious necessity’.²⁵³

By contrast, on leaving Bermuda, the return to France brought freedom at least from the newly acquired critical gaze of Evelyn, and gave him, albeit temporarily, the more wholehearted attention of his father and the kinder family environment of the Privat family, with whom he stayed during school holidays.²⁵⁴ Although he struggled to be accepted at the *Lycée* Montauban, France would remain as a preferable alternative to Bermuda. Mott refers to Merton’s claim that his return to France ‘really saved me.’²⁵⁵ In *Figures* the depiction of his native land hence becomes an ancient holy map as a fitting backdrop to faithful witness, where the rosary punctuates the night, where the night fires of St John’s night are as ‘wide as faith’, and where the crossroads and vineyards trace John the Baptist’s wandering in the wilderness.²⁵⁶ Unlike the

²⁴⁸ Susan Rakoczy, *Great Mystics and Social Justice: Walking on the Two Feet of Love*, (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2006), p. 118.

²⁴⁹ Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 2; 1941–1952: 1941–52*, edited by Jonathan Montaldo, (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 223. ‘I felt completely alienated from everything in the world and all its activity’.

²⁵⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton*, D-269 edition (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977), p. 155.

²⁵¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 193.

²⁵² Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 111, August 14, 1949.

²⁵³ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 8.

²⁵⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 61–65.

²⁵⁵ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 25.

²⁵⁶ ‘Born from the wombs of news and tribulation/ By night, by wakeful rosary.’ *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p.156. ‘Now where the hills of Languedoc are blue with vineyards (..) /The flames that wake as wide as faith. (..) /Burn at the ageless cross-roads,’ p. 171; ‘Out at the crossing of the vineyard roads /Prophet John-Baptist /You have brought us to the door-sill of your wilderness,’ p. 172; ‘Oh! since I was a baby in the Pyrenees, /When old St Martin marked me for the cloister from high Canigou,’ p. 156. The Feast of St John celebrates the birth of John the Baptist with bonfires on 24th June.

dystopic crafting of American geography, France represents for Merton transcendent possibility.²⁵⁷

The generally more negative criticism given to this volume of poetry is likely to derive from the stridency of this second voice which projects landscapes stamped by Merton's personal psychological landscape. One French critic, Madeleine Davy accuses Merton of pigeonholing France, expressing surprise that in spite of his French birth and his deep engagement with French and European culture, he was silent about the difficulties faced by the French during World War II.²⁵⁸ She claims that this silence seems uncharacteristic in one who was increasingly engaged with American social and political struggles. His attachment to France for Davy is fixed in a pre-war country of unchanging medieval landscapes, untouched by the struggles which provided material for his lament at modernity.

This volume of poetry consolidates the pigeonholing of both sides of the Atlantic, suggesting a too eager prejudice and a limited attending on the reality of place. The intransigence within the poetic construct also illustrates the extent of his own struggle with alienation and the repression of painful memories. The third voice in this volume seeks to reconfigure the landscape.

II.iv.c. The Third Voice: Mapping a Contemplative Path

A preoccupation with geography and with its absence is the focus of the third voice in this volume, returning to the theme which launched the poetry of the decade. Merton juxtaposes

²⁵⁷ 'Once we were begotten /In the wombs of the deep mountains /Born over and over in the play of penitential tunnels /(..) Have you heard this music (..) /Play: 'Going to Gethsemani.' *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 155. The Cistercian foundations in England similarly reflect a landscape bound to faithful witness, evident in the surrounding natural world: 'Once when the white clouds praised you, Yorkshire /Flying before the sun, flying before the eastern wind, /What greenness grew along the waters, /Flowering in the valleys of the purple moor. // Once when the strong sun blessed you, /Banking a million treasures in the waters of the Rye, /Who were the saints who came to claim your peacefulness /(..) // The viewless winds came walking on the land like a Messiah /Spending the thin scent of the russet heather, /Lauding the flowering gorse and the green broom: /because this was your spring. /The sky had new-discovered you and looked and loved you', p. 177. As John the Baptist is met on the crossroads in France, in England, the wise virgin stays awake as 'by night the lamps of York go to and fro', p. 177. As a result, 'The great psalms are flowering along the vaulted stones,' p. 178. Whilst urban decay and inauthenticity of America represent the breakdown of relationship with the divine, the Cistercian landscapes acknowledge, welcome, and represent communion with the divine.

²⁵⁸ Farcet, Giles and Davy, Marie-Madeleine *Thomas Merton, un trappiste face à l'Orient* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2014). 'Thomas Merton, peu sensibilisé au malheur de l'Europe', (So little sensitivity to the devastation of Europe).

concrete realities of place with a vocabulary reflecting the placelessness of contemplative vision. Geology is present in the elements of fire, water and earth spilling out tin, iron, and emeralds. Geography and topography are represented by countries, continents, islands, harbours, reefs, mountains, cliffs, riverbanks, oceans, and seas. Human-made cityscapes are met in towers, furnaces, cities, walls, windows, rooms, jails, prisons, skylights, and urban dereliction. Conversely, Merton seeks to name a location beyond the map. For the contemplative monk, the wood²⁵⁹ and shore²⁶⁰ are pathless. It is a place where ‘we have forgotten your geography, Old nature, and your map’;²⁶¹ where ‘we suddenly escape the drag of earth, /Fly from the dizzy paw of gravity /And swimming in the wind that lies beyond the track’.²⁶² The question remains: ‘Where shall we find the road to you?’²⁶³ There is no possible answer.²⁶⁴

This third voice recognises the falsity of trying to carve up mystery according to human calculation.²⁶⁵ As Merton names the insufficiency of human calculation: ‘Hidden heaven mocked the visible systems’,²⁶⁶ he realises his own calculation is suspect. He therefore asks to be delivered from measure,²⁶⁷ and like Paul the Hermit to travel on paths where ‘all ways are lost’.²⁶⁸ He seeks a freedom which allows him to reach beyond the clockwork heart, the calendar, and compass, into the wide-open winds of the horizon.²⁶⁹ This third voice questions the judgementalism of this volume of poetry, aspiring towards a greater openness. As Merton claims at the end of *The Sign of Jonas*, ‘My reaction is too natural. It is impure. The world I am sore at

²⁵⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 139.

²⁶⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 147.

²⁶¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 158.

²⁶² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 159.

²⁶³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 167.

²⁶⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 179. ‘Not in the streets, not in the white streets, /Nor in the crowded porticoes, /Shall we catch You in our words, /Or lock You in the lens of our cameras, /Not in the groves, not in the flowering green groves, /(..) Shall we find the path to Your pavilion.’

²⁶⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 169. ‘Because our minds lovers of map and line /Charting the way to heaven with a peck of compasses, /Plotting to catch our Christ between some numbered parallels /Trick us with too much logic.’

²⁶⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 159.

²⁶⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 187.

²⁶⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 167.

²⁶⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 158.

on paper is perhaps a figment of my imagination',²⁷⁰ he begins to reject the dualisms underpinning these poems. The final volume of the decade will begin in landscapes which reflect the coalescence of contradictions.

II.v *Tears of the Blind Lions* (1949)

In the title and the epigraph: 'When those who love God try to talk about Him, their words are blind lions looking for springs in the desert',²⁷¹ Merton heralds a landscape in which diverging elements converge. In a blind lion, wild pathos meets majesty. The drive to talk of God acknowledges God's ineffability. Landscape is ambiguous, and language tentative, touched by a sense of inevitable failure and an inherent darkness. This volume offers a marked contrast to the assured angry invective of *Figures*. Merton, like the lion, is haunted by the loss of Eden, where the fierce and meek are bound in relationship to the divine and to the whole of the created world. Leaving behind the angry judgementalism, the questioning of how to be in the world is transposed to a stance of urgent expectancy and longing for an answer.

The landscape is veiled as if representing a dreamlike vision with little resemblance to an actual place. Images of water and expressions referring to the cusp of change and new birth dominate, symbolising the reconfiguration of the land in the actions of quickening, swelling, bursting, pouring, or encompassing. Water becomes a symbol of contemplation, reflecting a power which can pierce through artificial constructs, and unearth an original purity and unity. Throughout this work, contemplatives are associated with the fluidity and unpredictability of water. They thus stand in a liminal place, accustomed to a loss of bearings, but open to unexpected encounter in new, yet ever temporary reconfigurations. Through this dissolving and reconfiguring, Merton represents the potential within contemplative vision to destabilise polarisations. Fixity in time and place meets infinity and eternity. Biblical characters meet contemporary humanity. There is a meeting and merging of multiple antitheses: near and far; past and present; fierce and tame; immanent and transcendent; verbal and speechless; mundane

²⁷⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 157.

²⁷¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 196.

and mysterious. The image of water is the key to capturing this eroding, melding, and re-forming dynamism.

In contrast to this wild elemental force, features of simple dwelling places are dotted through the landscape with references to doorways, windows, shelters, dens, and cells. Sometimes the dwelling place is out in the open, simply ‘beneath the cedars’ or ‘behind the firs’. These images suggest the fragility of a home which is a ready prey to surrounding elemental forces and ever on the cusp of being enveloped. The windows and doors are open whilst the dwelling places are without walls or insubstantial. Such a location demands ongoing attentiveness as the human and the cosmic collide. Part of this breakdown of frontiers is further manifest in the power of words to inscribe material reality and be inscribed in it. As in *The Sign of Jonas*, words materialise in landscapes. They can build, be consumed, devour, or take material form as birds, seas, and trees, which will themselves then speak.

This stepping into multiple contradictions generates a more lyrical voice. Merton is seven years into his life as a monk. The impact of monastic life has nurtured a greater sense of possible integration. These poems echo that transition in *The Sign of Jonas* where the frontiers between incense and nature, spiritual and functional, monastic and worldly, dissolve.

Following the mostly unmeasured diatribe of *Figures*, the lyricism and recollected tone of this volume plants surprise. In four short verses, the opening poem arrestingly encapsulates the multi-layered strangeness of the poetic landscape.²⁷² Merton highlights the reconfiguring power of water, the importance of mindful dwelling, the cusp of transformation, and the organic and dynamic power within words. The wild vitality of the landscape depicted, together with the assonant and alliterative sound, creates a persuasive lyricism:

When rain, (sings light) rain has devoured my house
And wind wades through my trees,
The cedars fawn upon the storm with their huge paws.
Silence is louder than a cyclone
In the rude door, my shelter.
And there I eat my air alone
With pure and solitary songs.

²⁷² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 197.

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The assonance, rhyme and meanings of ‘fawn’, ‘storm’ and ‘paws’ gives weight to an elemental wildness. The alliteration of ‘s’ suggests the whispering of constant rain, whilst the alliterative ‘l’ recreates the liquefying instability of the landscape, with its potential to slip into fresh forms. The cedars with their ‘paws’ and the devouring of his house suggest a metamorphosis into the fierce volatility and majesty of the lion, which is intensified further by the presence of a cyclonic wind. The vulnerability of the poet-contemplative is underlined as he is alone and has not more than a mere shelter with an insubstantial door, as a dwelling place, the house having been devoured. The contemplative stands humbly, tame, and insignificant, with a readiness to be victim to the wildness, yet trusting the devouring mouth of contemplation.

The strangeness of the landscape is reinforced by its verbal and anthropomorphic qualities. Windows grieve and frown, glass wrinkles, and the rain, wind, and air, become song makers and are consumed.²⁷³ The ‘boiling up’ of poems suggest the primeval movements of the earth. Words are imagined as organic material elements as the poet eats and drinks them. The strangeness of the landscape contrasts with his quiet stillness, his dispassionate observation, and the lightness of his presence expressed in the simple conviction of God’s immanence: ‘I speak to God under the doorway. Dialogue with God is definitely located.’²⁷⁴

The equation of the eroding and reconfiguring power of water with contemplation is projected into an association of all holy people with its elemental power. The Scottish philosopher-theologian, Duns Scotus, lives in a world where ‘the woods and grasses tumble like a sea’ and whose word ‘swells’ leading to a place that bursts, breaks, swings and rolls.²⁷⁵ The biblical landscape and the figure of Mary is equally associated with water,²⁷⁶ as she is described as coming from the land of the fishing boats and the women at wells. The mystery announced by the Annunciation is represented by oceanic depths: ‘You have drowned Gabriel’s word in thoughts like seas’;²⁷⁷ ‘What seas of life were planted by that voice’.²⁷⁸ St Clement stands on a

²⁷³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 197. ‘But I drink rain, drink wind /Distinguish poems /Boiling up out of the cold forest.’

²⁷⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 197.

²⁷⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 199.

²⁷⁶ ‘The Quickening of St John the Baptist’, pp. 199-202.

²⁷⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 200.

²⁷⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 201.

landscape in which the whole communion of saints is immersed in water, as his joy stands like ‘fleets or islands sailing the seas to Greece’. The historical and geographical distance of his witness is collapsed as he stands in close proximity to the modern-day contemplative in America: ‘Your waters shatter the land at my feet with seas, forever young’.²⁷⁹ The saint as model for the contemplative to follow stands precariously on land and seeks to ‘drink and swim’ as the ‘Lamb strikes rainbows from the rock’ and the cliffs give up their buried streams’.²⁸⁰ The landscape is pervaded by seismic movement, heavenly portents and trust in the divine.

The association of biblical figures and saints with water is accompanied by further associations with utterance and dwelling place. Mary enters ‘the dooryard of her relative’ and her graced salutation ‘Sings in the stone valley like a Charterhouse bell’.²⁸¹ John the Baptist is met before birth in the womb and is associated with the utterance of a mad truth.²⁸² St Malachy, immersed in water images,²⁸³ is similarly associated with words as the modern day monk is asked to sing him a stone-age hymn.²⁸⁴ Time and place are conflated as Malachy, John the Baptist, Clement, Duns Scotus, and Mary, meet the modern-day Trappist and all those who entrust themselves to contemplative wisdom.²⁸⁵

Conversely, the non-contemplative world is a place where the flow of water and of words are frozen. The depiction of Columbus arriving in America, presents a landscape in its Edenic state, before its fall into modernity when America is seen through a veil of waters.²⁸⁶ Once the

²⁷⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 204.

²⁸⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 203.

²⁸¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 200.

²⁸² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 200. ‘What secret syllable/ Woke your young faith to the mad truth.’

²⁸³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 210. St Malachy is known for having died in the arms of St Bernard at the Abbey of Clairvaux: ‘His coat is filled with drops of rain, and he is bearded /With all the seas of Poseidon. (..) He weeps against the gothic window and the empty cloister /Mourns like an ocean shell. (..) / Shall I shake the drops from my locks and stand in your transept, /Or, leaving you, rest in the silence of my history?’

²⁸⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 210. ‘So, the bells rang and we opened the antiphoners /And the wrens and larks flew up out of the pages. /Our thought became lambs. Our hearts swam like seas. /One monk believed that we should sing to him /Some stone-age hymn? /Or something in the giant language. /So we played to him in the plainsong of the giant Gregory: /Oceans of Scripture sang upon bony Eire.’

²⁸⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 201. ‘Those who by vow lie buried in the cloister or the hermitage: /Seeking the world’s gain in an unthinkable experience /Beyond the scope of sight or sound we dwell upon the air.’

²⁸⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 207.

land is ‘mapped, verified, plotted, printed, catalogued, numbered and categorized’, however, water ceases to flow, ‘resulting in the city’s eyes being ‘tight as ice’.²⁸⁷ Similarly, on a modern landscape of ‘steel horizons’,²⁸⁸ ‘Words turn to ice in my dry throat, Praying for a land without prayer’.²⁸⁹ Whilst in the mapping of land, voices disappear from the woods, the contemplative is ever ready to re-write the map, to find words, or to yield to the land disclosing itself in utterance.

Shifting from vast landscapes in the open air, Merton transfers his vision to an interior, demonstrating his ability to cinematically zoom in with his contemplative lens. Acute attentiveness to an interior is played out in the poem ‘The Reader’. Merton is due to read during the meal and is waiting in the lectern ahead of his community, observing the homely details of red cheese and bowls which ‘All smile with milk in ranks upon their tables’.²⁹⁰ Suddenly the scene is filled with an emerging sense of mystery in the dreamlike quality of the monks’ procession into the room: ‘With robes as voluble as water. I do not see them, but I hear their waves’.²⁹¹ The eye shifts again from what is familiar and recognisable to an intimation of a greater presence. In Merton’s own attentive stillness, he turns to his given task and to his hands which must ‘turn the pages of the saints’.²⁹² A sudden close-up reflects Merton’s gaze between the book, the hand and the eye, then zooming out sees the frozen branches of a tree on the window, which projects towards the creator God of Eden: ‘And to the trees Thy moon has frozen on the windows/My tongue shall sing Thy Scripture’. The creator God by being addressed enters into the narrow space. The gaze shifts again to the familiar image of the crucified Christ, which stands in the same space as God the creator of the moon, catapulting both back to Eden, and forward to the company of Merton and his fellow monks. Such close proximity seems startling. The cinematic zooming in and out disorientates. It turns to Merton’s hand and to the individual hands of the monks, as each one emerges from the holy water stoup, with ‘pearls of water at their fingers end, smaller than this my psalm’, the water confirming their identity with the transforming potential of contemplative vision. Another shift in focus is demanded as his

²⁸⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 209.

²⁸⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 218.

²⁸⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 219.

²⁹⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 212.

²⁹¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 202.

²⁹² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 202.

attention compares the material quality of the printed verses on the page with the spiritual depth of a holy book. The cinematic panning of the gaze from detail, depth and wider scene unleashes the sense of mystery even within a small drop of water. Time and place, verbal and material are projected onto an eternal and mysterious landscape.

This close weaving of eternity with the minutiae of the present moment is met again in the poem 'In the Rain and the Sun', where rain becomes a divine downpour.²⁹³ The opening line, 'Watch out for this peeled doorlight' suggests a door pulled back to reveal the fruit within, a door opening onto mystical light. Trying to name the capaciousness attributed to mystical vision, Merton imagines towers of water so huge that mountains emerge from within them. In contrast to their immensity, they look upon the little monks' graves. The individual is set in a fragile place against the immense background of cosmic grace, but each attend upon the other.²⁹⁴ The monastery is defined by movement,²⁹⁵ and by reflecting the potential of contemplation to merge opposite poles, wild and tame co-exist, as benign hills dwell in the jungle and language is channelled into wild cries.²⁹⁶ This interaction of wild and tame, however, is not simply observed, but is participated in with language uttered, sung, but also unarticulated. It is words which 'fling wide the windows of their houses whilst 'Adam and Eve walk down my coast' and it is hymns that sweep the horizons clean.²⁹⁷ The character of this strange world leaves all contemplatives as: 'Exiles in the far end of solitude, living as listeners /With hearts attending to the skies we cannot understand', with helplessness as 'our tongue tied sermon'.²⁹⁸

In contrast to this strange landscape, Merton presents the simple mundanity of daily life in the monastery. The discomfort of the heat made worse by the compulsory thick robes is symbolically depicted as 'locusts frying their music in the sycamores'.²⁹⁹ The need to put up with

²⁹³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 214.

²⁹⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 214-215. 'I dwell between cedars /Thus, in the boom of waves' advantage, /Dogs and lions come to my tame home /Won by the bells of my Cistercian jungle.'

²⁹⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 214. 'Lands of the water men, where poplars bend. /Wild seas amuse the world with water.'

²⁹⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 215. 'Songs of the lions and whales! /With my pen between my fingers /Making the waterworld sing.'

²⁹⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 215.

²⁹⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 201.

²⁹⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 204.

milk that is less than fresh is suggested in 'the curdled places of the sky'. The tedium of the monks' repetitive prayer is evident in the 'din of the crickets disconnected prayer'. The absence of women provokes dreams of St Clare in her fresh 'blowsy cotton'.³⁰⁰ The staleness of unwashed bodies generates imagined 'vistas of those laundries where the clean saints dwell', and the purple bottles of detergent: 'If we could only view them from our slum!'³⁰¹ There is even a picture of the regular queuing for communal shaving: 'These woods are too impersonal. The deaf-and-dumb fields, waiting to be shaved of hay /Suffer the hours'.³⁰²

Merton takes consolation in these down to earth experiences by placing monasticism in a primeval world in which contemplation and manual work provide a way back to Edenic unity,³⁰³ the memory of which is rooted within the monastic vocation.³⁰⁴ Through such vignettes, Merton demonstrates his attentiveness to the whole life of the contemplative. The domestic and the simple co-exist with the cosmic, complex and mystical as 'Tall poems grow up like buildings', 'songs of the martyrs come up like cities', 'their chains shine with hymns/And their hands cut down the giant blocks of stone'. It is a place where poetry and psalms 'Flower with a huge architecture /Raising their grandeur on the gashed cape /Words of God blaze'.³⁰⁵ Finally, 'Night pours down her canticles' 'and peace sings on thy watchtowers like the stars of Job.'³⁰⁶ The sacramental symbolism of words meeting materiality and subsequent transubstantiation floods the landscape.

This melding of place, words, and sacred presence in the last two poems stands as a swansong to the poetic activity of the decade. The lyricism of this final collection of poems reaches its heights in 'A Psalm'. Merton seeks to articulate a tangible and intoxicating reality which he senses emerging from liturgy:

³⁰⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 206.

³⁰¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 205.

³⁰² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 204.

³⁰³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 216. 'We will get up and work you loam /Until some prayer or some lean sentence /Bleeds like the quickest root they ever cut.'

³⁰⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 217. 'For we cannot forget the legend of the world's childhood / Or the track to the dogwood valley /And Adam our Father's old grass farm /Wherein they gave the animals names.'

³⁰⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 203.

³⁰⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 212.

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When psalms surprise me with their music
And antiphons turn to rum
The Spirit sings: the bottom drops out of my soul
And from the centre of my cellar, Love, louder than thunder
Opens a heaven of naked air.

The poem begins by suggesting that the mystery of creation is held within the narrow containedness of his location. The poem then reverses the paradox, where his 'cellar' opens up to the capaciousness of Eden, echoing the earlier image of 'my room, the sea; my sea, the room'.³⁰⁷ The boundless presence named as love, projects a world caught in the light of divine presence. There arises a sense of intoxication and seismic wonder, echoing earlier jolts into realisation. Bringing to the end a decade of poems, dualism is relinquished, as Merton's fixed location, his 'cellar', projects into the paradisaical vastness of Eden.³⁰⁸ As the boundaries of place collapse, so do the boundaries of time:

And I am drunk with the greater wilderness
Of the sixth day in Genesis. Haunted by Eden
While God sings by Himself in acres of night
And walls fall down.

The act of creation is thrust into the here and now, where Merton stands in the company of God.

Although the poem may invite into this discovered location, the return to the opening epigraph in the closing poem restates the approximation within any words about God and a necessary resumption of silence. All that has been said is absorbed into an image of the consecration. The paradigmatic poetics of place are captured in the materiality of bread and wine, the words uttered, and the sacred presence with its attendant silence:

Great Christ, my fingers touch Thy wheat
And hold Thee hidden in the compass of Thy paper sun.
This wine in which I sink Thy words, in the anonymous dawn.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 61.

³⁰⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 221. 'I send Love's name into the world with wings / And songs grow up around me like a jungle /Choirs of all creatures sing the tunes /Your spirit played in Eden. /Zebras and antelopes and birds of paradise /Shine on the face of the abyss /And I am drunk with the greater wilderness /Of the sixth day in Genesis. / Haunted by Eden /While God sings by Himself in acres of night /And walls fall down.'

³⁰⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 222. 'Great Christ, my fingers touch Thy wheat /And hold Thee hidden in the compass of Thy paper sun. /This wine in which I sink Thy words, in the anonymous dawn.'

Having sought words, Merton concludes:

His truth is greater than disaster.
His Peace imposes silence on the evidence against us.

Merton's poetic voice will in fact become silent as the unprecedented success of his autobiography led to the new role of becoming a mouthpiece for Catholic monasticism. There will be no new poems for eight years.

III Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated how Merton's early poems map a journey through alienating landscapes, caught up in the question of how to live in a world without being complicit in its destructive processes. The adopted dualism, the proclaimed failure of language, even that uneven quality in the poems together reflect the struggle in the undertaking. From Merton's early sense of the companionship of place, and the potential of all geography to become the ground for disclosure of the sacred, he falls into an archetypal and scholastic interpretation of place, which sets aside a supernatural category for the divine. In parallel, the poems illustrate an accompanying suspicion of this carving up of the world into sacred and profane. Monastic practices, and the resurfacing of Merton's original stance, bolstered by the experience of his own deep sense of dislocation, lead into the restoration of reverent attendance upon the world and a refusal to compartmentalise. By the end of the 1940s, sacramental vision in which nature and grace are enmeshed underpins his narrative. It is on this basis that my analysis highlights continuity and transition. He resumes that companionship with place, in spite of disorientation, and tentatively allows an integrated vision to resurface, hence allowing that transformation from 'jails of movies'³¹⁰ into 'a heaven of naked air'.³¹¹

Indirectly, the association of the Fathers of the Church with water imagery recalls the excitement of *ressourcement* endeavour and their understanding of the patristic sources as a vital spring. Similarly, the corresponding antagonism towards the cataloguing and mapping of the

³¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 20.

³¹¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 220.

land by the non-contemplative world recalls Lubac's stand against inventorying,³¹² and Merton's against systematisation.³¹³ Furthermore, the precarious dwelling places which provide the locus for contemplative vision are set within the instability of a 'waterworld', hence representing the opposite pole to the image of a bulwark, solidly raised. In a highly distinctive way these landscapes recall the differing approaches to theology, reflected by scholasticism and the *ressourcement*.

In view of O'Connell's insistence that the poetry provides insights not found elsewhere, this analysis has not only explored the landscapes Merton creates, but has brought to light various insights. Firstly, the poems reveal the depth of foreboding Merton underwent in discerning his vocation, and an ongoing spiritual darkness in his early years in the monastery. Both are glossed over in the autobiography and in *The Sign of Jonas*. Secondly, the full force of his anger and bewilderment at his compromised childhood emerges in his least appreciated volume of poetry, *Figures for an Apocalypse*. Thirdly, critics have tended to associate Merton's renunciation of dualism with the Fourth and Walnut epiphany experience of 1958, which will be explored in Chapter Seven.³¹⁴ It is at this point that Merton spells out his misnaming of the world as separated into holy and profane.³¹⁵ This shift in perception is clearly evident in the final volume of poems of the decade, in 1949, wherein Merton's alienating dualism is reconfigured into a place of transformation. There is therefore sound justification for studying the poetry in conjunction with the prose. The neglect of the poetry can lead to a loss of significant detail and a mis-locating of the changes in Merton's thought.

In the next chapter I continue the analysis of Merton's poetics, focusing on *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963), in which Merton responds to the plea of Jewish convert, Raïssa Maritain,

³¹² Chapter One, II.i 'The *Ressourcement* Lament'.

³¹³ Chapter One, III.ii 'The *Ressourcement* According to Merton'.

³¹⁴ Two examples: Referring to the later 1950s: 'The view of an original paradise as the goal would be displaced by a view of the sacred in a process of intimate interaction with the profane towards the synthesis of a new creation or union of both that could be spoken of in terms of the union of flesh and Spirit. (...) The sacred was changing Merton's anthropology. (...) In Christ Merton found both the sacred and the profane.' 'Thomas Merton's Poetry: Emblems of a Sacred Season', Alan Altany. Paul Pearson also identifies the 60s as the time when he had changed 'from the world-denying monk to the world-embracing monk', 'Religion and Ethics News Weekly', 'Paul Pearson on Thomas Merton', June 4, 2009, <<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2009/06/04/june-5-2009-paul-pearson-on-thomas-merton/1391/>>, [accessed 31/03/2019].

³¹⁵ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 157. Merton writes of 'waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness'.

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for a voice to redeem the brokenness of a post-Holocaust world.³¹⁶ Transformation and brokenness co-exist in a montage where alienation meets contemplative quietude, where horror at dehumanisation meets a humane welcome and where dystopic reality meets disarming grace. The work begins in the conviction that a place of brokenness can become a locus for redeeming possibility.

³¹⁶ Maritain, Raïssa, *Au Creux d'un Rocher*, Lines 151-157, 'Envoyez nous une parole de lumière et de paix. Envoyez les Apôtres qui enchanteront nos ténèbres (...) comme jadis vous avez suscité et donné l'enthousiasme et la connaissance Aux prophètes pour notre salut.' My translation: 'Send us a word of light and peace. Send Apostles who will enchant our darkness as before when you rose up and enthused prophets for our salvation'. Martine Bercot and Catherine Mayaux, *Poésie et liturgie: XIXe-XXe siècles* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 65.

Chapter Six

‘Opening a Space for Beauty’: The Poetry of the mid-1960s

This chapter, together with Chapter Seven, provides an analysis of Merton’s mature writing, balancing the exploration of the early poetry and prose of Chapters Four and Five. I focus on *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, (1963) written when Merton had lived within the medieval foundation of Trappism for twenty-two years. Beyond the monastery enclosure were the seismic changes marking 20th century modernism, evolving from the turmoil of two world wars, Hiroshima, the Holocaust, and the Cold War. The landscape of *Emblems* reflects these two contrasting dimensions.

Merton’s early writing is fixed within a Christian and pre-eminently Catholic context. Conversely, the canvas of *Emblems* engages overtly with Sufism and Zen Buddhism, and in adopting the biblical stance of the prophet and psalmist of the Old Testament highlights the Jewish legacy within Christianity. Such elements witness to Merton’s expanding awareness of a ground of wisdom shared between faiths. The task of naming such wisdom demands a reverence for words beyond their literary, communicative, or dogmatic function. Mindful of the stance of prophet and psalmist, I suggest that Merton brings a Jewish perspective on language into this work.¹ Words are not simply tools to communicate his craft but can be charged themselves with transcendent possibility.

Raïssa Maritain, a Jewish refugee from Tsarist pogroms,² and a Catholic convert, who was recognised amongst *ressourcement* thinkers for being a pioneer of Jewish-Christian

¹ Philip Leonard, *Trajectories of Mysticism in Theory and Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. xii. Leonard outlines these characteristics with reference to Kabbalistic mysticism and Zohar mysticism. The study of language provides a channel for understanding spiritual realities. According to Leonard, Abraham Abulafia, a leading Kabbalistic mystic, claims that spiritual inspiration can occur through ‘a form of meditation which predominantly takes the form of linguistic and grammatical study: it is by scrutinizing the combination and configuration of letters, that God’s name (and the secrets of Creation) may be discovered’. Leonard cites Gershom Scholem, author of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 199*’ who claims that ‘There is a language which expresses the pure thought of God and the letters of this spiritual language are the elements both of the most fundamental spiritual reality and of the profoundest understanding and knowledge’. (Gershom G. Scholem *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, (New York, Schocken, 1961) p.133. According to Leonard ‘language is also a key constituent in the tradition of Zohar mysticism where the Torah is treated as a text which provides the key to revealing God’s hidden nature. For the Zohar the symbolic value of Biblical words is of paramount importance and it is through Scriptural interpretation that divine secrets may be revealed.’

² Bloy, Léon, *Le Salut par les Juifs* (Paris: Éditions G. Crès, 1906), cited by Crane, p. 5.

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relations,³ provides one of the epigraphs to *Emblems*. Taken from *In the Cleft of the Rock* (1943), her chilling poem makes a plea for a psalmist or prophet whose words might transform the darkness wrought by the Holocaust.⁴

This trajectory, which seeks out beauty from a place of unmitigated alienation is the focus of Michel de Certeau, whose study of John of the Cross provides the title to this chapter: ‘Opening a Space for Beauty’. Certeau focuses on the incongruity between the beauty *The Spiritual Canticle* sings of and the location of a poet in a prison.⁵ Maritain and Certeau were both deeply involved in the *ressourcement* project.⁶ Their *ressourcement* endeavours led them to hold that text can redeem a broken situation by creating a verbal dwelling place which renders the divine present. I argue that it is through this process that Merton’s poetics of place functions in *Emblems*, where the interaction between place, language and divine intimation finds voice in the naming of grace and of ‘dis-grace’.⁷

Within secondary critique, Merton is frequently identified as a bridge-builder between contemplative quietude and the brokenness of the contemporary context.⁸ By identifying the

³ Maritain, Raïssa *Histoire d’Abraham ou La sainteté dans l’état* Texte présenté par France Quéré Les Carnets DDB 1994. Cited by Richard Francis Crane, ‘Cracks in the Theology of Contempt: The French Roots of *Nostre Aetate*, *Studies in Jewish Christian Relations*, 8, 2013, p. 7. <file:///C:/Users/HP/Downloads/5265-Article%20Text-10134-1-10-20130927.pdf>. Raïssa explores the inner life of Abraham, portraying him as a mystical figure, experiencing his faith as a dark night of the soul. Such work according to Crane prepared the way for ‘*Nostra Aetate*’s rejection of anti-Semitism and its efforts towards Jewish-Christian unity, p. 9.

⁴ Maritain, Raïssa, *Au Creux d’un Rocher*, Lines 151-157, Martine Bercot and Catherine Mayaux, *Poésie et liturgie: XIXe-XXe siècles* (Peter Lang, 2006), p. 65. See full quotation, Chapter Five, III. Conclusion, p. 160.

⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable, Volume One: The XVIth and XVIIth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 71.

⁶ Aside from this work on John of the Cross, Certeau was heavily involved with Lubac on a *ressourcement* project to explore the early modern Jesuits. Brenna Moore, ‘How to Awaken the Dead: Michel de Certeau, Henri de Lubac, and the Instabilities between the Past and the Present’. *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Volume 12, Number 2, Fall 2012, <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/490995>>, p. 174. Demonstrating an early kinship with *ressourcement* endeavours, Certeau identifies Lubac as the father of his vocation, p. 171. Raïssa was similarly involved in *ressourcement* research into early sources. She became recognised amongst the *ressourcement* thinkers for being a pioneer of Jewish-Christian relations, especially through her work exploring the inner life of Abraham *Histoire d’Abraham ou La sainteté dans l’état de nature*. Abraham emerges as a mystical figure, experiencing his faith as a dark night of the soul, not dissimilar to John of the Cross. Richard Francis Crane, ‘Cracks in the Theology of Contempt: The French Roots of *Nostre Aetate*, *Studies in Jewish Christian Relations*, 8, 2013, p. 7, <file:///C:/Users/HP/Downloads/5265-Article%20Text-10134-1-10-20130927.pdf>.

⁷ This term is borrowed from Mary Hilker in her work, *Naming Grace* in which she aspires towards theology which reclaims the lament through a naming of grace and dis-grace. Mary Catherine Hilker, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997), p. 112. This work will be explored further in Chapter Eight, I Dialogue I: Language and Theology, p. 248.

⁸ In Chapter Two, I referred to the tracing of links by Monica Weis between contemplation and ecovision and by Susan Rakoczy between contemplation and social justice, Chapter Two, II ‘The State of Dialogue Concerning Merton and Place’.

importance of Raïssa Maritain's plea, reinforced by aspirations outlined in *Liturgy and Contemplation*, co-authored with Jacques Maritain, and accompanied by a specifically Jewish dimension to an understanding of language, I make a similar connection which has not previously been made.⁹ Moreover, by underlining Raïssa's influence on *Emblems* and the strong Jewish legacy shaping the text, I highlight the distinctive and developing function of Merton's poetics of place.

I begin by considering elements within Jewish thought concerning language and show how this develops within critique of *The Spiritual Canticle*, both in respect of the trajectory identified by Certeau, and by associations made between John of the Cross and Jewish thought. This preliminary discussion helps carve out an understanding of language as a vessel to contain the divine, in the light of a Jewish perspective on language. An outline of Merton's close engagement with aspects of Jewish theology during the period of writing *Emblems* follows. Finally, before proceeding to primary text analysis, I explore the character of Maritain's poem as a catalyst for *Emblems*.

I

A Jewish Perspective on Language

In a study on Rabbinic exegesis, Susan Handelman outlines a key factor which has shaped the relationship between sacred texts and their interpretation within Jewish exegesis: words share an identity with material substance.¹⁰ Beginning by highlighting a difference in the Hebrew term for 'word', to the Greek equivalent, she points out that Greek *onoma* is the same as

⁹ Roger Lipsey refers to Merton's deep friendship with Jacques Maritain: 'Words must not set a boundary around the boundless friendship of Thomas Merton and Jacques Maritain. Between these two men, from whom one would expect intensive religious dialogue, towering metaphysics searching examinations of society, there was before all else a gathering warmth, strongest in the 1960s.' Thomas Merton and Roger Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton*, (Boston, Mass. ; London: New Seeds, 2006), p. 148. Others will comment on his affection for both Jacques and Raïssa: 'Merton felt Maritain responsible for his conversion and had a great affinity with Raïssa's dedication to contemplative prayer.' Beth Cioffoletti, 'The Maritain Connection', *Louie, Louie*, 2007 <<http://fatherlouie.blogspot.com/2007/06/maritain-connection.html>> [accessed 28/12/ 2019]. In Oct 1963 Merton writes to a friend John Griffen claiming that Jacques Maritain was very happy with a preface he wrote for Raïssa's *Notes sur le Pater*. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. by Robert E. Daggy (London: Harper Collins, 1990), p. 132. The deep interest however in *Liturgy and Contemplation* and *Notes sur le Pater*, as well as my focus on Raïssa's seminal influence in shaping *Emblems* has not been identified.

¹⁰ Susan A. Handelman, *Slayers of Moses, The: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (New York: SUNY Press, 2012), p. 4.

the word for name, whilst Hebrew *davar* means both word and thing. A Greek understanding of words, therefore, would be at one remove from the matter named and would hold a greater character of approximation. In contrast, the Hebrew interpretation would perceive language and matter as more closely bound.¹¹

This interpretation of words as material things is taken one step further in a study on trajectories of mysticism, by Philip Leonard, who identifies a ‘Jewish concept of a God who inhabits texts’, with the suggestion that words then take on a divine quality. He claims furthermore, that this notion influenced the poetics shaping *The Spiritual Canticle*, thus naming the interaction between God and man as not only spiritual but textual.¹² According to Leonard, John of the Cross ‘reads the mystical trajectory, like a divine text’. Leonard then identifies how the text becomes a space in which to dwell, inscribed with divine presence. The ‘divine ‘text’ is hence restructured as a ‘free space’, as if actualising a release from the desolation of torture and imprisonment. It becomes according to Leonard ‘a home in exile’.¹³

This understanding of text as a dwelling place for the divine is a key element in Certeau’s identification of the process in ‘opening a space for beauty’. According to Certeau *The Spiritual Canticle* organises the writing of John of the Cross as an exchange between beauty and a located

¹¹ There are various studies which help elucidate this link further. Until around the 19th century BCE, the time of Abraham, evidence of inscriptions is pictorial, but the ensuing development of a proto-Canaanite alphabet was the foundation for links between letters and things as found in Hebrew and Arabic. Abarim Publications, ‘The Meaning of the Hebrew Alphabet and a Survey per Hebrew Letter’, 2008 <http://www.abarim-publications.com/Hebrew_Alphabet_Meaning.html#VUs--pO7Zx8> [accessed 25/06/ 2015]. Madalina Vârtejanu-Joubert provides an outline of the importance of reification as a hermeneutic. Reification is the making of a symbolic abstraction into something concrete. Such a term implies the passage from letter to thing in one direction as, from word to flesh, from utterance to creation. Projected theories, however, could go in both directions. It could be argued that, in terms of onomatopoeic words and pictorial figuring, the physical thing came first and then the word. I suggest a few examples: the breath, the sound of vocal chords vibrating and its onomatopoeic replication *ruah*; the house, a shelter with a roof and pictorial representation in the letter *beth*, the Hebrew word for house: ב. A third example, the need for a word expressing the concept of and: *waw*, in Hebrew, a letter shaped like the peg which was exclusively used for hooking the curtain to the tabernacle, the curtain as an addition, hooked on to what was already there: ו. In this process, letters and words emerged as things catapulted into being by their sound or graphic representation. Joubert emphasizes the shared holiness of both word and thing: ‘Starting with the Second Temple, (5th century BCE – 70 CE) the Torah is sacred as ‘word’ and ‘scroll’ at the same time as it is sacred by means of its content and as an object. The history of Judaism will be constantly characterised by this double simultaneous sacredness.’ Madalina Vârtejanu-Joubert, ‘The Letter as Object. The Written Word between Reification and Hermeneutics in Rabbinic Judaism’, *Cahiers « Mondes anciens ». Histoire et anthropologie des mondes anciens*, 1, 2010 <<https://doi.org/10.4000/mondesanciens.129>>. As a result the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, according to Steven Katz in his study of mysticism and language, entered the process of creation not simply as linguistic symbols but equally as elements in the material structure. Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Language* (Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 47.

¹² Leonard, p. 15.

¹³ Leonard, p. 16.

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desolation, between ‘the song and historical truth’.¹⁴ He claims that ‘song and history mutually change and embrace one another’, that beauty and suffering ‘maintain one another but a Beauty transformed by suffering, and a suffering received and transformed by Beauty’.¹⁵ Continuing further into Certeau’s analogies, the text by becoming a dwelling place reifies language, thus echoing Leonard’s claims. The character of language and place become inextricably bound through a text in which:

(its) poetic is the invention of space in a prison. It animates, it moves a closed, decadent order from within. It is therefore ‘mystic’ in that it creates movements in the secrecy of a blocked situation, like a burst of Saying at the heart of a closed language.¹⁶

Certeau’s deductions endow language with spatial qualities. It is ‘closed’ or it ‘creates movements’ in a blocked situation in order to open up. As such, words which seek to name the divine mutually change and embrace the confined locatedness of time and place, to project into the unconfined space associated with divine nature. We can recall such juxtaposition of confinement and expansiveness in my analyses of Merton’s early poetry, including such antitheses as ‘my room, the sea’;¹⁷ ‘the centre of my cellar’, transforming into ‘a heaven of naked air’;¹⁸ the imprisonment by ‘the chains of martyrs’ has the power to ‘cut down the giant blocks of stone’.¹⁹ Physical confinement spills into the expansiveness of infinity, thus transforming an experience of limitation into one of freedom. This process, I argue, is a defining characteristic of the overall landscape of *Emblems*. Merton creates the exchange between song and history that Certeau recognised in *The Spiritual Canticle*. This trajectory would be familiar to Merton as a reader immersed in the writings of John of the Cross.²⁰ It is given added

¹⁴ Certeau, p. 71..

¹⁵ Certeau, p. 71.

¹⁶ Certeau, p. 77.

¹⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 221.

¹⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 221.

¹⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 203.

²⁰ Merton translated *The Spiritual Canticle* by St John of the Cross, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 239. He also refers to knowing the Spanish text by heart, *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 249. There are also frequent references to the poet in his journals *Entering the Silence*, pp. 42-43; 46; 73; 77-78; 195; 210 and *Search for Solitude*, pp. 37, 118-119. ‘The Song of Songs’ on which *The Spiritual Canticle* is based was a pre-eminent source of study for a Cistercian, given the *Sermons on The Song of Songs*, by St Bernard of Clairvaux, *Entering Silence* p. 111; pp 116-119.

significance, however, in the light of Merton's engagement with Jewish thought and with Raïssa Maritain's poem.

II

Merton and Jewish Thought

During the period of writing *Emblems* Merton was not only translating Raïssa's poetry, which is replete with psalmic reference, and read her collaborative work, *Liturgy and Contemplation*, he was also engaged in frequent correspondence with Zalman Schachter and Abraham Heschel.²¹ Claiming a close kinship with Heschel's work, he discloses his ambition to be 'Jewish beneath his Catholic skin'.²² Signalling an interest in Jewish mysticism in a letter to Schachter,²³ he identifies strong resonances with the School of Chartres, one focus of his own *ressourcement* endeavours and source of two poems in *Emblems*.²⁴ This theological study is accompanied by a growing awareness of the horrors of the Holocaust, highlighted by the trial of

²¹ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. by William H. Shannon (London: Collins Flame, 1990). Summary of Merton's comments to Heschel or concerning Heschel: 'Recently I have been deeply impressed and moved by the wonderful work of Abraham Heschel. It is singularly authentic religious material', p. 315, letter to Eric Fromm on September 30 1960. 'Real pleasure to receive letter and package of books'. 'I think the one that really appeals to me the most of all is *God in Search of Man*. (...) it has most to say about prayer', p. 431. 'I am happy that someone is there, like yourself, to emphasize the mystery and the Holiness of God.' Dec 17 1960, pp. 430-431; *God In Search of Man* was published in 1955 by Farrar Straus and Cudahy. 'I believe humbly that Christian and Jews ought to realize together something of the same urgency of expectation and desire, even though there is a radically different theological dimension to their hopes. They remain the same hopes with altered perspectives'; 'meanwhile, any letter from you is a joy to me', p.431. January 26 1963, "It is a great pleasure to have received your find book on the Prophets (...) hope to be able to use it in my conferences with the novices', p. 431; Jan 11, 1963 I have Heschel's Prophets – it is magnificent, p. 538.

²² Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*: Sept 1964. 'My latent ambitions to be a true Jew under my Catholic skin', p. 434.

²³ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*: August 3 1963 Letter to Zalman Schachter: Bahya Ibn Paquda is "my favourite Jewish mystic. I really like him tremendously, p. 538. Feb 1, 1964. Merton has received some books on medieval Jewish mysticism and he writes: 'This is right up my alley and very helpful. I like this material very much', p.538.

²⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, Oct 15, 1962, p. 536, letter to Zalman Schachter. 'Wonderful note. And above all I am moved by the quotation – *Li qutey Torah Ahre* especially the little phrase about creation, because I am absorbed in reading various 12th century masters of the School of Chartres, who under an impulse from Platonism and Arabic philosophy opened up a wonderful vision of the world. I am sure they must have been in contact with Jewish sources of the time, too. What would some of these likely be?'

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Eichmann in 1963,²⁵ which provides the catalyst for one of the most commented upon poems in *Emblems*.²⁶

Various channels emerge from this expanse of reading which shapes the text of *Emblems*. Firstly, there is an implicit acknowledgement, modelled by the psalmists and prophets, of the elemental power within words to direct attention to the divine. Secondly, Merton recreates the stance of the prophet as defined by Heschel,²⁷ shifting from lamentation and exhortation to comfort. This voice is further shaped by the task of responding to Maritain's plea for a prophet to transform the darkness. Finally, in a further negotiation between alienation and transforming quietude, *Emblems* reproduces Heschel's and Maritain's emphasis on the bond uniting contemplation and action.

II.i Words as 'Live Wires'

We can recall that the nexus of words, matter and divine presence is central to the poetics of place I have identified, even from Merton's earliest writings. In the sequence explored in Chapter Four, wherein Merton increasingly describes words and materiality as reciprocally bound and together divulging divine presence,²⁸ there are strong echoes of Heschel's description of the Bible as 'a live wire', mediating between the natural world and the sacred:

The Bible is holiness in words...It is as if God took these Hebrew words and breathed into them of His power, and the words became a live wire charged with His spirit. To this very day they are hyphens between heaven and earth.²⁹

²⁵ In a journal entry of March 27, 1963, Merton voices his horror at the Holocaust which was only coming to light in the 1960s with the trial of Eichmann. Merton refers to Heschel's question, not where was God but where was man. *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, ed. by Victor A. Kramer, *The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Four: 1960-1963* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 306: 'It is just incredible and shattering.... All that remains is a general sense of loss, of horror, of disorientation. The Trial of Eichmann was "a sordid examination of the entire West".' According to Susanne Jennings, the account of the trial of Eichmann in the 1963 report by Hannah Arendt in the *New Yorker* for Merton 'caused profoundly troubling questions to emerge', <<http://www.thomasmertonsociety.org/Journal/12/12-2Jennings.pdf>> *The Merton Journal*, 2005 ADVENT Volume 12 no 2, pp 36-37. The idea of obedience to a higher authority manifest in Eichmann finds for Merton a parallel in his adherence to monastic obedience. On this basis he would then anguish over the very life he was vowed to as a monk, in its unquestioning obedience to a higher authority.

My latent ambition to be a true Jew beneath my Catholic skin – 9th September 1964

²⁶ 'Chant to be used in processions around a site with furnaces', Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 346-349.

²⁷ Heschel's work *The Prophets* was published in Polish in 1936, and in English in 1962.

²⁸ See Chapter Four, II, 'The Mooring Point of Gethsemani'.

²⁹ Kaplan, Edward K, *Holiness in Words Abraham Joshua Heschel's Poetics of Piety* (New York:State University of New York, 1966), Introduction, p. 1.

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Merton himself vividly captures this charged reality in a letter to Schachter in 1962: ‘I have sat on the porch of the hermitage and sung chapters and chapters of the prophets in Latin out over the valley, and it is a hair-raising experience is all I can say.’³⁰

Merton highlights further this energetic quality of words in a discussion of God’s invitation to Adam to share in the creative process, by naming every creature,³¹ thus creating a channel from the created, to the name, to an empowered understanding of the created entity for being given a name.³² His discussion in *The New Man* focuses on Adam as the first contemplative mind, which Merton suggests, with reference to Augustine, is inextricably bound to the created world.³³ Reflecting the integration of the paradisaal garden, where created and uncreated are in dialogue, the active task of naming finds a unity with divine reality.³⁴

It was for Adam to draw each being notionally out of the silence and hold it up to the light of his own intelligence, coining the brand new word that would signify the correspondence between the thought in the mind of Adam, and the reality in the mind of God. Thus, Adam’s science was a discovery not only of names but of essences.³⁵

Words, thereby, become both physical and sacred realities, extending beyond their communicative content into contemplative embodiment.³⁶ This melded paradoxical reality has

³⁰ Merton, Thomas *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. by William H. Shannon (London: Collins Flame, 1990), p. 535, Feb 15, 1962. Rabbi David Zaslov claims that Schachter was so inspired that he later joined Merton in Gethsemani and together they chanted the psalms in Latin and Hebrew. *What I Am Living For: Lessons from the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton*, James Martin S.J., Robert Ellsberg, Daniel P. Horan, Kaya Oakes, from Chapter Thirteen: ‘Staunch Friendship for the Love of God’, p.180.

³¹ Gen 2:19, N.R.S.V., pp. 2-3.

³² Merton, Thomas, *The New Man*, (London: Burns and Oates, 1961), pp. 58-59. ‘The most interesting point in the story is the freedom left to Adam in this work of “creation”. The name is decided, chosen, not by God but by Adam. It is as if the Lord waited upon Ada to confer this accidental perfection upon His created world – as if there were one fatal touch that was left entirely to man’s freedom’. name.

³³ Merton, Thomas, *The New Man*, p. 57. Merton refers to Augustine: ‘The mysterious and primitive beauty of the text, with its anthropomorphic images, tells us better than anything of the union of Adam’s mind with all the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Augustine identifies Adam’s mystical knowledge especially in the scene where he names the animals.’ There is a, hence, a correlation between mystical understanding and finding the necessary words.

³⁴ Merton, Thomas, *The New Man*, p. 54. ‘In Paradise there was no opposition between action and contemplation’.

³⁵ Merton, Thomas, *The New Man*, p. 59. Merton develops this further on p. 61: ‘Words lose their capacity to convey the reality of holiness in proportion as men focus on the symbol rather than on what it symbolizes. The sense of the sacred of the numinous without which there can hardly be any real or living religion depends entirely on our ability to transcend our own human signs to penetrate them and pass beyond their manifest intelligibility into the darkness of mystery, to grasp the reality they can suggest but never fully contain.’

³⁶ Merton, Thomas, *The New Man*, p. 62. ‘Adam had named the animals before he had anyone to talk to. This suggests that words are considered by the authors of Genesis to have a function other than that of simple communication and it would seem that this other function is primary. Adam names the animals not for their benefit nor for the benefit of any other human being not merely

not only direct relevance to Merton's poetics, but to his preoccupation with the task of contemplation undertaken in 'a world of action'. Moreover, it impacts on the very character of the prophetic voice which Merton seeks to resurrect in these poems: that question poured over in his earliest poems: how to be in the world, how to avoid being complicit with its destructive processes, how to find transforming possibility.³⁷ The power of the word becomes a cutting edge tool for activism.

II.ii From Prophecy to Contemplation

Heschel's study of the prophetic voice identifies the prophet as a go-between, connecting God and humankind through an impassioned lament, and echoing that mediating role of biblical speech as hyphens between heaven and earth. Heschel claims moreover that the prophet jettisons metaphysics and turns instead to apparent trivialities: 'stories about widows and orphans, the corruption of judges and affairs of the market-place'. (...) 'Instead of showing us a way through the elegant mansions of the mind, the prophets take us to the slums.'³⁸ Merton takes on this very role in *Emblems*, telling the story of sex-workers, child activists, the forgotten elderly, refugees, and prisoners, shifting through accusation and lament, to contemplative transformation. We can recall the contrasting role identified by Congar, who in naming 'the spiritual realm of the clerics, the heaven of the theologians, cut off from the world' located theologians in that very elegant mansion of the mind.³⁹

The grafting of broken reality to a graced response is given further ballast by Merton's accompanying focus on *Liturgy and Contemplation*, published in 1959.⁴⁰ In a development of

even for his own. But words are drawn forth from his soul by God because there is an absolute value in words as the witnesses of essences that are stable and eternal. The primary function of the word is a contemplative rather than a communicative statement of what exist'.

³⁷ See Chapter Five, 'Poems of the 1940s', p. 126.

³⁸ Heschel, Abraham J., *The Prophets*, p. 12, <http://urbanleaders.org/500writings/000readings/Heschel_The%20Prophets.pdf> [accessed 25/04/2019].

³⁹ Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie - New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), p. 14. Yves Congar 8 January 1935 'Déficit de la théologie'. See Chapter One, II.i, 'The Ressourcement Lament'.

⁴⁰ The close friendship with the Maritains, which had begun as early as 1939 when Merton met Jacques, had grown to be particularly warm during the 1950s and continued with Jacques following Raïssa's death in 1960. During this time, Merton demonstrated his admiration of Raïssa's work. Of Raïssa's Journal, Merton claims 'It is not the kind of thing that is popular today, as if that had anything to do with it: but it is a pity that this record of a true, hidden and crucified contemplative life will not be read by more who would profit by it.' (Conjectures, p. 270) Merton made her journal available to a wider audience, (Judith

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this work published after the death of Raïssa, Jacques Maritain claims that Raïssa wished to develop a line of discussion from *Liturgy and Contemplation*,⁴¹ concerning ‘contemplation on the roads of the world’,⁴² in which the principal message is that contemplation is mandatory for all Christians,⁴³ not the prerogative of contemplative orders,⁴⁴ as it generates a predisposition to open up to divine encounter.⁴⁵ The task through contemplation then becomes ‘to actualise in our entire life, the typically supernatural quality’.⁴⁶ The work closes with an image symbolising contemplation ‘on the roads of the world’, of a homeless contemplative walking the streets, exiled from his chosen cell.⁴⁷ As lay Benedictines, the Maritains in fact sought to embody this practice of contemplation located outside monastic walls. Merton shares their aspirations for ‘contemplatives outside the cloister’,⁴⁸ and directly transposes the trajectory of their work, by closing *Emblems* with God as a vagrant on the roads of the world.⁴⁹

D. Suther, *Raïssa Maritain: Pilgrim, Poet, Exile* (New York: Fordham Univ Press, 1990), p. 60) and translated her poems, including them with those of several Latin American poets in the first publication of *Emblems*. With reference to *Liturgy and Contemplation*, on receiving a copy, Feb 22nd, 1960, he not only expressed his appreciation and agreement but claimed it would be a focus of study for his novices: ‘Many thanks for your valuable little book on liturgy and contemplation. I have read it with pleasure and deep agreement’ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1993), p. 28 and p. 32.

⁴¹According to Jacques, Raïssa posed the question: ‘Shouldn’t we have a book on prayer, something like Contemplation along the Roads of the World?’ He then outlines its ongoing importance to her: ‘After that she was always thinking of this project which she could not carry out because of the trial of illness, with its interminable suffering, which constantly ravaged our little flock. But every time she could, she noted down thoughts for this Contemplation along the Roads.’ Preface to posthumous work by Raïssa. Raïssa Maritain, ‘Notes on the Lord’s Prayer 1’, Jacques Maritain Center, 1964, <<https://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/notlp.htm>> [accessed 18/08/2018] .

⁴² Raïssa Maritain and Jacques Maritain, ‘Part III, Chapter IV’, in *Liturgy and Contemplation*, 1958 <<https://www.ewtn.com/library/THEOLOGY/LITCOM.HTM>> [accessed 13/08/ 2018]. Once again there is an aspiration towards finding links between experience of the divine and the contemporary context, that ‘exchange between song and history’.

⁴³ Raïssa Maritain, *Maritain, Raïssa, Translation of ‘Notes Sur Le Pater’, (Notes on the Lord’s Prayer)* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1962) <<https://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/notlp.htm#preface>> [accessed 18 August 2018] Chapter III.

⁴⁴ Raïssa Maritain, *Maritain, Raïssa, Translation of ‘Notes Sur Le Pater’, (Notes on the Lord’s Prayer)* Part II: chapter IV.

Indeed, contemplation is not given only to the Carthusians, the Poor Clares, the Carmelites. The great need of our age, in what concerns the spiritual life, is to put contemplation on the roads of the world. In *Conjectures* Merton refers to this work as the ‘record of a true, hidden and crucified contemplative life’. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 271.

⁴⁵ Raïssa Maritain, *Maritain, Raïssa, Translation of ‘Notes Sur Le Pater’, (Notes on the Lord’s Prayer)* Part III: Chapter VII and Part II: Chapter V. ‘Prayer seeks, contemplation finds’ which, leads to ‘a supernatural view of everything.’

⁴⁶Raïssa Maritain, *Maritain, Raïssa, Translation of ‘Notes Sur Le Pater’, (Notes on the Lord’s Prayer)* Part III: Chapter IV.

⁴⁷ Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *Liturgy and Contemplation*, Chapter X.

⁴⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, p. 346.

⁴⁹ The extent of this preoccupation unfolds further when his own work *Contemplation in a World of Action* was published two years after *Emblems*.

Padraic O'Hare identifies Heschel's understanding of this dichotomy as a reflection of the biblical tension between the 'Song of Songs' and the 'Book of Ecclesiastes'. On the one hand is 'ecstasy and poetry', on the other, 'contrition and judgment'.⁵⁰ There is the same pairing in Maritain's poem, as she brings 'The Song of Songs' with the dove in the cleft of the rock into dialogue with the pessimistic gravity of Qohelet in 'Ecclesiastes', thus reproducing a key trope of Heschel's scriptural commentary.

In June of the year of publication of *Emblems*, Merton wrote to Jacques, outlining his sense of having shared a common journey at a particular point in history with him and Raïssa:

I want to come after you and Raïssa by the road you have taken, since our journey is in common, though we are very much alone. How good it is to have seen His play in the friendships and influences that brought us all together in this world and this century.⁵¹

Merton draws attention to a sense of God embedded in the temporal and material reality of their time together. Their 'journey in common'⁵² calls upon that mediating role of words, the mediating stance of the prophet, the coalescence of contemplation and action, of 'The Song of Songs' and 'Ecclesiastes'. A brief exploration of Maritain's poem will further underline its formative influence on the writing of *Emblems* as through a Jewish framework, she becomes the voice of Catholic lamentation.⁵³

II.iii *In the Cleft of the Rock*

Maritain's poem, like much of her work, has a liturgical and biblical underpinning. The title recalls Moses who being confined to a rock face, was only permitted to see the back of

⁵⁰ O'Hare, Padraic Abraham Heschel and the Catholic Heart *Merrimack ScholarWorks*, 2.2 (2007), 7 (p. 14).

https://scholarworks.merrimack.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011&context=rts_facpub. Refers to Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), pp.3-83.

⁵¹ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 40.

⁵² Raïssa Maritain, *Poésie et Essais: Extraits de : Au Creux Du Rocher, La Vie Donnée, et Lettre de Nuit Broché* (Paris: Anté Matière, 2014), originally published 1943. .

⁵³ Richard Francis Crane, 'Cracks in the Theology of Contempt: The French Roots of *Nostre Aetate*, *Studies in Jewish Christian Relations*, 8, 2013, p. 7, <file:///C:/Users/HP/Downloads/5265-Article%20Text-10134-1-10-20130927.pdf>. As a refugee from Tsarist pogroms, (Léon Bloy, *Le Salut par les Juifs* (Paris: Éditions G. Crès, 1906, cited by Crane, p. 5). Crane outlines how she became the voice of Catholic lamentation.

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God,⁵⁴ and the dove, who similarly, in the hollow of a rock, sings with longing for the beloved.⁵⁵ God's presence becomes an almost absence as it is ever receding. Michel Bresselette in a study of the links between liturgy and poetry identifies psalmic influence in the rhythms of her poetry,⁵⁶ yet notes that there are few poems expressing joy or serenity, with the tone of this poem being particularly despairing. Bresselette suggests furthermore, that for Maritain, the 'hollow' of the title, is both Christ and poetry.⁵⁷ This echoes the divinely indwelt nature of language within Jewish mysticism, referred to by Leonard, and that Christian association of 'Word' and word. Maritain's confidence in the power of words stretches to a biblically founded conviction, that a psalm or prophetic utterance has the power to transform darkness.⁵⁸ The symbolism underlines a powerful understanding of the constructive and restorative power of words and their sacred function.

Maritain's poem borrows from Psalm 47 which concerns God's protection for the people of Israel.⁵⁹ In Catholic liturgy it marks the feast of Ascension, naming Christ as the eternal mediator between Heaven and Earth. The solace within the psalm and the liturgy is upturned when placed beneath the title *Deus Excelsus Terribilis*. The sense of a distant and unapproachable God colours the lament. The landscape is dark and infertile,⁶⁰ caught up in a cycle of evil, of lost innocence and interminable war and is abandoned even by Wisdom.⁶¹ Throughout, there is an assumption of dialogue with God, but the phrase chosen by Merton for

⁵⁴ Exodus 33:22: 'When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by', N.R.S.V., p. 87.

⁵⁵ Song of Solomon, 2:14 : 'My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely', N.R.S.V., p. 771.

⁵⁶ Bercot and Mayaux, pp. 53-54, 'De la prière du psalmiste au cri d'un poète', Raïssa Maritain wrote three volumes of poetry, many with liturgical or biblical titles such as 'De profundis', 'Quare Tristis es?', 'Au chant des psaumes'. Poetry was written as a form of contemplation. Merton wrote an essay on her in his collection of literary essays.

⁵⁷ Bercot and Mayaux, p. 53.

⁵⁸ Bercot and Mayaux, p. 65 Lines 151-157: 'Envoyez nous une parole de lumière et de paix. Envoyez les Apôtres qui enchanteront nos ténèbres (...) comme jadis vous avez suscité et donné l'enthousiasme et la connaissance Aux prophètes pour notre salut 1943'.

⁵⁹ Clap your hands, all you peoples; /shout unto God with a voice of triumph. /How awesome is the LORD the Most High, /the great King over all the earth! /He subdues nations beneath us, /and peoples under our feet. /He chooses our inheritance for us, /the pride of Jacob, whom He loves. N.R.S.V., p. 661. This psalm is associated with the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, and in Jewish liturgy is recited seven times on important feast days. Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom, Yitzchak Etshalom, 'Rosh HaShanah: Psalm 47', *Torah.Org*, 2013 <<https://torah.org/torah-portion/mikra-5773-netzavim/>> [accessed 28/12/ 2019].

⁶⁰ Bercot and Mayaux, p. 63, Lines 50-52.

⁶¹ Bercot and Mayaux, p. 63, Line 47.

the epigraph is one with the unrelenting pessimism of Qohelet from ‘Ecclesiastes’, which underlines the enormity of collective guilt: ‘There is no deliverance for nations, only for souls, one by one’.⁶² It is a bitter assessment by Maritain of the Nazi genocide and suggests an deep-rooted evil within national and international structures. Her plea for a psalmist or prophet seeks out a new script in which to dwell, in order to step beyond physical, spiritual, and linguistic confinement. It is on this note that Merton launches his work *Emblems*, drawing together the echoes of both ‘The Song of Songs’ and ‘Ecclesiastes’ of Maritain’s poem. He thus highlights a scriptural dialogue between poetic ecstasy and penitence, beauty hand in hand with lament and that holding of tension of the contemplative locked in a place of alienation.

III

Emblems of a Season of Fury

There are two possible sources for the term ‘emblems’ in the title. One such source is late medieval works called ‘emblems’, which, displaying a strong religious connection juxtaposed familiar landscapes with metaphysical reflection and were frequently illustrated.⁶³ Merton in fact describes the work as ‘baroque emblems turned inside out’.⁶⁴ There are several features in Merton’s ‘emblems’, which are equally characteristic of this allegorical form: the blend of verse and prose, the wisdom imported from other texts, the sense of being an emblem signalling

⁶² Bercot and Mayaux, p. 64, Lines 108-109. *Et il n’y aura pas d’acquiescement pour les nations Mais seulement pour les âmes une à une*. Merton describes ‘Ecclesiastes’ as ‘a book of earth’ which reflects this notion of material groundedness of theological revelation. He chooses to associate this book with ‘the Gospel ethic’ in its interpretation as ‘an ethic of revelation made on earth of a God Incarnate’. Merton thus highlights the centrality of an embodied theology in both Old and New Testaments, drawing together Jewish and Christian tradition, announcing the enmeshment of located material reality with sacred possibility. After this equation, he renounces ‘exalted and disincarnate spiritualities that divide man against himself, putting one half in the realm of angels and the other in an earthly hell’. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (Shambala Publications, 2004), p. 12.

⁶³ Mara Wade elucidates the interaction between image and word found in the ‘emblem’ form: ‘The hybrid forms of the ‘emblem’ present an argument composed of words and pictures. Thus, another way to define the ‘emblem’ is as a reading of texts and images, whereby the back and forth between the words and the pictures creates meaning. The picture presents the reader with a recognisable scene or symbolic collage, and the text then reorients the reader’s understanding of that scene to present a new and unexpected message. More than the sum of their parts, ‘emblems’ involved innovative reading practices combining words and images. They redirected readers’ thinking, and were intended to change their perspective, for example, to produce new insights, to make political, social, ethical, and religious commentary, to make a joke or a pun meaningful, and to juxtapose visual and textual meanings, thereby creating new knowledge.’ Mara R. Wade, ‘What Is an Emblem?’, *Emblematic Online*, 2015, <<http://emblematica.grainger.illinois.edu/help/what-emblem>. [accessed 26/05/2020].

⁶⁴ Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years; The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 4: 1960-1963* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), pp. 41–42.

towards something beyond.⁶⁵ In addition, whilst the abandonment of conventional verse forms is a feature of 20th century poetic experimentation, the sense of an *ad hoc* medley also echoes the form of baroque emblems. Merton's unfolding of themes reflects a similar organic quality, with indiscriminate shifts of mood through anger, compassion, and wonder, with clashing juxtapositions and ambiguities. The form also reflects this randomness. Apart from the three-line verse unit which is the most regularly met, repetitive patterns of rhyme, line length, verse length or poem length do not figure, and several poems are entirely in prose. This overlapping of style and the inclusion of historical texts without any references illustrates the enmeshment of Merton's craftsmanship with a wider literary and theological context.

Reflecting the juxtaposition of metaphysical and material within the emblem tradition, Merton selects a random series of objects projecting them against the horizon of eternity. He offers a chaotic assortment: rockets, bomber planes, concentration camp apparatus, the window of a sex-worker, dollars, soap, caves, a child's drawing, medieval desert dwellings, a bobwhite, a night-flowering cactus. It recalls Heschel's insistence that the prophet presents that which lies 'beyond the elegant mansions of the mind'. It reflects furthermore the character of rabbinic exegesis as outlined by John Barton in his history of the Bible. He claims how in rabbinic exegesis, there is an acceptance of 'random associations', and 'criss-crossing over books'. Origen, who figured in Merton's study of patristic texts from his earliest years in the monastery copied this approach. Jewish and patristic exegesis with a shared voice project a network of interconnected meanings.⁶⁶ Reflections can seem arbitrary and perverse.⁶⁷ As in the Emblem tradition, mundane realities are pointers to heavenly or spiritual things.⁶⁸ Merton's random selection drawn from pre-modern and modern, urban and natural landscapes gathers the whole of life onto a theological canvas. Such haphazardness suggests an organic unfolding, representing

⁶⁵ Multiplicity characterised the emblem form, in its association with many other forms: for example allegory, fable, epigram, enigma, moral, parable as well as with a variety of images, making of *Emblems* a form of picture book, echoing bestiaries of the Bible, bookplates, heraldry, classical mythology. Its subjects were 'drawn from all sources and the materials unlimited' In addition, the intent was wide and varied with texts leading towards antiquity, the Middle Ages, Renaissance or 17th Jesuit literature. Henri Stegemeier, *Problems in Emblem Literature* The Journal of English and Germanic Philology, Vol. 45, No.1, (January, 1946), pp. 26-37.

⁶⁶ Barton, John, *History of the Bible: The Book and Its Faiths* (London: Allen Lane, 2019), p.340.

⁶⁷ Barton, John, p. 338.

⁶⁸ Barton, John, p. 341.

what Merton identified to Jacques Maritain as ‘His play in the friendships and influences that brought us all together in this world and this century’.⁶⁹

A second source of the title *Emblems* is from the first epigraph which is taken from Shakespeare’s ‘All’s well that ends well’, and refers to Captain Spurio ‘with his cicatrice, an emblem of war’.⁷⁰ The speaker is Parolles, who in Shakespeare’s play is known for his deception and empty boasting, skills from which his name is derived. Placed alongside the French of the second epigraph, it is perhaps significant, that of the two French words for word: *mot* and *parole*, it is *parole* which figures at the start of Gospel of John for ‘Word’.⁷¹ This clash of Parolles the speaker and *Parole*, the Word, exemplifies the debasement of language as a key theme of the ensuing poems.

The first poem Merton wrote in the 1960s was a single prose poem *Original Child Bomb* about the bombing of Hiroshima. The sense of lament directed at contemporary history and the declaration of an accompanying complicity sets the tone for the delving into the contemporary global landscape found in *Emblems* creating a work Merton describes as ‘angry and obscure’.⁷² He underlines the dichotomy within contemplation on the roads of the world and within the plea for re-enchantment in the face of the Holocaust. On the one hand, there is the angry impassioned prophetic voice, naming the desacralised places, adopting the role of ambassador between God and humankind, and demanding conversion. It is the call to judgement and penance of ‘Ecclesiastes’. On the other, there is a quieter, more ambiguous voice, which reaches cryptically towards moments of stillness suggestive of possible transformation. It signals towards the poetic exaltation and longing of ‘The Song of Songs’.

The framework for my analysis of the poems is shaped by these two voices. I explore the lament and call to repentance beneath the title ‘Naming the Place,’ and the song signalling possible transformation in ‘Locating Grace’. Throughout, landscape and language are

⁶⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 40.

⁷⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 304.

⁷¹ It is essentially in Bibles published for a Protestant readership where *logos* is translated as ‘Parole’. For example in the Louis Segond Bible the opening verse is: ‘Au commencement était la Parole, et la Parole était avec Dieu et la Parole était Dieu’. In contrast, *The Jerusalem Bible* in French translates *Logos* as ‘le Verbe’.

⁷² Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity*, p. 196, January 12, 1964. Letter to Dom Jean Leclercq.

interwoven, each mutually shaping the other and demonstrating both the place-making function of text and the language-shaping function of place.

III.i Naming the Place⁷³

Emblems opens describing the adulation of space technology as a replacement religion: ‘the computers are convinced / Fed full of numbers by the True Believers’.⁷⁴ The lack of substance in the new narrative is underlined by the questions and answer: ‘Convinced of what?’ ‘Consent to what?’ ‘Nobody knows’, repeated three times. Cosmic wonder has now been replaced by a ‘star spangled somersault’, where the cosmos has been squashed into the geometry of the American flag. The criteria for this adulation are the guaranteed one-upmanship over the Russians and Africans. Part of the new narrative of modern America is that what is perceived as other must be subdued and dominated.

An ensuing exchange between this modern context and the language of liturgy underlines the extent to which the landscape and its accompanying language have become debased. This compromise is especially evident in the echoes of *The Exsultet*,⁷⁵ a feature I also identified in Merton’s early poems and which in its tracing of the history of Israel in the light of the Resurrection, underlines a direct link with the Jewish context of Maritain’s poem. The transference of the exaltation and accompanying symbolism of this proclamation, to surreal dystopic landscapes reinforces Merton’s sense of the loss and degeneration of modern culture. Whilst *The Exsultet* speaks of a time when ‘things of heaven are wed to those of earth, and divine to the human’, in Merton’s poem, there is an astronaut ‘smiling and riding in eternal transports’, and ‘a dog died in a globe and still comes round enclosed in a heaven of Russian wires’,⁷⁶ a reference to the Russian dog Laika who was sent to space and died on the mission in November 1957. Any hint of acerbic humour is blunted by the pervading and mocking dismay as

⁷³ This group of poems includes: ‘Why some look up to planets and heroes’; ‘The Moslems’ Angel of Death’; ‘And So Goodbye to Cities’; ‘An Elegy for Five Old Ladies’; ‘Song: In the Shows of the Round Ox and Gloss on the Sin of Ixion’; ‘Advice to a Young Prophet’; ‘A Picture of Lee Ying’; ‘And The Children of Birmingham’; ‘Chant to be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces’; ‘There has to be a jail for ladies’; ‘A Dream at Arles on the Night of the Mistral’; ‘Seven Archaic Images’.

⁷⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 307. ‘Why some look up to heroes and planets’.

⁷⁵ ‘The Exsultet: The Proclamation of Easter’, in *The Roman Missal, English Translation* (International Commission on English in the Liturgy Corporation, 2010) <<http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year/easter/easter-proclamation-exsultet.cfm>> [accessed 28/12/2019].

⁷⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 306.

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the words ‘True Believers’ echo ‘the one true Lamb’ of *The Exsultet*, ‘whose Blood anoints the doorposts of believers’.

A more sinister attachment to technological advance is met in ‘The Moslems’ Angel of Death’,⁷⁷ where, with reference to the Algerian war, the spotlight is on the pilot of a bomber plane. As *The Exsultet* announces: ‘This is the night, (..) let this holy building shake with joy, filled with the mighty voices of the peoples’, proclaiming ‘an end to gloom and darkness’, instead:

the firefly city stirs all over with knowledge.
His high buildings see too many
Persons: he has found out
Their times and when their windows
Will go out. (...)

‘O night!’

The implication of ‘their windows will go out’ stands in stark contrast, both to the imagery in the Marian poem comparing Mary to a window, referred to in Chapter Five, through which the light of Christ could come into the world,⁷⁸ and to Merton’s enthusiastic appreciation of a book by Raïssa Maritain, as a ‘book full of windows’.⁷⁹ The window represents that strange shifting territory where history encounters the capacious light of eternity. Here the modern world in its machinery of war seeks to block such access.

As *The Exsultet* proclaims a celebration of light in the extolling of the Paschal candle which is ‘a solemn offering, the work of bees’, ‘a torch so precious’, it is echoed again as the plane becomes ‘a great honeycomb of shining bees’.⁸⁰ The exultant message, however, is reversed, as light is transformed into an instrument of darkness. This is chillingly illustrated when the expansiveness of the cosmos and the wonder it can engender is juxtaposed with the smallness of a human home, and the stark single strategic action: ‘I leave your room empty’.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 307-308.

⁷⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 46-49.

⁷⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 33, December 18, 1962.

⁸⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 307.

⁸¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 308.

Spatial and architectural entities are overlaid with significance. The room as symbolic of the intimacy of home is made desolate by a display of military prowess.

Aside from the Christian symbolism, Merton was concerned with the loss of other sacred traditions and mythologies, having written a series of essays on Amerindian culture, *Ishi means Man*, thus demonstrating the degree of attention he gave to listening to what is other.⁸² Fireflies figure in Native American folklore as symbols of illumination,⁸³ whilst peacocks represent holiness, beauty, protection and watchfulness.⁸⁴ In this rendering they are bound exclusively to the war machine, an ironic form of protection, light and watchfulness: 'Like a jewelled peacock he stirs all over/ With fireflies'.⁸⁵ The poem also calls upon Azrael, an angel of God who in Islamic-Arabic tradition is associated with transporting the souls of the deceased after death. The final verse chillingly underlines the destructive role of this Azrael: 'There is one red coal left burning/ Beneath the ashes of the great vision. There is one blood-red eye left open/ When the city is burnt out'.⁸⁶ War strategy is indifferent to preserving sacred ground and is closed to questioning its own destructive function.

⁸² Thomas Merton, *Ishi Means Man: Essays on Native Americans* (New York: Paulist Press, 2015), a study on Amerindians of North and Central America. This work was published posthumously with a foreword by Dorothy Day. Merton's aim was to increase awareness of Amerindian cultures and he makes use of primary sources to highlight an alternative to white supremacy and uniquely white mythologies. The interweaving of this interest with the crafting of poetry is evident in a 1958 letter to Pablo Cuadra, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 180, whose poems Merton translated and published alongside *Emblems*. In this letter Merton outlines the importance of Indian cultures, refers to his own study of Aztec and Mayan poetry, (the firefly is a key symbol in Mayan iconography, Lupes, Luis, <https://www.dcc.fc.up.pt/~lblopes/epigraphy/papers/firefly04.pdf>) and how he is overjoyed at the extent to which Cuadra takes and uses 'the Indian religious tradition as our Christian property.' A further illustration of Merton's concern to include Amerindian wisdom as part of a globally inclusive religious imagination, is provided by the study *Merton and Indigenous Wisdom* edited by Peter Savastano. This work explores how Merton saw that the essential values of Christianity in embracing the dignity of all, and in highlighting incarnational reality in the material world, were reflected in the wisdom traditions of the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

⁸³ Leah M Bostwick, 'Firefly Animal Totem Symbolism & Meanings', *Sun Signs*, 2015 <<https://www.sunsigns.org/firefly-animal-totem-symbolism-meanings/>> [accessed 28/12/ 2019]. Bostwick describes the qualities of fireflies: 'They truly are majestic, under-appreciated insects because of their ordinary, uninspiring appearance during the daytime hours. However, as darkness falls, fireflies turn into the remarkable (and beautiful) illuminators of the night. This seeming contradiction serves as the firefly's animal totem's most fundamental symbol in the spiritual world: things are not always the way they seem.'

⁸⁴ Totems, 'Symbolism of the Peacock', *Global Light Minds*, 2013 <<http://www.globallightminds.com/2013/02/symbolism-of-the-peacock-totems/>> [accessed 28/12/ 2019]. This study outlines different symbolic interpretations of the peacock. 'Buddhist iconography the peacock equals wisdom; in Native American, dignity, wholeness and beauty; in Greek, the Heavens, in Hindu iconography, benevolence; in Japan an emblem of love, compassionate watchfulness, good will, nurturing, and kind-heartedness.'

⁸⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 307.

⁸⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 308.

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‘And So Goodbye to Cities’⁸⁷ continues the tone of deep disillusion with the sinister superficiality of a world in thrall to war: ‘Cities have grown old in war and fun’.⁸⁸ ‘This is the night’ from *The Exsultet* has become: ‘This is the day the calendar must bark’,⁸⁹ as time is automated, nonsensically, and ‘This is the day their calendar must choke’,⁹⁰ suggestive of a nuclear bomb bringing an end to time. In contrast to the Paschal candle which would lighten the darkness, is a light that talks and ticks. The references to mountains and dragons might hint at an adventure to conquer evil, but of the two remaining humans on the canvas, one, Lot’s wife is asleep, whilst Lot ‘still works his drunken feet’.⁹¹ Humanity itself is anaesthetised and mechanised.⁹²

The surrealistic wartime landscapes of *Emblems*⁹³ stand in conjunction with more photographic or journalistic representations of contemporary history: children marching as civil rights activists,⁹⁴ a young immigrant standing dejected, having lost her right to leave her country,⁹⁵ a cinematic portrayal of the interior of Auschwitz.⁹⁶ The disorientation experienced within the photographic reality of these landscapes is sharpened by language which is similarly disorientating. The temporal and material reality is bound to the verbal.

‘A Picture of Lee Ying’ depicts the fate of thousands of Chinese refugees during the rule of Mao Tse-Tung, caught within immigration policy, which sacrifices the humanitarian welcoming of the stranger to economic expediency.⁹⁷ Newspaper headlines weave a mock dialogue in which the words of the refugee, Lee Ying are not heard, but robotically responded to,

⁸⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 309-310.

⁸⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 309.

⁸⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 308.

⁹⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 309.

⁹¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 309.

⁹² Woodcock makes a parallel between this world and the one described in *Rain and Rhinoceros* where it is claimed that people of the cities: ‘have created a world outside the world, against the world, a world of mechanical fictions which condemn nature and seek only to use it up, thus preventing it from renewing itself and man’. Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet*, p. 145.

⁹³ ‘Song: In the Shows of The Round Ox’, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* 1980, pp. 311-313; ‘Gloss on the Sin of Ixion’, pp. 313-315; ‘Advice to a Young Prophet’, pp. 338-339.

⁹⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 335-337.

⁹⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 322-324.

⁹⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 345-349.

⁹⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 322-324.

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in accordance with the official management of the process. The thirty-five unpunctuated stanzas of prose, with disrupted syntax, recreate the dehumanising disorientation caused by the procedure, all the more chilling when accompanied by a false claim of sympathy. The pain of Lee Ying is shown to be easily dismissed, worth no more than the attention needed for scanning a newspaper article. The difficulty in naming this invisible pain is reproduced in the amorphous unfolding of the prose.

Within the bland monotone, the word alarm or alarmed is sounded seven times. The danger of human compassion being forced to come into play alarms the authorities, as it would disrupt a homogenously robotic and unsentimental response to such potentially emotive news. There is a mock use of possessive pronouns: ‘You, we, they’ as if engaging in dialogue, but every statement of Lee Ying is reduced to a generality, her personal sorrow, having a fictitious quality as if it were simply a film. Merton sums up the situation with biblical echoes of the nativity story, as she is forced with others like her to the margins, a place of expendability: ‘There is no place for her and no point for thousands like her’.⁹⁸

The distortion of the news mirrors tactics used by authoritarian regimes and associated in 1960s America with China and the USSR.⁹⁹ The intent to maintain authority and silence critical reporting is reflected in a procedure which disconnects itself from truth telling and refuses to evaluate evidence, exhibiting only an appetite for news which is no more than entertainment. Merton’s account is ambiguously truthful, critical, and therefore more disturbing. Rather than a text which ‘opens to beauty’, Lee Ying is shown to be trapped in an unyielding text which is fixated on closure.

‘And The Children of Birmingham’ continues this entrapment within a text.¹⁰⁰ It concerns the arrest and imprisonment of child civil rights demonstrators in the city of Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 and the subsequent murder of four children by white supremacists. It was the year when Martin Luther King was imprisoned and when John F.

⁹⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 322.

⁹⁹ The Red Scare was growing hysteria over the perceived threat posed by Communists in the U.S. throughout the 1940s and 1950s. It led to tactics of the Cold War. (1947-1991). History Editors, ‘Red Scare’, *History*, 2020 <<https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/red-scare>> [accessed 28/12/ 2019].

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 335-337.

Kennedy, who had been hugely supported by the African American vote was assassinated. Echoing Maritain's lament at collective sin, Merton voices his own dismay at the violent suppression of the demonstration and the subsequent deaths: 'The whole thing leaves one bewildered and slightly sick. Sick for the madness, ferocity, stupidity, aimless cruelty that is the mark of so great a part of this country. (...) The country is full of madness.'¹⁰¹ This poem shares themes with 'A Picture of Lee Ying': the objectification by race; the consumerisation of love and law; the subversion and unreality of the American dream as propagated by films and fairy tales; the accompanying contortions of language.

The engagement of the reader is disrupted from the very title where the 'And' draws attention to itself for the oddness of its positioning, implying that the story is already in motion, just one more tale of injustice unfolding. The corruption of language is a central theme with the tragic events situated in a fairy-tale, subverting the anticipated notions of justice normally encountered in a children's story.¹⁰² It is a world where hymn singing becomes punishable,¹⁰³ where political pronouncement distorts ideals to justify police brutality,¹⁰⁴ and where the unquestioning righteousness of the forces of law are upheld.¹⁰⁵ The verbal chaos indicative of linguistic dysfunction is evident in clashing juxtapositions. On the one hand is the world of children, represented by the fairy-tale enactment, schools, lesson, singing, Grandma, hug and love. On the other is the triply stated and capitalised law, plus shadow, devil, smack, wall, fire, water, extreme, no pardon, bite, and fury. With such dramatic verbal shifts the world of innocent expectation is sliced up. The children, like Lee Ying, walk into a text over which they have no control.

A rondo like sequence is established with 'And tales were told / Of man's best friend, the Law', and 'Better to love you with', set within blocks of verse of similar length alternating with shorter stanzas. This framework states and restates the hidden texts around which the children's narrative revolves. The link with the law and love is continually and ironically restated with law

¹⁰¹ Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, p. 36, Nov 23, 1963.

¹⁰² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 335. 'And the children walked into the story', 'of Grandma's pointed teeth'.

¹⁰³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 336. 'The singing wall (...) hymns were extreme'

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 336. 'Liberty may bite a responsible race forever singing'.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 335-337. 'And tales were told /Of man's best friend, the Law'.

and grandma having capital letters and defined by consumerist culture in their evident purchaseability from the ‘stores of love and law’.

The poem relays not simply Merton’s dismay at the dehumanising processes, but his deep frustration by the censorship of his order over his writing about war. This concern, regularly aired in his letters and journals at the time of writing the poetry of *Emblems*, focuses on this same juxtaposition of law and love.¹⁰⁶ His anger is powerfully voiced over censorship of an article against nuclear war. Merton saw the Church’s opposition to his stance as reflecting a complicity with the corruption of the civil authorities.¹⁰⁷ He questions the reasoning behind preventing publication on the basis that as a monk he had renounced this right:

In favour of what? In favour of a silence that is deeply and completely in complicity with the forces that carry out oppression, injustice, aggression, exploitation, war. In other words, silent complicity is presented as a greater good than honest conscientious protest.¹⁰⁸

He thus echoes the questions: ‘Consent to what?’ ‘Convinced of what?’ in the first poem of *Emblems*, inferring the response of his order belongs to the vacuous morality he saw in the secular world, and the extent to which they were equally complicit in the perpetuation of injustice and aggression. That a shameful record of civil rights abuse is placed in a fairy-tale suggests an extreme disconnection to any perceived ability to relate to the protest. The children ‘walk into the story’, and ‘walk into the fury’ as if their fate were simply inevitable. The last long verse of narrative pivots around the words ‘friendly’, ‘love’ and ‘hug,’ but the hug becomes the walls of a prison cell.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton*, p. 251, Jan 17 1963 . ‘We too closely identify fidelity to God and fidelity to external organization in the Catholic church – fidelity to God is not compatible with mere obedience to an external norm (..) Fidelity belongs not so much to the realm of Law as to the realm of love.’

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton*, pp. 266-267, March 3, 1964. ‘A grim insight into the stupor of the Church in spite of all that has been attempted, all efforts to wake her up! It all falls into place, Pope Pius XII and the Jews, the Church in South America the treatment of Negroes in the United States, the Catholics on the French right in the Algerian affair, the German Catholics under Hitler. (..) The whole thing is too sad and too serious for bitterness.’

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton*, pp. 266-267, March 3, 1964.

¹⁰⁹ The sequence of feigned warmth includes: ‘friendly cells’; ‘friendly officers’; ‘better to love you with’; ‘dooms of love’.

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The unallayed bitterness in this poem echoes Maritain's,¹¹⁰ only capped in terms of bleakness by 'Chant to be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces',¹¹¹ a poem concerning the victims of the Holocaust, to whom Raïssa's poem is dedicated, thus creating a pivotal focus within the volume of poems. It underlines powerfully the extent to which dehumanised language is highly complicit in constructing a dehumanising physical reality. The poem is a transposition of the trial of Eichmann, arrested in 1960 and executed in 1962. Whilst many of the poems in *Emblems* have excited limited reflection from critics, this poem has engendered wide-ranging comment. Petisco speaks of the 'atonal irony, the macabre humour and a limitless complacency',¹¹² as the poem narrates the different stages in the execution of Jews, from the clinical examinations through to cremation. Altany speaks of the 'drone' of the commander, and highlights the euphemisms for torture and death which centre around cleaning: 'purifying', 'soap', and 'bathrooms', where the prisoners are 'soiled passengers', 'naked votaries' and 'customers'.¹¹³ The chillingly rational tone voices a seemingly innocent concern for cleanliness: 'I could tell by their cries that love came to a full stop. I found the ones I had made clean after about a half hour'.¹¹⁴ Labrie claims that 'Chant' 'recreated the literalism of war criminals', yet beyond this literalism he suggests that the 'poem's dry understated tone and phrasing mimic the step by step process of reason'. Labrie suggests that it is not only a condemnation of the thinking behind the Holocaust, but also of the spiritual vacuum underlying the anaesthetised orderliness and rationality of the utterances.¹¹⁵ Reason is thus shown to relegate the messiness of compassion or the complexity of moral, ethical or spiritual considerations to a place of indifference and expendability.

¹¹⁰ There is a further text echoed here which builds in another layer of irony. The 'dooms of love' is a reference to a poem by E E Cummings (1894-1962). The affinity with the poetry of Cummings in a poem where norms of language are distorted suggests that the poet's distortions give a better rendering of truth than the journalism and the platitudes of political processes. The poem by Cummings 'father moved through dooms of love' is full of stylistic eccentricities, including odd use of brackets as Merton uses here. His theme, the love of a child for his father 'and every child was sure that spring /danced when she heard my father sing', places in relief the fate of the children of Birmingham who are offered the brutal police officers as models to admire and to love, suggesting the demonization of human relationships. Whilst Cummings' poem shares a similar suspicion of societal indifference to truth, ultimately, he concludes with love transcending all. Merton's poem offers no such redemption.

¹¹¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 345-349.

¹¹² Petisco Martinez, Sonia, p. 191.

¹¹³ Altany, Alan, 'Celtic Monasticism as a Metaphor for Thomas Merton' Section V: 'The Pilgrimage Goes Public and Profane'.

¹¹⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 347.

¹¹⁵ Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*, p. 153.

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At the close of the poem, Merton diverts the sense of horror at Eichmann's speech and actions, against contemporary war manoeuvres: 'Do not think yourself better because you burn up friends and enemies with long-range missiles without ever seeing what you have done'.¹¹⁶ Merton's poem is at its most damning in the suggestion that the sane response to his pacificism, as voiced by his monastic superiors, bore resemblance to the seeming sanity of Eichmann. Altany points out how in Merton's rendering, the Holocaust murderers 'seem so sane in many ways, they can appreciate music, love their families and dogs and then go to work where they antiseptically commit genocide all in a day's labor'. Merton saw that such apparent sanity or well-balanced attitudes was instrumental in the ethnic cleansing at Auschwitz. According to Altany, Merton considered that 'truth demanded less, not more, of such sanity'.¹¹⁷ The poem reflects a wider self-questioning in Merton. If people were just obeying orders, the virtue within the monastic vow of obedience is unhinged. Thus, what is ostensibly a journalistically presented poem targets a deeper questioning of authentic witness to faith, in which simply obeying rules is shown to cataclysmically side-step human compassion.

The poems hence become a theological lament against a context and a standpoint. In contrast to that paradigm of opening up, these poems clearly define the nature of the closed zone. The only opening is the underlying compassion for those trapped in a dystopic text. The very utterance of a lament offers a rekindling of a human response, released from the strictures of reason, pragmatism, social expediency, and legal requirement. It demands a demoting of reason as the principal determiner of action.

Various channels beyond the lament emerge, shaped by poignancy, nostalgia, or aesthetic transposition. 'A Dream at Arles on the Night of the Mistral' begins with war but the medieval French landscape,¹¹⁸ and the association in the title with the nightscapes of Van Gogh,¹¹⁹ releases a sense of beauty, as elegiac nostalgia tinges the description of the martyred St Sebastien who 'Floats to death down wind, / Like smoke, over the canals, /Over the cathedral of Narbonne'.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 349.

¹¹⁷ Altany, Alan, 'Celtic Monasticism as a Metaphor for Thomas Merton' Section V.

¹¹⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 334-335.

¹¹⁹ Van Gogh lived in Arles from February 1888 to May 1889 and some of his best-known landscapes are of the town, and its surrounding landscapes, whipped into movement by the mistral.

¹²⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 335.

Redemption can thus lie in art and memory for lost landscapes. ‘Seven Archaic Images’ juxtaposes a place of consumerism and war:¹²¹ ‘O great dishonourable beast, War, /Cockroach and millionaire, why do we dance for you?’ with a turning towards primeval times: ‘(To the beginning)¹²² /Womb of a secret hill/ Paradise /Covered inside with animals’.¹²³ Merton voices once again an expression of nostalgia for France,¹²⁴ but also the possibility of starting afresh. The symbolism throughout the poem, whilst seeming demonic, does at least engender fear and awe, which might lead to a more reverent stance towards the world. Merton’s deep attachment to a place, even if fixed in a pre-modern imagining, unearths human longing for belonging, with a hint that a place of welcome might be possible.

There is a partly transformative canvas of the struggle between power and powerlessness in ‘There has to be a jail for ladies’.¹²⁵ Society’s marginalisation and disparagement of the sex-worker, in language reminiscent of the concentration camp commander: ‘No amount of soapsy sudsy supersuds, will make you Dainty again and not guilty’,¹²⁶ is upended as the poem describes them as ‘jailed buttercups’ and ‘small field flowers’,¹²⁷ directly recalling Matthew 6 where such flowers are worth more than all.

The contemporaneous contexts panned in *Emblems* demonstrate the extent to which Merton’s attentiveness to his own history meets a parallel awareness of the power of language to open up or to imprison. Reflecting what O’Connell names as his ‘extraordinary attentiveness to the spatial dimension, to place, not just as setting but as subject’,¹²⁸ Merton shows the degree to which place is inscribed with a corresponding language as subject and medium. Just as Merton could observe the age in which he lived and see a desacralisation of the social, political, and cultural canvases, equally he could observe language and note the same process in parallel. Thus,

¹²¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 341-343.

¹²² Merton’s brackets.

¹²³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 341.

¹²⁴ The Lascaux cave paintings were discovered in 1940 and the richest area for such art is the Vézère valley in the Périgord. In the Pyrenees, however, close to where Merton was lived, are two sites of cave paintings, Bedeilhac and Niaux. Archaeology Travel, ‘Guide to Cave Art in France’, *Archaeology Travel* <<https://archaeology-travel.com/thematic-guides/cave-art-in-france/>> [accessed 28/12/2019].

¹²⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 332-334.

¹²⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 333.

¹²⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 333.

¹²⁸ Patrick F. O’Connell, ‘‘The Surest Home Is Pointless’’, p. 2.

the landscapes he presents are marked by a desacralisation of both language and place. There is a further dimension, however. When time and place produce the sinister prose of the *Chant*, the perversion of a fairy story for the children of Birmingham, the cold journalism covering the fate of Lee Ying, the indictment is equally a lament. By conceding complicity and voicing compassion, Merton signals towards a new song. The very lament suggests language can escape the confines imposed upon it by place, and in so doing releases place from the text in which it is confined. This group of poems have uncompromisingly named the place which provokes the prophetic lament. In the ensuing selection of poems, Merton builds in this brokenness and constructs a more confident transformative canvas.

III.ii Locating Grace

The anger and dismay voiced in *Emblems* meets a parallel voice of wonder, warmth, and contemplative quietude. On the one hand it is possible to see a clearly carved out alternative canvas where love of learning, friendship, medieval landscapes, and pastoral scenes provide an antidote to the transactions fashioned by technology, war, and consumerism. On the other, this duality dissolves as, rather than two alternative canvases, the poems demonstrate transfigurative possibility in the midst of the turmoil. It is contemplation on the roads of the world.

There are two series of transfiguring landscapes. The first is a place of shared aspiration. Reflecting the character of the initial publication of *Emblems* in which there were translations by a variety of other poets, Merton engages with an incongruous medley of fellow writers. The sense of openness is relayed through the hospitality of his text as other writers create a web of intertextuality, reflecting Merton's insistence that 'God speaks in the voice of the stranger'.¹²⁹ The second series displays a parallel openness but stretches beyond the specifically human context. It is characterised by wide-awakeness. In contrast to the places of lament, where fabricated exchanges block authentic connection, here an openness to the sacred demands an ever-ready willingness for encounter. Whatever the location, something or someone is awake.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 384. 'A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants'.

¹³⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 337.

III.ii.a. 'God speaks in the voice of the stranger'.

The breadth of other writers Merton invites into his poems demonstrates his characteristic ease of engagement with the writing world, as he grafts their writing to his own.¹³¹ Several are translations, and they become like guest writers, all sharing a belief in the value of crafting words.¹³² They also reflect a range of styles.¹³³ The accompanying landscapes are similarly varied, connecting 1960s America with Egyptian deserts, a Nicaraguan interior and two medieval monastic and cosmological landscapes. This range of inclusion and reference is also a statement of Merton's engagement with varied transcultural and transhistorical narratives, highlighting Merton's welcome to the stranger. In the letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra initially published at the end of *Emblems*, Merton identifies this absence of hospitality as signifying a loss of the sacred:

desecration, de-sacralization of the modern world is manifest above all by the fact that the stranger is of no account. As soon as he is 'displaced' he is completely unacceptable. He fits into no familiar category, he is unexplained and therefore a threat to complacency. Everything not easy to account for must be wiped out, and mystery must be wiped out with it. An alien presence interferes with the superficial and faked clarity of our own rationalizations.¹³⁴

In *Emblems* Merton counters this stance by showing how he actively cultivates the company of strangers. The diversity of writers underlines his hospitality. Merton thus makes room for difference and demonstrates that a degree of strangeness or unresolved mystery must remain part of the overall canvas. The tone of this group of poems is less tense than the first group. It includes adaptations of work Merton has translated, elegies which introduce poignancy into the landscapes, and a fable-like genre, announcing belief in the extraordinary as an acceptable part of

¹³¹ This group of poems includes: 'An Elegy for Ernest Hemingway'; 'Elegy for James Thurber'; 'Macarius and The Pony'; 'Macarius The Younger'; 'Song for the Death of Averroes'; 'To Alfonso Cortes'; 'News from the School of Chartres'; 'What to do when it rains blood'.

¹³² Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*, p. 44. Lentfoehr points out that this practice of 'mixing literal quotation from various documents, together with his own personal arrangement and patterning', begins in *Emblems*. I suggest that it is a development of the intertextuality met in the poems of the 1940s, the echoes of other poets, the layering with the writing of St Paul as well as other biblical and liturgical echoes.

¹³³ American novelist, Ernest Hemmingway (1899-1961) and American writer and cartoonist James Thurber (1894-1961) for whom elegies are written; the Nicaraguan poet Alfonso Cortes (1893-1969); a turn of the century Spanish priest Asin Palacios (1871-1944); Islamic philosophers Averroes (1126-1198) and Ibn al Arabi (1165-1240); a French theologian Gregory of Tours (538-594); Rufinus Aquiliensis (345-411), a Roman monk historian and translator of Greek patristic material into Latin, Macarius of Egypt (300-391); Macarius of Alexandria (297-395), E.E.Cummings and unnamed writers including a novice monk and his guardians of the School of Chartres.

¹³⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 385.

the landscape. Merton shows the extent to which he chooses to dwell in the text of another and invites their text to dwell within his own verbal universe.

One of the earliest writers historically that Merton invites into his text, Rufinus of Aquileia, 345-410 provide the source of Merton's story about Macarius of Egypt, who was known for his wisdom and his pursuit of ascetism. The very title, 'Macarius and The Pony' is especially incongruous when set amid the angry surrealistic landscapes. The scene is set 'at the desert's edge' where a girl is berated for magically becoming a pony.¹³⁵ She is brought to the cell of Macarius, who undeceived, sees before him 'a good child'.¹³⁶ Instead of accusations, he anoints her, and through his loving attention, the community sees her true *persona*. Macarius condemns their eyes, their crooked thoughts, their ill-will which 'people the world with spectres'.¹³⁷ The moral of the tale is that through loving another, their true beauty can be seen, which is otherwise hidden by prejudice and careless conformism to prevailing opinion. Wisdom, moreover, lies with the one who is prepared to be apart from the crowd, the anchorite, 'the clear-eyed one'. Wise action is characterised by a readiness to step out of the ready-made text of common opinion and create a new song.

The poem 'Macarius The Younger' is similarly set in an exotic fable-like land: 'In wide open desert a day and night's journey from the monasteries a Nitria. No road, no path, / No landmarks / Show the way there. / You must go by the stars'.¹³⁸ Its location is therefore mysterious, with dangers lurking in the scarcity of water, the strangely poisonous smells, and the sparsely populated landscape. Unlike the fairy tale the children of Birmingham were trapped in, here, the tale functions in accordance with a hint of transforming magic. It is in a place which maintains a belief in magic arts and in the value of simple living where the 'true men of God' live.¹³⁹ Paradoxically, the desert, known for its aridity, is the place of spiritual fecundity. In contrast to the bleak vacuity of the modern townscapes and wastelands, filled with 'Officers, rich

¹³⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 319-321.

¹³⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 318.

¹³⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 318.

¹³⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 319.

¹³⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 319.

brass' who would reject Lee Ying the stranger, in this place 'There is great love among them'¹⁴⁰ and 'If any traveller should reach that place he receives much care.'¹⁴¹

Leaping forward eight centuries, Merton welcomes Ibn Arabi and Averrões, two medieval Andalusian philosophers, whose thinking represents polar opposites.¹⁴² Merton reads Ibn Arabi's work in a Spanish translation by the priest Asin Palacios, a scholar of Islamic studies. The poem 'Song for the Death of Averroes'¹⁴³ becomes a gloss on a gloss, creating cross-cultural, cross-historical, and cross-linguistic links. The sense of empathy with those who share an earnestness for the spiritual journey is evident in the shift to a more intimate canvas. After the procession of rockets, bomber planes and brass suns, there follows a house, an apartment, 'the place where he was sitting', from where 'he took me in his arms' which 'increased his joy'.¹⁴⁴ The world is suddenly more human and this greater humanity is marked by a love of learning, which links Averroes not only with Aristotle, but with Ibn Arabi, Asin Palacios and with Merton himself.¹⁴⁵ Continuing the spatial references resonant of home, the philosopher's closeness to God lies in an ability to 'unlock His door' and allow wisdom to be observed through a 'thin curtain'. The final image is of a donkey carrying a coffin on one side, all the books of Averrões on the other. The lifeless materiality of the man of God is balanced by all the words he ever wrote, the themes of which encompass the immateriality of heavenly bodies and the abstractions of classical rationalist philosophy. It is a beguiling image, wherein the desire to seek truth and to find words is held up for all to see by a donkey.

It is clear from the eclectic nature of Merton's writing companions that Merton exhibits a degree of reticence in being the provider of the sole voice of the text. He demonstrates that multiples voices are better than one. By excavating the words of other writers, he withdraws

¹⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 319.

¹⁴¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 320.

¹⁴² Alex Robinson compares Ibn Arabi and Ibn Rushd known to the West as Averroes. For Averroes, his 'empirical-rational epistemology formed the foundation for Renaissance science and the modern scientific method that developed from it. Averrões could therefore be considered the father of modern European thought.' Ibn Arab conversely teaches that as 'humans are not primarily rational, reason cannot lead to knowledge'. Alex Robinson, 'The Great Philosophers – Averrões and Ibn Arabi', *Bradt Travel Guides*, 2015 <<https://www.bradtguides.com/articles/great-philosophers-averroes-ibn-arabi/>> [accessed 28/12/2019].

¹⁴³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 325-329.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 325.

¹⁴⁵ His friend and fellow ressourcement theologian, Jean Leclercq, in his seminal study on monasticism, equates a monastic love of learning with desire for God Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God..*

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from being the sole protagonist. The hospitality of his writing fashions a space which can absorb and welcome the stranger from other periods of time, other countries, as well as landscapes, languages, cultures and faiths.

Two further medieval landscapes demonstrate a powerful openness to learning from other people in other places. They both concern letters to and from the School of Chartres and a warning about cosmic portents.¹⁴⁶ ‘News from the School of Chartres’ portrays the archetypal monastic association of love of learning with desire for God.¹⁴⁷ The pleasure of the written word in its various forms shines through this poem and a corresponding intimacy with all those who share the same delight. The letter writer itemises the tools and tasks of learning: ‘a psalter’; ‘two dozen sheets of parchment’; ‘chalk’; ‘little gloses’; ‘muse’; ‘my little books’, and highlights the pleasure of the shared learning: ‘Have you forgotten? We studied, as one person, Looking together into the same book of Logic’.¹⁴⁸ The desire to read the psalter, to fill the parchment, and to write with chalk relays a fascination with words. Accompanying the pleasure is a recognition of the love underpinning the chosen life. The first such declaration is from a relative who anxiously recommits a child to the care of the school ‘for God’s love and mine’¹⁴⁹ with vocabulary pivoting around kindness and gentleness.¹⁵⁰ The sense of affection continues as a child writes to his father about the kindness around him.¹⁵¹ The delight in learning is brimming over: ‘I am at such a peak of Happiness I burst, and have no words to burst with’, the school offering a perfect place to learn: ‘Come to Chartres and learn!’ Further requests include some

¹⁴⁶ Thérèse Lentfoehr points out that in his notebooks Merton had described the background of this medieval cathedral school. She records ‘the school had periods of decay and restoration until in the 10th century under Fulbert of Chartres (..) it reached a peak of excellence with a student body representing Germany and the Lowlands as well as France. Fulbert was a “father” to the students concerned with their acquiring of virtue as well as knowledge.’ Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*, p. 44. Merton during the writing of *Emblems* claimed to have an intense interest in the Chartrains, writing both to Donald Fiene, (Nov 1962) Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. by Robert E. Daggy (London: Harper Collins, 1990), pp. 324–25, and to Etienne Gilson, (Oct 1962). He expressed a wish to work on them seriously and asked Gilson for book suggestions exploring their themes in a Cistercian context.

¹⁴⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 356–359.

¹⁴⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 359.

¹⁴⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 357.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 357. ‘Your piety received my request Kindly (..) He could read in your own books And you would faithfully see to all his needs’; ‘Godfrey needs once again ‘your heart’s kindness.’

¹⁵¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 357. ‘Our clothes are laundered in his house and his wife gives us our haircuts’

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lamb skins to guard against the cold and chalk as ‘The chalk here won’t write’.¹⁵² The writer hints at ineffability: ‘They say deep thoughts cannot be put into words,’¹⁵³ yet, in the manner of mystical language he does not hold back from an effusion of words: ‘Dear friend be well, be every bit as well, As I want you to be. If you are well, then I am well too’.¹⁵⁴ The echoes of the optimism of Julian of Norwich whom Merton named ‘the greatest of the English mystics (and) one of the greatest English theologians’ is clearly evident.¹⁵⁵

A contrasting poem also influenced by the School of Chartres is ‘What to think when it rains blood’.¹⁵⁶ It is a translation of a letter from Fulbert of Chartres¹⁵⁷ to King Robert in the eleventh century.¹⁵⁸ France is caught up in strange happenings including the blossoming of trees in winter, accompanied by lightning and frightful thunder, a comet in the inky darkness of the sky and a downpour of blood, which sticks to garments and human flesh. It is followed by a plague. The advice given is that if this happens, conversion will prevent otherwise inevitable death. The warning however is quite dispassionate. It is as if such strange happenings, set in a vibrant and colourful canvas are part of existence in which the divine is perceived as closely involved with what happens on Earth.

¹⁵² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 358.

¹⁵³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 358.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 359.

¹⁵⁵ Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), p. 140. The echoes relate to her words ‘All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.’ (Julian of Norwich, *Enfolded in Love* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), p. 15. In *Hagia Sophia*, Merton identifies the notion of a divine feminine, as being drawn from the teaching of Julian of Norwich: ‘As truly as God is our father, so just as truly is he our mother’. (Julian of Norwich, *Enfolded in Love*, p. 35). Julian of Norwich also figures in the poem, ‘News from the School at Chartres’. Her vision, Merton suggests is shaped by a place set beneath ‘a kind sky’: ‘When the recluses of fourteenth century England heard their Church Bells and looked out upon the wolds and fens under a kind sky, they spoke in their hearts to ‘Jesus our Mother’. ‘It was Sophia that had awakened their childlike hearts.’ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 367.

¹⁵⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 359-362.

¹⁵⁷ Fulbert was bishop of Chartres from 1006. He developed the cathedral school of Chartres into one of the best centres of learning in Europe. He was regularly sent on diplomatic missions to Rome by King Robert II whom he supported in his conflict with the nobles of France and with William V of Aquitaine. In 1020 Fulbert began to rebuild the burned cathedral of Chartres, but he died before the work was completed

¹⁵⁸ It concerns a history written by Gregory of Tours, original name Georgisu Florenius (born c. 538 – c. 594). Bishop and writer whose *Ten Books of Histories* is a prime source of 6th century French history.

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The poem 'To Alfonso Cortes'¹⁵⁹ is directly linked with Merton's translations, published in conjunction with *Emblems*, and underlines Merton's welcome to the stranger.¹⁶⁰ Once again, a room interior marks a shift towards a greater intimacy, with the domestic detail of a bunch of leaves in a glass vase, a funny hat, well-worn clothes and a sheet of paper.¹⁶¹ The focus zooms in closer, to the stillness of Alfonso, his face, his smile, the writing on the paper. Cortes in his presumed insanity,¹⁶² provides a sharp counterpoint to the sanity of Eichmann. A clown-like simplicity suggested by his funny hat, and his smiling at the rainbows he will create on the empty paper¹⁶³ is reflective of a child's creativity with paint, and anticipates Merton's locating of grace in the drawing by the child Grace, to be explored in the next section.¹⁶⁴ Poks points out that his 'funny hat' and his smile demonstrates his distance from systematic thought, showing 'the poet's ability to transcend his condition' and 'outwit the rational, two-dimensional logic of the world'.¹⁶⁵ It is a stance shared with the poems of contemplative stillness, to be explored in the next section, which step back from logical polarisations to seek out a mystical third dimension.

¹⁵⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 355–356. Alfonso Cortes was known as 'El poeta loco', the mad poet. His treatment for madness was to be manacled to his bed. He would refer to a commonplace opinion of poets as mad people claiming that in his case, 'they chained me like an animal. Society in its stupidity and cowardice was afraid of me. Crazy. Barbaric. Poets are always being called mad.' In this film he is pictured with bars on the window. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vJw9BMra6w&list=PL04Qh7tVkIoknmTO5YcPwStqux-NyBJXN>. His guitar kept him company. He was known to play his guitar in moments of lucidity when his family unchained him. <https://altamontenterprise.com/opinion/columns/field-notes/04022020/confined-walls-what-do-you-see-through-your-window>, [both accessed 13/10/2020].

¹⁶⁰ Poks lists the wide range of Merton's translations which were included in the publication of *Emblems*. There were Latin and Greek of the Church Fathers including St Ambrose, Paulus Diaconicus, Sedulius, Clement of Alexandria; the Chinese of Chuang Tzu and Meng Tsu and the Persian of the anonymous poem 'Tomb Cover of Imam Riza; the contemporary French poetry of René Char and Raïssa Maritain. The core however is from Latin American poets: Jorge Carrera Andrade; Carlos Drummond de Andrade; Alfonso Cortes; Ernesto Cardenal; Pablo Antonio Cuadra; Nicanor Parra; Cesar Vallejo. Poks, Malgorzata, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices*, p. 11. Poks describes this textual welcoming of the stranger as 'intended by Merton as witness to such a heartfelt resonance between his entire being and 'the entire being of the other', p. 12, citing *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 188.

¹⁶¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 355.

¹⁶² Pablo Antonio Cuadra and Jorge Eduardo Arellano discussed the character of the 'madness' of Cortes. Cuadra suggests it was inseparable from his mystical vision whilst Arellano said even before his catatonic attack, he was already preoccupied deeply with questions of 'time, feelings, the self, and its immensity, but his neurological experience churned up these impressions. Revista digital para los curiosos de Modernismo 'La noble locura de Alfonso Cortés', <<http://magazinmodernista.com/2009/08/10/la-noble-locura-de-alfonso-cortes/>> [accessed 13/10/2020].

¹⁶³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 356. 'You stand still /And you begin to smile /As you read rainbows /On the empty paper.// You smile in a mist of years /Where your country has placed you /To think about the paper /You hold in your hand.'

¹⁶⁴ See III.ii.b. 'Someone is awake'.

¹⁶⁵ Poks, Malgorzata, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices*, p. 86.

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In this first series of transformative landscapes, I have explored Merton's engagement with other writers to demonstrate how he layers up locations and genres onto an ever-expanding canvas of inclusion. Having named a place of confinement, this selection of poems signposts the release which language can bring by its multidimensionality, and by its power to connect with those who have no hesitation in acknowledging communion with the sacred through words. Jennifer Reek's thesis on the links between text and sanctuary, which will be further explored in Chapter Eight, identifies a space called textuality which she defines as 'the textured open spaces opened up by the interactions between texts, and between texts and readers/writers, that we might inhabit as sacred spaces'.¹⁶⁶ Merton invites into the spaces which his reading opens up to him, containing his engagement with Latin American poets as well as his interest in medieval French and Spanish texts. An ever-widening circle of textual engagement draws in the writings associated with Zen meditation.¹⁶⁷ The greatest sense of liberation is tethered to the stillness of the final selection of poems,¹⁶⁸ which, according to Lentfoehr,¹⁶⁹ Petisco and Altany¹⁷⁰ represents Zen thinking merged with the Christian apophatic tradition.¹⁷¹

III.ii.b. 'Someone is awake'¹⁷²

Meditative silence and an accompanying wakefulness stands as a counterpoint to the unlistening noise of the world.¹⁷³ In 'Song for Nobody' is a flower 'in whose dark eye / Someone

¹⁶⁶ Reek, Jennifer Lynn, 'From Temple to Text: Reading and Writing Sacred Spaces of Poetic Dwelling. University of Glasgow' (University of Glasgow, 2013) <<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/4537/1/2013reekphd.pdf>> [accessed 28/12/ 2019], p. 55.

¹⁶⁷ Accompanying Merton's admission that he is 'profoundly engrossed in the School of Chartres' he declares a parallel interest in Zen. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy*, pp. 148–49.

¹⁶⁸ 'Grace's House'; 'Song for Nobody'; 'Song: If You Seek ...'; 'O Sweet Irrational Worship'; 'Messenger from the Horizon'; 'Night Flowering Cactus'; 'Love Winter When The Plant Says Nothing'; 'The Fall'; *Hagia Sophia*.

¹⁶⁹ Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*, p. 59.

¹⁷⁰ Altany, Alan, 'Celtic Monasticism as a Metaphor for Thomas Merton' Section IV: 'Emblems for a Pilgrim.'

¹⁷¹ Merton's interest in Zen spanned the period of writing *Emblems* and beyond. As early as 1958, Merton wrote to Jacques Maritain claiming: 'I myself am very interested in Zen and I can see that it has very much to do with all that is true'. In April 1963, writing to Dom Aelred Graham who had written *Zen Catholicism*, Merton referred to his own early books, claiming that 'what was lacking was the 'Zen element', *The Courage for Truth*, p. 28, October 9, 1958.

¹⁷² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 337.

¹⁷³ In *Contemplative Prayer* Merton describes the mental stepping aside involved: 'Contemplation is essentially a listening in silence, an expectancy. The contemplative life should liberate and purify the imagination which passively absorbs all kinds of things without our realizing it; liberate and purify it from the influence of so much violence done by the bombardment of social images', *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 67. He suggests that contemplation offers liberation from the confinement within language or context and invites into a different way of seeing.

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is awake'.¹⁷⁴ In 'Grace's House',¹⁷⁵ the curtains are wide open, a face at the window winks, a dog smiles and the trees have knotholes from which creatures look out. In 'Song: If You Seek...' the ability to see is an opening of 'the windows of your innermost apartment'.¹⁷⁶ We meet again the image of a window as representative of contemplative seeing as a noun and a verb, something which is visually an empty frame, yet which transmits something beyond itself and able to contain the paradox of the 'empty, wealthy night'.¹⁷⁷ This ability to relocate or step into a wider perceptions, stands in acute contrast to that earlier poem in *Emblems* in which 'windows will go out', destroying all possibility of re-locating.¹⁷⁸

This group of nine poems figure among those most often chosen for web-blogs, anthologies, and academic criticism.¹⁷⁹ The accessibility and appeal of 'Grace's House' has made it a focus for superlatives among critics. Its importance within *Emblems* as a whole, led Balthasar to place it as the first poem in the German translation, giving its name to the entire anthology.¹⁸⁰ Lentfoehr describes it as 'one of the most interesting poems',¹⁸¹ Petisco as among the most beautiful,¹⁸² whilst O'Connell as 'arguably the best' of Merton's 'sacramental' landscapes. O'Connell moreover provides a detailed analysis giving close attention to form and highlighting the mellifluousness created through assonance, alliteration, and metre.¹⁸³ He points out how attention readily shifts through the material images of summit, cloud, river, house, grass, flowers to collide with the scriptural resonances of 'no blade of grass is not counted', 'twelve

¹⁷⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 337.

¹⁷⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 330-331.

¹⁷⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 340. The references to windows echo once again the poem comparing the Virgin Mary to a window in *Thirty Poems*, pp. 46-49 and the book of Raïssa Maritain as a 'book full of windows', *The Courage for Truth*, p. 33, December 18, 1962.

¹⁷⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 340.

¹⁷⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 307-308.

¹⁷⁹ Julia Marks, 'The Value of Sparrows', *Writings of a Christian Mystic*, 2015 <<https://thevalueofsparrows.wordpress.com/2015/02/28/poetry-song-if-you-seek-by-thomas-merton/>> [accessed 18 April 2020]; Randy Coleman-Riese, 'A Mailbox Full of Valentines for Grace', *The Cornerstone Forum*, 2017 <<https://cornerstoneforum.org/?p=2221>> [accessed 28/12/ 2019].

¹⁸⁰ Thomas Merton and Merton, *School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, Reprint edition (San Diego: Harvest Books, 1993), p. 326, January 7, 1967.

¹⁸¹ Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*, p. 86.

¹⁸² Petisco Martinez, Sonia, p. 201.

¹⁸³ To write nearly 3000 words on a single poem is a rare undertaking in relation to Merton's poetry. Patrick F. O'Connell, "'The Surest Home Is Pointless': A Pathless Path through Merton's Poetic Corpus".

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flowers', 'the secure house', 'prepared by the winds'.¹⁸⁴ As 'Grace's House' draws together apophatic wisdom set in the beguiling intimacy of a child's drawing, these poems provide a consummate expression of Merton's poetics of place in its interplay between created and uncreated, the scripted and the wordless, caught up in the interplay of verbal, spatial and sacred.

This play of paradox is at the core of the poetic landscape in 'Song: If You Seek...'. Intimacy and openness to encounter invade the contemplative canvas:

If you seek a heavenly light
I, Solitude, am your professor!
I go before you into emptiness,
Raise strange suns for you new mornings,
Opening the windows
Of your innermost apartment.¹⁸⁵

The poem oscillates between domestic and cosmic, emptiness and fullness, interior and exterior. Merton underlines the multidimensionality of contemplation in its ability to contain the Zen paradox of the fullness of emptiness and when merged with the Christian tradition becomes 'The forerunner of the Word of God', signalling a place before the Incarnation, which is full of anticipation for the event.¹⁸⁶ Labrie suggests that the poem names the power within contemplative solitude to precede 'the self into an emptiness where there arises the possibility of an intuitive leap'.¹⁸⁷ In side-stepping the familiar patterns of reasoning, contemplation unearths the possibility of taking that leap to accept the Incarnation as an ongoing reality which grants the opportunity to collide with the divine in the materiality of the world.

'Night Flowering Cactus'¹⁸⁸ also interweaves Zen consciousness and the apophatic tradition and underlines how contemplative insight is caught in a fleeting moment. Illumination is thus bound to fragility:

I know my time, which is obscure, silent and brief

¹⁸⁴ Patrick F. O'Connell, "The Surest Home Is Pointless", pp. 4–8.

¹⁸⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 340.

¹⁸⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 340. 'Follow my ways and I will lead you /To golden-haired suns, /Logos and music, blameless joys, /Innocent of questions /And beyond answer.'

¹⁸⁷ Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*, p. 62.

¹⁸⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 351-352.

For I am present without warning one night only.

Like 'Grace's House', this poem has incited frequent commentary from critics. According to Lentfoehr, the poem represents the 'Eckhartian concept of perfect poverty'.¹⁸⁹ Woodcock appreciates the 'crystal clarity and formal delicacy', qualities he claims 'that will rarely reappear in Merton's poetry'.¹⁹⁰ Labrie interprets the cactus with its hidden nocturnal life, 'as a paradigm of the role of a non-rational self-abandonment and acceptance'.¹⁹¹ Weis understands the poem as a picture of 'grace offered at particular moments to those who are aware' with its 'unpredictable outpouring'.¹⁹² The Eucharistic imagery reflects a specifically Christian reading: 'I lift my sudden Eucharist / Out of the earth's unfathomable joy.'¹⁹³ The joyousness of the image leads Susan McCaslin to isolate this poem as an 'astonishingly beautiful ecological/spiritual peace poem'.¹⁹⁴ The sense of a resonant silence, in spite of its fleeting quality, leaves an indelible imprint. 'You live forever in its echo:/ You will never be the same again.'¹⁹⁵

In contrast, 'Love Winter When The Plant Says Nothing'¹⁹⁶ seems more exclusively bound to Zen consciousness.¹⁹⁷ The title is suggestive of the *koan* forms associated with Zen meditation, the underlying intention of which is to say a great deal in a few words. Characteristic

¹⁸⁹ Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*, p. 61 This 'occurs only when there is no self left as a place for God to act in, and hence He acts purely in Himself. It is only then that one comes to his true self or, in the Zen terms, the no-self, in which one achieves his true identity which consists in the birth of Christ in us.'

¹⁹⁰ Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet*, p. 142.

¹⁹¹ Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*, p. 108.

¹⁹² Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, p. 111.

¹⁹³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 352.

¹⁹⁴ Susan McCaslin, 'Pivoting Toward Peace: The Engaged Poetics of Thomas Merton and Denise Levertov', *Pacific Rim Review of Books*, 10, 2009 <<http://www.prrb.ca/articles/issue10-mccaslin.htm>> [accessed 06/09/ 2018].

¹⁹⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 352.

¹⁹⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 353.

¹⁹⁷ Merton's earnest engagement with world religions is well-documented, in particular the nine book series, published by Fons Vita which include: Merton and Sufism; Merton and Hesychasm; Merton and Judaism; Merton and Buddhism; Merton and the Tao; Merton and Indigenous Wisdom; Merton and Hinduism; Merton and the Protestant Tradition. James Goulet provides a very helpful and succinct summary of this developing outreach to other faiths in the *Merton Annual*, no. 4, 1991 <<http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/4/Goulet113-129.pdf>>, accessed 16/06/2020. He describes Merton in the autobiography as demonstrating 'a narrow ecumenism' and a 'one sided triumphant Roman Catholic exclusivism', p. 117. In the writing of his final years, whilst Christ remains at the centre of his vision, Goulet outlines that 'Merton gradually realizes that every human journey faithfully made contains the experience of crucifixion and resurrection, and so partakes of the Christ experience.' P. 124. The expansiveness of his welcome to other faiths is dependent on a capaciously shaped vision of Christian mystery. This capaciousness is instrumental in the freeing of theology, not only from restrictive forms, but from confining categories which compromise rather than clarify truth.

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of a *koan*, the title has no clear logic, but the randomness of rhythm and form which is so prevalent in *Emblems* is offset in this poem by patterns of inventive wordplay and hidden connections.

The winter scene reflects the humble stance of the contemplative before the world. The forest acts ‘meekly’, with ‘low branches’ and the trees are ‘little’. The winter landscape paradoxically is a place of growth:

O little forests, meekly
Touch the snow with low branches!
O covered stones
Hide the house of growth!¹⁹⁸

The verse is unified by the internal rhymes of ‘snow’, ‘low’, ‘growth’ and the repetition of O, which as a zero, echoes the thrice stated nothing across the poem. The continuing significance of the letter O is particularly spelled out in the second verse:

Secret
Vegetal words,
Unlettered water,
Daily zero.

After the declamatory tone of the opening verse, when trees and stones are addressed, this second verse is an unexpected contrast. The multiple alliteration of the sibilants, plosive and liquid consonants, beginning with the word *secret*, suggests an audible whispering, as if echoing the sound of a quiet praying. The fact the words are unlettered suggests an absence of meaning, perhaps a reference to *glossalia*¹⁹⁹ or the simple echoing of organic sounds, like the dripping of water melting beneath the snow. The praying and by analogy the pray-er have fused with the landscape, emptied of self, as if becoming the zero of the final line. This notion is reinforced with the echo of the French word for water: *eau* with its absence of consonants and hence

¹⁹⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 353.

¹⁹⁹ Glossolalia also called speaking in tongues, (from Greek *glōssa*, ‘tongue,’ and *lalia*, ‘talking’) utterances approximating speaking, in generally unintelligible sounds. Biblical references include: 1 Samuel 10:5–13, 19:18–24; 2 Samuel 6:13–17; 1 Kings 20:35–37; Acts of the Apostles 2:4. The Apostle Paul referred to it as a spiritual gift: 1 Corinthians 12–14, and claimed that he possessed exceptional ability in that gift, 1 Corinthians 14:18. The account in Acts: 4:31, 8:14–17, 10:44–48, 11:15–17, 19:1–7, indicates that in the beginning of the Christian church the phenomenon reappeared wherever conversion and commitment to Christianity occurred. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia Britannica: Glossalia*, 2019 <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/glossolalia>> [accessed 14/04/2020].

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unlettered, phonetically reproduced in the internal rhymes and the repeated O. We can recall how among Merton's poems of the 1940s, water is a symbol of contemplation in its reconfiguring potential. The repeated letter 'l' recreates the liquefying of words, exemplifying the power of water and the dissolving of meaning, of person, and of the mysterious hidden, covered growth of the first verse.

In verse three, nature and the human are together at prayer. The forest is bowed down. The praying trees and the praying monk are at one, curved together in prayer:

Pray undistracted
Curled tree
Carved in steel-
Buried zenith!

The image resonates with Merton's likening of the monk's role to that of trees: 'In the night of our technological barbarism, monks must be as trees which exist silently in the dark and by their vital presence purify the air',²⁰⁰ the technological barbarism evident in 'Carved in steel', the material of the modern industrial and technological age, echoed in the harshness of the repeated c: 'undistracted', 'carved', 'curled' and the plosive 'ed' four times. The harshness of the alliteration of c, d, r, suggests audible twentieth century industrial sounds, as if the poem is moving into the noise of the world. Merton's comparison recalls dualism, where monks stand at odds to the noise of the world. In this poem, however, the harshness is absorbed into the blunted alliteration of 'th' in end words: nothing, growth, zenith, nothing, growth, nothing creates an undulating rondo-like pattern becoming the nothingness which is the apogee of growth. The sense of paradoxical power within apophatic knowledge is multiply underlined as such wisdom is described as buried zenith, echoing both the zero of verse two and prefiguring the zero of verse six, as well as signalling Zen consciousness.

In verse four the juxtaposition of 'infant', 'weak' and 'nothing'' with 'fire', 'fort' and 'burly' almost mocks the power in powerlessness theme. There is a hint of anguish in the dark mystification, the need to hold the tension of extremes:

Fire, turn inward

²⁰⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1992), p. 61.

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To your weak fort,
To a burly infant spot,
A house of nothing.

By verse five, the consonance of 'peace', 'bless', 'place' and a double 'silence' indicates something of an arrival beyond the tension, even though it is proclaimed to be a 'mad place'. We can recall how in 'Chant' the sanity of the speaker represented the greatest horror. Here, representing the opposite pole, the equation of wisdom and folly, echoing the references to St Paul in the early poems offers the transfiguring possibility. As a second zero and the word sun, in verse six, echoes the first zero and zenith, it restates Zen awareness and the release into a wider space. The circle of 'O' is reconfigured as the poems returns full circle to the title. The reader is invited into the process in which a lack of logic holds fort and is led to arrival in resonant ambiguity.

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

O silence, golden zero
Unsetting sun..

Love winter when the plant says nothing.

The boundaries between noise and silence, rigidity of thinking and a fluid openness are gradually dismantled. Whilst many of these poems are set in rural landscapes, reflecting the city nature divide, contemplative seeing is also possible against an urban background. It is a question of relationship to place, rather than the place itself. The night flowering cactus for example blooms 'when the sun rises on the brass valleys',²⁰¹ whilst in 'The Fall',²⁰² a homeless contemplative stands at a city crossroads.²⁰³ Although physically in one place, however, the contemplative has the power to re-locate. Being trapped in a paradox defines contemplative space. The opening sentence relies on apophasis in a sequence of eight negatives:

There is nowhere in you a paradise that is no place and there
You do not enter except without a story.

²⁰¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 351.

²⁰² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 354-355.

²⁰³ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 354.

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To enter there is to become unnameable.

Whoever is there is homeless for he has no door and no identity with which to go out and to come in.

Mindful of the puzzling *koan*-like unfolding of the line, Merton arranges each statement separately, as if in an individual verse. The cryptic declarations force a lingering. In contrast to this unplaceability the one 'who has an address is lost' and in conforming to the mapped out territory of roads, apartments, doors and keys is trapped: 'They fall, fall into apartments and are secularly established'.²⁰⁴ In a parallel to mystical seeing, O'Connell suggests that they are subject to 'a parody of mystical oneness', as 'All telephones ring at once, all names are shouted at once and all cars crash at one crossing; all cities explode and fly away in dust.'²⁰⁵ He thus identifies 'a pseudo-unity that is meaningless, incomprehensible and ultimately destructive'.²⁰⁶ Fully categorised they have a name, a number and even place to be stored after death: 'a definite place for bodies, pigeon holes for ashes',²⁰⁷ echoing the careful ordering met in the death camps of *Chant*. The security of the mapped location reflects the security of a prison.

Merton thus pitches side by side a contemplative and a desacralised landscape. The implication is that to encounter and dwell within a graced landscape, it is necessary to live on the edges and to remain open ready to yield to an absence of identity, to be homeless and nameless. Such openness is reflected in the poem through a series of verbs, which, in identifying movement in and through space, emphasise the possibility of relocating: to fall; to enter; to go out; to come in. Similarly, adjectives describing relationship to place: lost; found; homeless; at home, again reflect a move from dislocation to relocation. The ability to relocate is a key element in Merton's perspective on contemplative seeing. How might it be possible to relinquish the angry stance against geographical, historical, and cultural context, to yield to the possibility of fresh encounter? This poem steps beyond the binaries and shows how it is possible to stand between opposite poles asserting the coalescence and connaturality of the desacralised and the sacred. It is not simply a contemplative detachment. It is equally a political standing against dehumanising

²⁰⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 354.

²⁰⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 354.

²⁰⁶ Patrick F. O'Connell, "The Surest Home Is Pointless", p. 11.

²⁰⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 355.

structures: the immigration process which rejected Lee Ying, the governments who would jail the sex-workers, the officers who would arrest child activists, the reasoned criminality of Eichmann, the adulation of technology, the debasement of myth and language. To be rightly placed, is to be displaced.

With *Hagia Sophia*, the closing sequence of *Emblems*,²⁰⁸ all polarisations are dismantled as the poem tentatively lets liminal space emerge. The panorama of 1960s America disappears from its the haunting landscape. Unlike many of the individual poems in the work, this work has been the focus of close scrutiny and admiration in three recent publications, one by Fiona Gardner and two by Christopher Pramuk.²⁰⁹ Each study gives a distinct shape to the figure of Wisdom. In Gardner's work Wisdom is represented by the child mind, which she summarises as 'a pre-verbal, pre-conceptual context', 'of being open to wonder due to the novelty of encountering situations, things and people for the first time'. Through this way of being, the child can therefore become the symbol of a transformational process²¹⁰ and of liminal space which allows for the merging of different worlds.²¹¹

In Pramuk's first study,²¹² the shape given to Wisdom is named Sophia based on the central presence in the book of Wisdom. She is characterised by dynamism and boundless potential.²¹³ She represents the merging of the scripted quality of biblical revelation, the created nature of the child in the garden, and the sacredness, the verbal, the created and the uncreated. Pramuk's second study locates the whole canvas in liminal space marked by receptivity and

²⁰⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 363-371.

²⁰⁹ *At Play in Creation Merton's Awakening to the Feminine Divine*, 2015, *Wisdom in All Things Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, 2009, *The Only Mind Worth Having Thomas Merton and the Child Mind*, 2005.

²¹⁰ Fiona Gardner, *The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), ebook, 16%.

²¹¹ Gardner, ebook, 25%.

²¹² Pramuk, *Sophia*.

²¹³ Wisdom 7: 22-24. The nature of Wisdom: N.R.S.V., p. 783. 'For in her there is a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent and pure and most subtle. For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.'

driven by a vital impulse to find words to name the sacred energy, animating both language and the created world.²¹⁴

The perspicacity and depth of scrutiny manifest in the critique of Gardner and Pramuk offset the relative neglect in Merton discourse of his poetic works. This text, however, is especially relevant as I bring my analysis of *Emblems* and of Merton's poetry to a close. Its vivid representation of Merton's poetics of place, and the contrasting landscape it provides to the one void of Wisdom met in Raïssa's poem, together signals the emergence of that prophetic and transforming voice for which she calls.

III.iii The Song in Historical Truth²¹⁵

Merton's poetics of place unfolds on the landscape of *Hagia Sophia* in the paradoxical clash between the presence of a divine voice which speaks, materially present as sound waves, speaking, awakening, soothing and being heard, and yet which is wordless. The voice is that of 'my Creator's Thought and Art speaking',²¹⁶ the voice of Wisdom, Hagia, Eve, the Virgin Mary. It is also equally, however, the voice of a nurse.²¹⁷ The imagery blends the linguistic nature of the scriptural stories of women of God, the divine dynamic of the Creator who utters the world into being, and the physicality and contemporaneity of that world in the presence of the nurse. When a nurse speaks as Sophia, when to speak is not to utter words, when the dynamic animating the world is namelessness, the world of *Hagia Sophia* captures a threshold of awareness between placelessness and place, between silence and speech, between the sacred voice of Sophia and the human voice of a nurse. Reversing this paradox, the close of the poem offers God as a vagrant wondering the Earth. As the poem emerges within the framework of Lauds, there is the assumption that the dialogue between God and humankind will be ever unfolding.

²¹⁴ Christopher Pramuk, *At Play in Creation: Merton's Awakening to the Feminine Divine* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015).

²¹⁵ Certeau, p. 71..

²¹⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 363.

²¹⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 364.

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In all the contemplative poems, the way towards a redeeming vision is characterised by an ambiguous map on which there is no road. In this poem, conversely, God as a vagrant, ‘finds his way down a new road’.²¹⁸ The eternal time which the hours of Lauds and the hours in a hospital ward have entered into, at the start of the poem, is now reversed as ordinary time and place become the dwelling place of God.²¹⁹ The flow of the text emphasises the full entering into materiality of the divine, that exchange of history and beauty named by Certeau.

This exchange provides a direct echo of Raïssa’s poem. Where Maritain names God as *Deus Excelsus Terribilis*, *Hagia Sophia*, transforms this sense of a terrifying distant God into a kindly presence, close to hand:

The Sun burns in the sky like the Face of God, but we do not know his countenance as terrible. We do not see the Blinding One in black emptiness. He speaks to us gently in ten thousand things²²⁰.

Merton demonstrates a contemplative shift in perspective where almighty becomes all-fully. Instead of standing ‘in solitary might surrounded by darkness’, God embraces ‘all creatures with merciful tenderness and light’²²¹ and wills to be the ‘unseen pivot of all nature, That which is poorest and humblest’.²²² God becomes Sophia, a girl, playing in the world. This image from ‘Proverbs’ is central to Merton’s description of a recurring dream.²²³ He even claims to Jacques Maritain that he associates the dream with Raïssa. It is also associated with the animating energy where Merton has a flash of mystical insight on a busy high street, named the ‘Louisville Revelation’ to be explored in the next chapter:

²¹⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 371.

²¹⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 371. ‘The shadows fall. The stars appear. The birds begin to sleep. Night embraces the silent half of the earth’. Then, God appears on this familiar landscape, incarnate in a fully human form: ‘A vagrant, a destitute wanderer with dusty feet, finds his way down a new road. A homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identification, without even a number, a frail expendable exile lies down in desolation under the sweet stars of the world and entrusts Himself to sleep’.

²²⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 366.

²²¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 367.

²²² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 368.

²²³ Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, p. 176. ‘On a porch at Douglaston I am embraced with determined and virginal passion by a young Jewish girl. She clings to me and will not let me go, and I get to like the idea. I see that she is a nice kid in a plain, sincere sort of way. I reflect “She belongs to the same race as St. Anne.” I ask her name and she says her name is Proverb. I tell her that is a beautiful and significant name, but she does not appear to like it - perhaps others have mocked her for it.’

What moves me most is that in each line I see and I hear this ‘child’ of Proverb 8:27-31 ‘*ludens in orbe terrarium*’ (Playing on the surface of the earth) *ludens* too in Raïssa – In Louisville street I saw suddenly that everyone was Proverb, without knowing it. Raïssa’s words are filled with the presence and the light of this wisdom-child. She is ‘Proverb’.²²⁴

These connections clearly demonstrate that the work seeks to respond to Raïssa’s plea. In *Emblems* Merton confronts his own dismay, evident in the desacralised landscapes and reaching its culmination in the concentration camp setting of *Chant*. He adopts the role of the psalmist and prophet, however, offering both a lament, and a call to make straight the paths by looking to alternative textual dwelling places. God’s distance is translated into a deep intimacy, which, through an understanding of the Incarnation does not so much dissolve the brokenness, as find a home within it. It is the image at the end of *Hagia Sophia*, where the homeless God is only at home on the roads of the world.²²⁵

Overall *Emblems* fully acknowledges Raïssa Maritain’s dismay at a place seemingly emptied of God. Merton’s response does not turn away from the world but stays firmly on its roads where the Maritains would have it be. As Merton outlines in *Conjectures*, the seeming withdrawal from the world which contemplation demands is not a process of passive self-isolation but the root of active engagement with the world: ‘Solitude has its own special work: a deepening of awareness that the world needs. A struggle against alienation. True solitude is deeply aware of the world’s needs. It does not hold the world at arm’s length.’²²⁶ With *Hagia Sophia*, the intangibility and namelessness of the Zen and apophatic landscapes are sifted through the lens of the child-mind. The book which began in a loss of symbolism and in a debasement of the possibilities of language passes through the places of desacralisation into those of liminality and transformation and ends in the rich biblical symbolisms of Old and New Testaments. In the poems of the 1940s, Merton for the most placed Mary, Christ, and God on the canvases he created, reflecting the language of Catholic tradition, with prayerful invocation and biblical reference. In this this work their combined presence emerges as if unannounced in the closing scene. Following the pendulum of anger and quietude which seems engaged elsewhere,

²²⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 33, December 18, 1962.

²²⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 371.

²²⁶ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 19.

they stand with Sophia in sharp relief, thus creating an alternative, paradoxical and mysterious cartography.

IV

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have identified the deadlock of a world wherein language and place are emptied of all sense of their divinely shaped and divinely indwelt character. I have illustrated the power of language to create alternative textual dwelling places. I have signalled the role which O'Connor identified for the Catholic writer, the naming of grace in unpromising geography, the home in exile identified by Leonard, those words live-wired into divine presence of Heschel and that 'opening a space for beauty', identified by Certeau. I have shown how Merton's response to Raïssa calls for openness and a readiness to re-locate, through which there emerges the quietude beyond alienation, solidarity with human brokenness and a lyrical stillness within the automated noise of the world.

As a theological canvas Merton has introduced a rich diversity of faith traditions and kindred thinkers. He thus illustrates his expansion of sources from the strictly limited Scholastic sources of The Magisterium, Scripture, and the Apostolic Tradition. The expanding capaciousness of Merton's understanding of Christian revelation signals how faiths can be permeable to each other.

Chapter Seven explores the prose work, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, written in parallel. It is in this work that Merton highlights his interest in texts beyond the pre-modern or specifically theological as explored in Chapter One, with reference to marginalised thinkers

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including Fénelon and Newman,²²⁷ Péguy and Weil,²²⁸ and Giono.²²⁹ He will also engage earnestly with other faith traditions. Merton's mode of theological expression is now recreated in a cascade of headlines, opinions, and prejudices accompanied by an intermittent stilling of the flow of the text, creating textual spaces in which to linger. As Merton's sources expand, his theological style becomes increasingly more fluid.

²²⁷ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 24. 'They are not of their time, or ahead of it, or behind it. They are outside of it. Indeed, they reach this condition by suffering a kind of rejection which liberates them into a realm of a final perfection, a uniqueness, a humility, a wisdom, a silence that is definitive and contains all that they have ever said.' Chapter One, III.iii 'Merton's Directives for Theological Genre', p. 47.

²²⁸ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 40. Charles Péguy, (1873-1914) and Simone Weil, (1909-1943), both of whom he identifies as not preferring to be 'in the middle of the Catholically approved and well-censored page, but only on the margin. And they remained there as question marks: questioning not Christ, but Christians'. Chapter One, III.iii 'Merton's Directives for Theological Genre'.

²²⁹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 43. Giono is a passionate and articulate defender of the human scale, the human measure. And in the long run, without this measure, God Himself cannot be known, for He revealed Himself scaled down to our dimensions. Chapter One, III.iii 'Merton's Directives for Theological Genre'.

Chapter Seven

‘Contain All Divided Worlds and Transcend Them in Christ’:¹

The Language of Merton’s Later Prose

This chapter analyses the form of Merton’s later prose focusing on *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1965). It is a remodelling of diary and notebook entries from 1956 onwards and offers Merton’s ‘personal version of the world in the 1960s’,² a parallel prose commentary on the world explored in *Emblems of a Season of Fury*. The work has ongoing appeal in academic and popular opinion,³ and for Merton, as mentioned in Chapter Three, it receives his greatest accolade of ‘better’ than ‘good’ in a graph drawn up in 1967.⁴ This suggests that it figures among those works which provide his most representative voice.

During the period of assembling and reworking journal entries to create *Conjectures*, the discussions set in motion by Vatican II are one of several focuses of Merton’s reading and letter writing.⁵ *Conjectures* was published in the aftermath of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.⁶ This Vatican II Constitution is recognised as the crowning achievement of the Liturgical Movement, which we can recall from Chapter One figured as a key predecessor to the *ressourcement* endeavour to revitalise Catholic theology. In the same year, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the

¹ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 21.

² Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Kent: Burns and Oates, 1995), p. 5.

³ Harmless Harmless defines *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* as ‘one of (Merton’s) finest works. In popular opinion, judging simply from Amazon reviews between 2013 and 2018, there are frequent superlatives and the work receives mostly five stars, never dropping to below four: Love the book, 2015; Excellent 2017; Amazingly timely 2016; much to ponder 2015; well worth reading 2014; Catholicism understood 2015; deeply inspiring and challenging 2013; why Pope Francis referred to him 2015; Merton gem 2014; five stars an absolute classic 2015.

⁴ See Chapter Three, IV Towards Part Two, p. 101. Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work* (London: Collins Fount, 1981), Appendix II, ‘Thomas Merton’s graph evaluating his own books (1967), pp. 168-169.

⁵ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 7, 261, 270, 312–14, 319, 335. In *The Courage for Truth*, alone representing Merton’s letters to writers, there are nine references to Vatican II.

⁶ ‘Sacrosanctum Concilium’ <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html> [accessed 26 December 2019] promulgated by Pope Paul VI on 4 December 1963. ‘It is of the essence of the Church that she be both human and divine, visible and yet invisibly equipped, eager to act and yet intent on contemplation, present in this world and yet not at home in it; and she is all these things in such wise that in her the human is directed and subordinated to the divine, the visible likewise to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, which we seek [2]. While the liturgy daily builds up those who are within into a holy temple of the Lord, into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit [3], to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ [4].

church in the modern world was published. The ferment of thinking characterising the period underpins Merton's stated purpose in *Conjectures* of providing an outline of the role of monastic witness in the world,⁷ as a parallel to the ecclesial interrogation of its own role.⁸ I suggest however, that Merton went further than his stated aim and recreated in the text of *Conjectures* certain theological emphases contained within the Vatican II proclamations which were shaped by the *ressourcement* endeavours.

Sacrosanctum Concilium defines the Church as 'human and divine, visible yet invisibly equipped, eager to act, yet intent on contemplation, present in this world and yet not at home in it',⁹ and explores the liturgy as the closest representation of the paradoxes outlined. Liturgy is at once deeply engaged with the world whilst simultaneously inviting a contemplative distancing. Merton highlights these two qualities. Citing a recording of Merton's lectures to his novices on *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Gregory Hills points out how Merton defines liturgy as 'theology-lived'.¹⁰ In a further extrapolation from Merton's thoughts on liturgical renewal, Patrick Collins adds that one essential characteristic of liturgy for Merton, was that it must be a contemplative experience by inviting attentiveness beyond the surface contours of the world.¹¹

Given this pairing of theology-lived with contemplation in an understanding of liturgy, it is significant to note that Merton speaks of the theology he prefers, and of contemplation, in parallel terms. We can recall that in describing the theology of Bernard of Clairvaux, he claimed that it embraced 'not merely one department of Christian life but the whole of that life'.¹² Similarly, referring to contemplation in his journal of July 1959, Merton recorded: 'How mistaken I was to make contemplation only a part of a man's life. For a contemplative, his whole

⁷ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 7. 'If the Catholic Church is turning to the modern world (..) then it becomes necessary for at least a few contemplative and monastic theologians to contribute something of their own to the discussion'.

⁸ Second Vatican Council, 'Pastoral constitution on the Church in the Modern World' *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965 in 'Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents', ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1975), sec. 2, p. 903. 'The council longs to set forth the way it understands the presence and function of the Church in the world of today'.

⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, par. 2.

¹⁰ Gregory Hills, Gregory K Hillis, 'Communion of Love: Thomas Merton and Liturgical Reform', *ABC Religion & Ethics*, 2016 <<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/communion-of-love-thomas-merton-and-liturgical-reform/10096540>> [accessed 28/12/2019].

¹¹ Patrick W Collins, 'Thomas Merton and the Future of Liturgical Renewal', *The Way*, 53.2 (2014), pp. 99–113.

¹² Thomas Merton, *Last of The Fathers: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux And The Encyclical Letter Doctor Mellifluus* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1981), p. 48.

life is contemplation'.¹³ Hence, to contemplate is not to turn away from the world but to be rooted in the fullest sense within it. Similarly, to interpret life theologically is to engage with life in its fullness.

I argue that Merton's style of theological expression in *Conjectures* reproduces this intertwining of a theology-lived with contemplation, through two distinct dynamics in the flow of the prose. On the one hand, Merton comments on what he stumbles upon in a seeming random flow of content. He thus demonstrates his presence 'in the world' and his eagerness to participate in it.¹⁴ On the other, he crafts vignettes of description which invite a contemplative lingering in the midst of dynamic exchange. Guardini a key protagonist behind *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, recognised this invitation in Merton's writing. He notes 'Merton can bring it about that things receive a singular immediacy: they become simple and fresh'.¹⁵ Merton's writing thus exhibits an energetic flow of comment which is recurrently brought to a halt and allowed to linger in an alternative space.

In order to explore Merton's distinctive craftsmanship, I begin my analysis with an overview of the genre of *Conjectures*. I then examine the two structural dynamics I have identified. Firstly, I sketch the line of his seemingly random observations, by exploring two sequences from the beginning and end. Secondly, I give close attention to the distillations of

¹³ William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987), p. viii. Like Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, Merton considered that contemplation was not reserved for the monastic life: 'We need contemplatives outside the cloister and the rigidly fixed patterns of religious life', Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, p. 346. In addition, he highlights the importance of solitude, as a companion to contemplation as 'special work: a deepening of awareness that the world needs. A struggle against alienation. True solitude is deeply aware of the world's needs. It does not hold the world at arm's length,' Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 19.

¹⁴ An inclusive focus is outlined as the emphasis in *Gaudium et Spes*: 'The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age', the proclaimed focus of *Gaudium et Spes*. Pope Paul VI, 'Gaudium et Spes', 1965 <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html> [accessed 11/05/ 2020], par.1.

¹⁵ Robert Anthony Krieg, *Romano Guardini: A Precursor of Vatican II* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), p. 52. Krieg summarises comments by Merton and Guardini about each other, pp. 51-55. Guardini is referring to *The Sign of Jonas* in November 1954. Guardini claimed that until he read Merton, he believed America's contribution to religious culture was largely negative. In parallel, on reading Guardini, Merton claims that his work underlines 'the solitude of the Christian in a world detached from Christian order in which the narrative has been mislaid or misinterpreted'. It recalls Merton's affection for Weil and Péguy who 'were not in the middle of the Catholically approved and well-censored page, but only on the margin. And there they remained as question marks: questioning not Christ but Christians', *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 40. Given Merton's recurring references during this period to Guardini and his reflections on liturgy, the spirit of liturgy as a spirit of playfulness as outlined by Guardini, is in fact deeply resonant with Merton's prose in this work. The organic quality of liturgy in contrast to the organisation and discipline of Canon Law reflects the juxtaposition of conventional theology, as represented in the Manuals with the prose of *Conjectures*.

vision, which I name ‘still-points’ by analysing four extracts. I include one further extract written days before Merton’s death in December 1968 and published posthumously in *The Asian Journal*. In so doing I explore what Labrie describes as Merton’s ‘distinctive form of religious expression’,¹⁶ and show how it remains a preferred idiom through to his final days.

I

Naming the Genre

The considerable attention which *Conjectures* has attracted in academic critique and popular opinion is derived largely from Merton’s account of the ‘Louisville Revelation’, one of the pieces of narrative I have chosen for closer analysis, which is frequently identified as a pivotal moment in Merton’s thinking.¹⁷ In spite of this close attention, it is rare that attention is given to the form of Merton’s account. Critique of Merton’s writing style tends to be found in studies which address Merton’s work as a whole. One such assessment is offered by Ross Labrie’s description of Merton’s genre as ‘a distinctive form of religious thought and

¹⁶ Labrie, p. vii.

¹⁷ A few examples representing academic and popular attention: Harmless, pp. 31-33. William Harmless describes the ‘Louisville Revelation’ as a turn towards synthesis, towards the world and a breakthrough and continues: ‘The incident at Fourth and Walnut was clearly an epiphany, and on reflection, Merton saw it as a profound experience of God’s presence.’ Mott identifies how the description has been called ‘The Vision in Louisville’, and is ‘one of the most celebrated passages of M’s writing’. He continues that it has been given wide importance as an epiphany and as the turning point in Merton’s life’. He will point out however, that for all the attention it has received, Merton does not observe any individual in that crowd as closely as he observed the hawk flying over St Ann’s’. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, pp. 311-312. Arcement describes the experience at Louisville as ‘the epiphany on the corner of Fourth and Walnut Street’. Ephrem Arcement, *In the School of the Prophets: The Formation of Thomas Merton’s Prophetic Spirituality* (Liturgical Press, Minnesota 2015), pp. xv-xvi. He claims furthermore, that after this experience, Merton’s contemplative awareness expanded from a myopic vision of God to a universal vision of God, where ‘the gate of heaven is everywhere’, (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 158), Arcement, p. xxiii. He points out how after this point, Merton’s use of the terms prophet, prophecy and prophetic are ‘much more prevalent than the term spirituality’, Arcement, p. xv. He like Mott, also identifies how critics have isolated this experience as a decisive moment often referred to as his ‘return to the world’, referring to Christine Bochen’s account in the *Merton Encyclopedia*, pp. 158-160, as ‘The Fourth and Walnut Experience’, Arcement xvi. It is identified in ongoing popular engagement by a blog, named ‘At Corner of Fourth and Walnut’, <<http://ylcatholic.blogspot.com/2012/12/at-corner-of-fourth-and-walnut.html>>, whilst Michael Havercamp, ‘That They May Be One: At the Corner of Fourth and Walnut’, <<http://ylcatholic.blogspot.com/2012/12/at-corner-of-fourth-and-walnut.html>> [accessed 28/12/ 2019]. David King in The Georgia Bulletin, the newspaper of the Catholic Diocese of Atlanta, places the description beneath the heading, ‘Merton’s shining ‘epiphanies’ of light and insight’, continuing to outline its recognisability: ‘It is a passage that every Thomas Merton reader knows, and one beloved as well by people who have never even read Merton. It adorns offices—even mine—nightstands, mantels, bookshelves, desktops. It is usually framed, to demonstrate its importance. (..) It is the famous ‘Fourth and Walnut Epiphany’ of Thomas Merton, September 18, 2014’, <https://georgiabulletin.org/commentary/2014/09/mertons-shining-epiphanies-light-insight/>, [accessed 25/06/2020].

expression', and he highlights Merton's search for unity over a systematic presentation.¹⁸ Victor Kramer's cursory examination of Merton's writing style in *Conjectures* is similarly set in a study evaluating Merton's entire oeuvre. Kramer refutes 'the organic pattern of the book', which Merton lays claim to,¹⁹ and vouches that *Conjectures* 'gives the appearance of being the least organised of any book which Merton had published, yet, it is in fact very carefully organised'.²⁰ Kramer does not unpack this assertion. He highlights nonetheless the layered ambiguity of the text in view of Merton's claims, the apparent disorganisation, and his own unspoken intimations of a hidden and deliberate structure.

This relative neglect of form within Merton discourse is highlighted in Seal's thesis on Merton's poetics, to which I referred in Chapter Two.²¹ Seal explores Merton's form as an accompanying locus of theological revelation but does not include *Conjectures* in his analysis.²² Seal pinpoints formal characteristics of Merton's prose to demonstrate his premise that Merton creates a theological poetics, the form of which embodies the content claims concerning theology.²³ His ensuing analysis is highly original and in my view, deserves further development.²⁴ I intend therefore to draw upon Seal's identification of formal structures in my

¹⁸ Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*, pp. vii–viii. According to Labrie, his style of writing is shaped by the anti-rational stance of Romanticism, which rejects systematic thinking, yet achieves coherence through Merton's 'emphasis on unity and wholeness'.

¹⁹ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 6.

²⁰ Victor A. Kramer, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Artist* (Collegeville: Cistercian Publications, 1987), p. 101.

²¹ Philip Seal, 'Towards a Formalist Theological Poetics: Practising What You Preach in the Prose Writings of Thomas Merton' (University of Oxford, 2015), <<https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:be5480fc-2edf-464a-b37c-a28d2c25fd1f>>'No sustained work, furthermore, has thus far been done on the literary form of Merton's prose', p. 40.

²² Seal, p. 2. The nine works which provide the source of his close textual analysis are: *What is Contemplation?*, *Seeds of Contemplation*, *The Ascent to Truth*, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude' (from *Disputed Questions*), *The Inner Experience*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Contemplative Prayer*, and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, p. 4. Seal claims in the 'Abstract' that 'the thesis offers a new method of inquiry for Thomas Merton Studies, by performing the first extended literary-critical account of his prose'.

²³ Seal, p. 2. 'The argument of the thesis is that the literary forms of Thomas Merton's prose writings embody theological claims he makes elsewhere at the level of content'.

²⁴ In Seal's identification of certain recurring forms, he highlights those which merge various elements together, pinpointing the chaining together of images met in concatenation. He also identifies those more frequently met strategies which create a sense of rupture, including hiatus, caesura, the use of volta from the sonnet-form, to generate a turning away or setting apart from previous material, Seal, p. 63. This is also the character of a form he identifies as a counter to concatenation, Seal, p. 161, which he terms de-concatenation, Seal, p. 165. Such forms recreate the sense of an abrupt transition or a gap, significant for altering the course in the flow of narrative.

analysis of *Conjectures*. I thereby contribute not only to Seal's claim that Merton's literary form offers a new site for theological enquiry,²⁵ but I develop a shared line of questioning.

It is in fact difficult to classify the genre of *Conjectures*. Merton's autobiography, his many diaries, and the fact that this work largely remodels diary entries, suggests the work is a spiritual journal. In the 'Preface', however, Merton dismisses this categorisation, being at pains to say what the work is not, rather than what it is: 'Not a spiritual journal as not intimate and introspective', 'nothing private or confidential', 'not a venture in self-revelation or self-discovery. Moreover, no clear answers to current questions'.²⁶

This defining by negatives is not new for Merton as it is also found in his 'Preface' to the French edition of *The Ascent to Truth*.²⁷ It imitates the strategies within mystical texts where, as we can recall from Chapter Three, apophatic statements underline the ineffability of the subject being explored.²⁸ A further kinship with mystical texts is echoed in the variety of narrative forms Merton adopts in *Conjectures*, which include theological debate, poetic description, musings on the headlines or a reading diary. In an outline of the multiple narrative forms represented within mystical texts, William Harmless identifies Merton's writing as mystical.²⁹ He includes Merton's autobiography and letters,³⁰ alongside journals,³¹ scripture

²⁵ Seal, p. 3. 'Merton's prose is a site through which he lives out, through literary strategies, aspects of the spiritual life that he also commends and describes at the level of content'.

²⁶ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 5.

²⁷ *The Ascent to Truth* more closely follows scholastic conventions for writing theology. He claims the work is 'not intended to be a guide to the mystical life. (...) It is rather an informal and meditative study'. Merton, *Honorable Reader*, p. 37. He continues to claim that he has 'no intention of preaching a sort of rationalistic and pelagian variety of interior prayer'. Claiming that he would no longer try to write that kind of study represented by *The Ascent to Truth*, he outlines the view upheld in his more mature writings: 'I would like to concern myself a little less with scholasticism which is not the true intellectual climate for a monk,' Merton, *Honorable Reader*, p. 38.

²⁸ Louth, Andrew, in 'Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology' in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism* ed. by Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 137-146. Louth explores 'apophatic' and 'cataphatic' theologies, that is, 'the use of negation (apophasis) and affirmation (kataphasis) in our ways of talking about God', describing its early longer even than Christianity, 'reaching back into the traditions of the Hebrew scriptures and classical Greek philosophy to which Christian theology had early laid claim. The practice of saying what mystical writing is not, is the subject of Michael Sells' study *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). It begins by highlighting the conviction of mystics that 'The transcendent must be beyond names – ineffable', Sells, p. 2.

²⁹ Harmless, p. 229.

³⁰ Merton, Hildegard, Evagrius.

³¹ Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and *The Asian Journal*, the *Gnostic Wisdom* of Rumi's father and mentor, Dōgen's *Hōkyōki*.

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commentaries,³² and poetry.³³ The prose of *Conjectures* reflects this variety as if Merton were re-creating for the 20th century the character of early mystical Christian sources, in which he, as a monk and as a *ressourcement* thinker was immersed. With reference to Merton's journals J.S. Porter describes such variety as 'less a single flowering of a form than a garden of forms'.³⁴ Merton himself identifies this very profusion in his own affirmative outline of the work: 'Personal reflections, insights, metaphors, observations, judgements on readings and events',³⁵ and 'a series of sketches and meditations', identified as variously 'poetic, literary, historical and even theological'.³⁶

This ease in shifting through different genres rather than adopting any overt mode leads Mary Murray-McDonald to suggest that Merton's style is defined by what it seeks to do. She thus identifies a connection with Montaigne, who instead of relying on the power of rational analysis to persuade the reader into a shared vision, makes use of 'a rhetoric that is a search for knowledge'. This kind of rhetoric she describes as demanding 'open speculation and risk of questioning and ambiguity'.³⁷ The resultant meandering quality demands that the reader works out the direction of the text.

These various deductions concerning Merton's genre as a flowering of forms, as an invitation to open speculation, or as echoing mystical texts, feature on the canvas of *Conjectures*, within the meanders of multiple conversations. The reader is drawn into Merton's line of thought, which is largely reactive to the material of other writers. The dynamic flow of the text

³² Bonaventure's *Collations on the Six Days of Creation*; Eckhart's *Commentary on Exodus* and *Commentary on the Gospel of John*; Evagrius's *Scholia on Psalms and Proverbs*; fascicles in Dōgen's *Treasury*.

³³ Hildegard's *Antiphons*; Rumi's *ghazals* in the *Divān* and his epic *Masnavi*; Dōgen's brief *waka* poems; proverbs: Evagrius's *The Monk* and *Chapters on Prayer*; sermons: Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*; Eckhart's *German Sermons*; Dōgen's *Extensive Record*; essays and treatises: Merton's *Mystics and Zen Masters*; Bernard's *On Loving God*; Bonaventure's *Journey of the Mind into God*; Eckhart's *Book of Divine Consolation*; Dōgen's *Fukanzazengi* and *Bendōwa*; theological summae: Hildegard's *Scivias*; dialogues and hagiographies: *Sayings of the [Desert] Fathers*; Cassian's *Conferences*, Ch'an and Zen kōan collections such as *The Gateless Gate* and Dōgen's *Mana Shōbōgenzō*.

³⁴ 'The Last Journals of Thomas Merton and Anais Nin.' <<http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/5/Porter279-295.pdf>> [accessed 28 December 2019].

³⁵ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 5.

³⁶ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 5-6..

³⁷ Murray-McDonald, Mary *The Fire Watch Epilogue and Life and Holiness: Opposing Rhetorics in the Writings of Thomas Merton*, p. 45, <<http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/07/Murray45-57.pdf>> [accessed 29/12/2019].

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replicates that ‘fluid chaos’ hailed by the Maritains,³⁸ or the patristic text of Maximus defined by Balthasar as ‘without form’ and ‘incredibly haphazard’.³⁹ Throughout, humour, light-heartedness and rapid shifts in focus seem to invite a casual skimming of the text. The breadth of the content and the intricacy of links between one section and the next, however, result in a dense spiralling of material. The sense of a conversation in progress filled with storytelling, in effect, nudges the reader to participate in the fathoming out of theological truths, carving out an oblique way towards knowledge.

This invitation is present throughout the work. Christopher Page, who in his recommendation of *Conjectures* as being among Merton’s best books, rightly claims, ‘it can profitably be read by dipping in anywhere’.⁴⁰ The spiralling dynamic allows for the surfacing and receding of different elements, which can be read at any point in the flow. Such egalitarian accessibility is the distinct feature of the journal-like genre according to Porter:

The journal, the most democratic of art forms, (..) the most Zen-like of verbal forms, puts all entries on an equal plane; no one part aristocratically acts as the centre of the whole. What is stumbled upon is commented upon; the miraculous lies in the mundane, the extraordinary in the commonplace.⁴¹

Merton will blend his own random observations with a sudden arresting of attention, which can demand a puzzling over as in a *Zen koan*.⁴² This combination creates a sense of vitality, of being in the moment and participating in a shared curiosity. It is that sense of immediacy and freshness that Guardini identified.

Merton’s rejection of academic norms in writing theology is also present in his lack of concern for precision and careful referencing. In his many references to other writers,

³⁸ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Poetry* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1943), p. 12.

³⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), p. 30.

⁴⁰ Christopher Page, ‘Reading Thomas Merton’, In *A Spacious Place*, 2013, <<https://inaspaciousplace.wordpress.com/2013/05/09/reading-thomas-merton/>> [accessed 28/12/2019].

⁴¹J. S. Porter, p. 290.

⁴² Rodriguez, Emily *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, *Koan* is a ‘succinct paradoxical statement or question used as a meditation discipline. The effort to “solve” a *koan* is intended to exhaust the analytic intellect and the egoistic will, readying the mind to entertain an appropriate response on the intuitive level, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/koan>>, [accessed 23/05/20].

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occasionally he mentions the author,⁴³ or the actual book,⁴⁴ but fails to include page references to help locate further. The only full referencing given is for scripture and even that is infrequent. Intermittently, as if actively engaging directly in dialogue, Merton addresses the person named, as with Barth,⁴⁵ and Himmler.⁴⁶ This conversational style is also evident in an apparent indifference to rules of sentence construction, with many paragraphs beginning ‘and’,⁴⁷ ‘but’,⁴⁸ or ‘not that I’,⁴⁹ reproducing the sense of a constant flow of assertion, counter-assertion, and further development. This is matched by the punctuation. There are few pages without dashes,⁵⁰ dots,⁵¹ or brackets,⁵² underlining the notion of unfinished business. Merton furthermore takes short cuts through use of italics for emphasis,⁵³ and inverted commas, to draw in the thinking of another without precise reference. He uses phrases for sentences,⁵⁴ and exclamations of surprise,⁵⁵ both real and ironic. The humorous elements, such as his frustrations with the mumbling into beards at the monastery,⁵⁶ referred to in Chapter One, or the evident childlike delight in ‘My Aunt Kit is here’,⁵⁷ add an incongruously human, and personal element into the text. They appear as unexpected intrusions into the serious subject of a monastic response to the church in the world. Such elements reinforce a sense of genuine human reaction and an eagerness to share. In contrast to his journals, Merton avoids dates.⁵⁸ The avoidance of precise detailing of time is a further

⁴³ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* ‘Julien Green’, pp.153-154; ‘J.A.T. Robinson’, p. 322.

⁴⁴ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Bonhoeffer’s Ethics, p. 201.

⁴⁵ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 12.

⁴⁶ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 242.

⁴⁷ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 163.

⁴⁸ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 239.

⁴⁹ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 156.

⁵⁰ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 161.

⁵¹ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 158.

⁵² Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 160, but almost every page.

⁵³ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 167.

⁵⁴ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 18, 43, 159, and multiple examples.

⁵⁵ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 157.

⁵⁶ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 40.

⁵⁷ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 200.

⁵⁸ Examples include: 4am, A Holy Day in December, p.21; a time within the Liturgy of Hours, p. 15; a feast day or Palm Sunday, p. 162.

contribution to the sense of a constant flow. The inference is a living within the boundaryless parameters of an eternal canvas, marked out by the church year and the monastic day.

There are five chapter-headings which Kramer suggests are ‘definitely planned to achieve a particular end’. Just as Kramer fails to outline how the work is ‘carefully organized’, he similarly fails to elucidate how he perceives the ‘definite planning’.⁵⁹ The making of such claims without clear justification underlines the perplexity the style of writing causes. It is as if to identify disorder or haphazardness would undermine rather than add interest to the work. Alternatively, Kramer may simply invite into following his intimation so that the reader is challenged to work it out.

I suggest that the titles of each chapter signal various themes which keep re-surfacing and are not confined to the ‘chapter’ in question. The breadth which they represent demonstrate a holistic focus. ‘Barth’s Dream’ signals an interest in theology and the world made strange in dreams; ‘Truth and Violence: An Interesting Era’ highlights Merton’s engagement with the historical context of the 1960s, both inside and outside the monastery; ‘The Night Spirit and The Dawn Air’ illustrates Merton’s interest in the natural world as a locus of divine presence; the final two ‘chapters’, ‘The Fork in the Road’ and ‘The Madman Runs to the East’ establish a link between theology and geography. The chapter boundaries appear to be of no real significance.

This sense of a shifting canvas containing all elements is also evident in the physical layout of the work. Passages are simply separated by rows of asterisms, which may enclose a few lines, half a page, or less frequently, a passage of several pages, the longest being six.⁶⁰ Merton makes no attempt to neatly compartmentalise his thinking. The fact that Kramer underlines the extent that critics usually seek a ‘guidepost’ to piece the mosaic together,⁶¹ suggests that in spite of the ‘definite planning’ or the ‘careful organization’, it is necessary to create a pivot, as one does not emerge with obvious clarity from the text.

⁵⁹ Kramer, p. 102. Kramer simply outlines that parts 1-4 mediates ‘amongst other things dreams, deceptions, the paradise of the present and the necessity of choice.’ Whilst ‘Being is the focus of that final division of the journal’.

⁶⁰ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 33-39.

⁶¹ Kramer, pp. 189-190. He suggests that for George Woodcock, the work is wrapped around the broad outlines of Merton’s role as both monk and poet. Labrie he claims identifies big patterns whilst Elena Malits selects metaphor.

From this broader outline of Merton's writing style in *Conjectures*, I now track the flow of observations in two sequences of narrative. By examining several pages from the beginning and the end, it is possible to see a style of expression shaped by an organic quality, reflective of an already started and ongoing conversation, which continues indefinitely. Whilst within this unfolding it is possible to identify thesis, anti-thesis and a possible ensuing conclusion, the text is so composite that it is a readiness to move on to a further place of questioning, which holds sway.

II

Tracking the 'Organic' Flow of the Prose

II.i Opening Sequence (pages 11-18)

The task of extracting a concise focus in any sequence of pages is challenging. Merton seems to project a certain polarisation from within loosely connected ramblings. At one pole Merton places the carefree playtime of children, set alongside music, dancing, legendary islands, dreams, and nature's beauty. At the opposite pole, Merton places dogma, systematic reasoning, Kentucky political figures, and the dirt and confusion of modern cities. This polarisation helps to provide a frame, but the unfolding of the text signals that both are enmeshed. If, as Murray suggests, the style is defined by what it seeks to do, it is not so much what Merton says, as the process which unfolds showing how polarised landscapes co-exist on the same canvas. Merton proceeds in a series of loosely connected juxtapositions and spiralling of comment to create a montage.

The opening confrontation is between the gravitas of theology and the lightness associated with childhood. Merton refers to a dream by the theologian Karl Barth wherein he is asked to examine Mozart in theology, but Mozart refuses to answer the questions. The suggestion is that for Barth, answers matter. The pre-eminence of the pupil over the examiner, however, is established, by the reference to Barth's need to play Mozart 'every day, before going to work on his dogma', as if he depends on the music to enable him to function as a theologian. Merton recounts Barth's claim that it is the 'divine child' in Mozart who speaks in the music, and he addresses Barth, 'Fear not! (..) Although you have grown up to become a theologian, Christ

remains a child in you. (..) There is in us a Mozart that will be our salvation'.⁶² Theology is hence placed in a very adult world which needs the child to redeem it.

Developing the focus on the world of a child, Merton refers to the storybook island in the poem 'Crusoe' by St John Perse. This hint of enchantment is pitched against 'the squalor, the exhausting mess of life', a reality 'remade to our diminished measure' which is 'utterly false'.⁶³ Shifting attention again, as a contrast to 'diminished measure' Merton describes his immediate surroundings as replete with sensuous vitality: 'I write this in the woodshed, surrounded by the charred, sweet-smelling wood of smashed-up whiskey barrels, not ours naturally. Kegs given to the monks to break up for firewood.'⁶⁴ The whisky barrels conjure up images of a pirate's booty from ocean adventures. The freedom and licence they represent are now housed in the confines of a monastery woodshed. An increasingly dense sequence of contrasts is layered onto the canvas: gravitas and childhood; confinement versus freedom; inauthenticity and sensuous vitality.

Merton then picks up the pulse with two stories recounted by a former teacher, Mark Van Doren. This tangent is pursued simply on the basis of the latter's friendship with St John Perse. The stories concern Cape Hatteras, firstly in its association in the mind of St John Perse with the dangerous excitement of legendary sea voyages, and secondly with the birth of Victor Hugo, described as generating a similar oceanic disturbance. The return to the theme of sea adventures collates the two French literary giants with excitement and adventure.

Merton then turns his attention to a musing on Latin American poetry. He describes the Brazilian language as a 'wonderful language for poetry, a language of admiration, of innocence, of joy, full of human warmth and therefore of humor'.⁶⁵ This character is pitched against authoritarian and dehumanised expression which he describes as 'the hardness, (...) the sour, artificial, doctrinaire attitudes, (...) a mechanical gag, a final pirouette after many crudely engineered moments of truth in which the bull is hacked to bits with a blunt axe'.⁶⁶ The violence

⁶² Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp 11-12.

⁶³ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 12.

⁶⁴ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 12.

⁶⁵ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 13.

⁶⁶ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 13.

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and cruelty of the image captures his deep antagonism against language which enforces its own truth through a strait jacket of expression, void of human warmth. It recalls the constructs of language which contained and constrained Lee Ying, the Auschwitz victims, and the children of Birmingham.

Revisiting the theme of childhood and the world as a playground, Merton discusses Jorge de Lima, ‘the same paradisaical humor, viewing the universe as play’,⁶⁷ which leads into one of Merton’s many references to Chapter Eight of ‘Proverbs,’ Sophia playing in the garden.⁶⁸ The ensuing focus on Jewish tradition emerges readily from the Old Testament image, which links directly with a consideration of ghettos, and an accompanying reflection on the closed mentality he encounters within his monastery. He believes the teaching of St Benedict stands in contrast to this mindset: ‘there is nothing of the ghetto spirit in St Benedict’. Instead there is ‘freshness, liberty of spirit, sanity, broadness, healthiness’.⁶⁹ When the monastery turns in on itself, it offers ‘interpretations of interpretations’, which ‘fail to break the spell’.⁷⁰ Merton’s deductions recall his essay on Blake, outlined in Chapter One, concerning ‘a *narrowing* of vision, a foreclosure of experience and of future expansion, a locking up and securing of the doors of perception’.⁷¹

This contrast of freshness and stuffiness meanders into a reflection on windows, a focus which we can recall is important in his poetry.⁷² Merton refers to the action of ‘locking all the windows that look outward to the world or toward the sky’.⁷³ His preferred option in contrast is that ‘the window must open or be able to open in any direction’.⁷⁴ The tension inferred by the real and metaphorical insularity of the monastery is lightened by a matter of fact return to

⁶⁷ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 14.

⁶⁸ Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life*, p. 176; Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, pp. 33 and 90; Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 14.

⁶⁹ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 14.

⁷⁰ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 14.

⁷¹ Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1985), p. 6. Chapter One, III.iii Merton’s Directives for Theologica Genre, p. 48.

⁷² We can recall his many references to windows in his early poems including ‘The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to a Window’ pp. 46-48 and in *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, ‘The Moslems’ Angel of Death’ where ‘the window will go out’, pp. 307-308. The window is a symbol of the lightness of divine entry into the world. When locked as here or smashed in gun fire, it blocks divine light.

⁷³ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 14.

⁷⁴ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 15.

glimpses of monastic life: a book read in the refectory; early morning prayer; the sighting of a monoplane alongside a heron in the monastery grounds, the simplicity of which opens up a refreshed vista.

Having swept through music, poetry and literature, Merton introduces dance. He describes a dream in which dancers recall the vitality of ‘Song for Our Lady of Cobre’. He carefully outlines the dancer’s movements through space. The dream has an unexpected twist, reflecting the earlier incongruity of Mozart taking a theology exam in Barth’s dream, as it is brought to a halt by a group of men in straw caps, Kentucky politicians, whom he identifies for having poor syntax and limited spiritual understanding.⁷⁵ Merton thus underlines the discrepancy between political and spiritual understanding, airs the limitations and ambiguities of language, and suggests implicitly that politics undermines beauty.

Seeking out once again redeeming possibility, beauty returns as Merton attentively tracks the flight of a heron,⁷⁶ and is rewarded as the heron meets his eyes,⁷⁷ underlying human kinship with the natural world. No sooner is this harmony named, the clashing juxtapositions resurface, as Merton airs his frustration in his role as a writer at having to write a review on a ‘depressingly inane magazine article’,⁷⁸ in formulaic language:

the mechanical output of their own thinking machine. They don’t have the imagination or the good sense to stand in awe at real emptiness. In fact, their rationalizations seem to be a complacent evasion: as if logical formulas somehow could give them something to stand on in the abyss.⁷⁹

Eight pages into the text, a further spiral unfolds as Barth and St John Perse are met again. Pitching reason against wonder, Merton claims to share with Barth that the incarnation ‘is the most unprincipled reality one can imagine’⁸⁰ and hence ‘is not something that can be fitted into a

⁷⁵ Merton describes their ambiguous comment: ‘You monks know that you cannot be happy because you have material possessions’.

⁷⁶ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 16. ‘A green heron started up from the water in the culvert under the roadway where all the blackberry bushes are and flew up into the willows.’

⁷⁷ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 16.

⁷⁸ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 16.

⁷⁹ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 17.

⁸⁰ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 17.

system'.⁸¹ He then finds a link between St John Perse and the Koran.⁸² He deduces that for Muslims, the spirit of the desert 'is not the prerogative of a few. It is for everyone'.⁸³ Merton's implicit suggestion is that world faiths can be permeable to each other, highlighting a quality of openness and sharing.⁸⁴

Within a short space of text, Merton has discussed the dynamics of creativity as manifest in the Bible, in Barth, Mozart, St John Perse, Jorge de Lima, St Benedict, Victor Hugo and Van Doren. He has leapt through history and across nationalities and disciplines. He has drawn in reference to Christian, Jewish and Islamic traditions. Music, poetry, storytelling, fantasy, the natural world, friendship, and dancing, all find a place on the inclusivity of his theological canvas. In parallel, Merton displays an underlining antagonism towards a systematisation of thought which he has variously identified as 'sour, artificial, doctrinaire attitudes', 'engineered moments of truth', 'a diminished measure'.

Throughout the opening pages, there is no obvious stopping point in the dialogue, apart from the provisional cadences supplied by the descriptions of dream and the natural world. A recurring provocative note offsets the lyricism of the nature descriptions and the matter-of-fact commentary. Abrupt shifts of focus inject the work from the start with a sense of energy and vitality, albeit somewhat chaotically. The reader can enter the moment with Merton, as if spontaneously engaging in something new, being forced into thinking at odd tangents. Merton thereby nurtures an openness to the unexpected and a readiness to enter into the challenge and play of the text.

⁸¹ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 17.

⁸² A verbal echo invites the next link between Barth's claim that 'divine revelation cannot be discovered in the same way as the beauty of a work of art', and the book of Wisdom: 'a man going to sea without art', Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 17. This meanders into more musing on ships and of the spiritual life being a movement through space, accompanied by God: 'trusting life to a piece of wood – and all the while God draws the madman over a safe path'. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 18. The reflection drifts into a line of French poetry about ships which look as if they're in the desert: 'This moves me deeply' he claims with 'its spirit of loneliness, independence of men, dependence on God emptiness, trust – contemplation'. Although he thinks it sounds like St John Perse, he knows it is from the Koran, hence unearthing unexpected links.

⁸³ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 18.

⁸⁴ There is extensive documentation of Merton and his engagement with other faiths. See note 197, p. 216, Chapter Six, Section II ii,b. 'Someone is awake'. In suggesting that faiths can each be permeable to the other, it stands within a capacious interpretation of Christian mystery, as generously embracing the universal human faith journey.

II.ii Closing Sequence (pages 346-350)

The drifting pattern continues throughout the work with a breadth of observations covering nature, monastic life, and prevailing conversations about current affairs, theology, and poetry. An analysis of the final pages offers no sense of the work concluding. Implicit is an assertion in the form and the content, that the organic nature of the reflections will continue.

My chosen selection of material begins as attention is directed towards the action of tearing out the pages, by an ex-postulant, of a magazine article which gives an account of President Kennedy's assassination. The abruptness of the action creates a caesura effect in the flow of the text colouring this sequence with perplexity. Merton dwells on the dysfunction and tragedy of the world beyond monastery walls, and how the monastery's silence is not only invaded by the sense of cataclysm in the headlines, but also by the accompanying gossip.⁸⁵

There is then a shift from dismay into humour, as he smilingly refers to the rumoured making of a cardinal of Jacques Maritain. This leads him into thinking further about the Maritains and the task he has of writing a preface to a work by Raïssa Maritain.⁸⁶ The focus on false information meanders back to a consideration of his original claim that *Conjectures* reflects upon the role of the Church in the world. In a juxtaposition of priests and poets, Merton chooses latter as representing the greater prophetic sense.⁸⁷ He thus infers that, as at the start of *Conjectures* where theology needs to listen to the 'divine child' in Mozart for its own salvation, so does the priest need the poet, a direct echo of Rahner's assertion: 'To the poet is entrusted the Word.'⁸⁸

Bringing the work to its last page is a discursive commentary on extracts from unreferenced poems by George Oppen, one of which concerns a Jewish baby: 'Little violent

⁸⁵ In this case, Merton refers to the assumed beatnik and communist associations of the named assassin, and the corresponding self-righteousness which arises from judgementalism. Merton's dismay at how readily human opinion can claim Christ like behaviour, leads into a reflection on the wrath of God, which spirals back to Barth and the opening pages reminding Merton that theological gravitas, must be relinquished both by Barth and by himself.

⁸⁶ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 348. His thoughts are never far from the Maritains and it could be argued that implicitly, he continues in *Conjectures* to respond to their shared aspiration, to outline both contemplation for the undisciplined roads of the world, and Raïssa's plea for a prophet to create a new text in which to dwell.

⁸⁷ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 348.

⁸⁸ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations: Theology of the Spiritual Life*, III, p. 294.

diligent seed. Come let us look at the world glittering. This seed will speak'⁸⁹ Merton underlines the ongoing and organic power of words to take flesh by naming God in materiality and ordinariness. He considers that it is by this endeavour that the world's true vitality will be actualised: 'The world not of lies and stale air in the subway, but of life'.⁹⁰ On the one hand, those underlying polarisations remain as Merton refers to an image of a 'false, glittering building'. On the other this judgement is dissolved as Merton continues with a question followed by a half answer: 'The glitter is false? Well, the *light* is true'. Surface and depth, artificial and authentic mingle, so that finally 'The glitter has ceased to matter. It is even beautiful'.⁹¹ *Conjectures* ostensibly concludes as the underlying polarisation is fully dismantled.

This analysis of two sequences of narrative shows how Merton creates a sense of randomness which contains two contrasting poles: a worldly clarity identified as mechanical, complacent, logical,⁹² 'hard, sour, artificial, doctrinaire and engineered',⁹³ 'remade' according to 'our diminished measure'.⁹⁴ In contrast, is clarity of a different kind. In the discursive unfolding of the text, Merton points in many directions to give intimations of what this might mean: Mozart's music, Sophia playing in the garden, stories of adventures, the dream of dancers, open windows, poetry, the play in the character of a different language and of the natural world. By implicitly insisting upon the need to build in brokenness, Merton equally insists that the unwelcome realities need to be embraced: 'We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ'.⁹⁵ Merton's writing style within this random flow of observations contains the elements which fill with dismay alongside those inviting wonder. When Kramer speaks about it being organised, it is this offering of a montage containing the divided worlds which constitutes the organisation. It problematises analysis as what is central is the constant reiteration of opposing dimensions coalescing. The only option for analysis is to spell out in a

⁸⁹ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 349.

⁹⁰ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 349. Merton continues: 'What matters is not the words but the life. If we listen particularly to the world's speech about itself, we will be lied to and deceived, but not if we listen to life itself in its humility, frailty, silence, tenacity.'

⁹¹ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 350.

⁹² Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 17.

⁹³ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 13.

⁹⁴ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 12.

⁹⁵ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 21.

more pedestrian way, the flow of different focal points or to capture the dynamic of the whole. Rowan Williams aptly does the latter summarising Merton's methodological approach:

he is so dramatically absorbed in every environment he finds himself in – he does not organise, dominate, or even interpret, but responds. It is not a chameleon inconsistency (..) because all these influences flow in to one constant place, a will and an imagination turned Godward. Merton is sure enough of his real place, his real roots to let some very strange and very strong winds blow over him, to let his understanding grow by this constant re-creation.⁹⁶

The clarity contained in Merton's 'will and imagination turned Godward' is unleashed more fully in the vignettes of description which summon a more contemplative engagement with the world. Merton signals how contemplation can release a less familiar kind of seeing, from among the props of daily living, shaped by those stranger and stronger winds. Such descriptions reveal his own clarity concerning a sacramental, incarnational, and liturgical way of seeing. He pinpoints thresholds between physical presence and mystical presence by 'locating grace' as we can recall from *Emblems*. It is at these moments carved out of the flow of meandering observations that Merton shows himself to be most at home. The second part of my analysis of *Conjectures* explores the distillations of vision which I name 'still-points'. I begin by outlining salient characteristics of these extracts, then I attend to the detail.

III

The Crafting of 'Still-Points'

The passages containing distillations of vision reflect the character of liturgy, where liturgy is, according to Merton's definition, theology-lived, but also an invitation to contemplation. Guardini, who as mentioned earlier in the chapter, noticed how Merton's prose conveys 'a singular immediacy' which is 'simple and fresh',⁹⁷ is a helpful companion to analysis of these 'still-points', identifying their essential character. In Guardini's exploration of the 'spirit of liturgy', he highlights the biblical image, frequently a source of reflection by Merton, of the

⁹⁶ Williams, Rowan, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2013), p.19.

⁹⁷ Krieg, p. 52.

child playing in the garden from Proverbs.⁹⁸ The absorbed composure and stillness of the child becomes the prerequisite of contemplative surrender. Guardini then identifies two different kinds of play. He offsets the character of space within a gymnasium with that provided by a woodland. In the first, ‘every detail of the apparatus and every exercise aims at a calculated effect’ and is ‘consciously directed towards discipline and development’. This for Guardini is the theology of Canon Law. Conversely, the play of liturgy is located in ‘the open woods and fields, life is lived with Nature, and ‘internal growth takes place in her’, which results in a ‘universe brimming with fruitful spiritual life’, allowing ‘the soul to wander about in it at will, and to develop itself there.’⁹⁹ In the manner Guardini describes, reflecting the play of liturgy, Merton verbally plays with the multidimensionality of his material surroundings, trawling it for intimations of sacred presence and inviting a new way of seeing.

There is a delicate craftsmanship of language in these passages, the more powerful for being as if chiselled out from the drift of unceasing reflections I explored earlier. One key overall characteristic is the by now familiar frequency of prepositions, which demonstrates Merton’s grounding his observations in material reality. Phrasal verbs involving prepositions similarly reinforce this endeavour and introduce the action of passing over thresholds, away from, and on towards.¹⁰⁰ Another frequent characteristic is the focus on colours, with a spectrum dominated by monochromes of black and white with shades of red and pink, the latter often resonant of eucharist. In addition, a dark spectrum of blues and greens is juxtaposed with references to illumination, symbolising how the natural world can become a place of transfiguration.¹⁰¹ The attention to naming colours is suggestive too of a pictorial creation, as if Merton were a landscape painter. This feature echoes not only that sacramental materiality, identified by

⁹⁸ Chapter 8, ‘Proverbs’, N.R.S.V., pp. 735-737. I refer variously to Merton’s references to Sophia in Chapter Six of this thesis, ‘The Song and Historical Truth’, p. 189. Other references include *A Search for Solitude*, pp. 176, 182 and *The Courage for Truth*, p. 33.

⁹⁹ Romano Guardini, *The Church and the Catholic* and *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1935), p. 27.

¹⁰⁰ Such characteristics directly echo the use of prepositions in the doxology: ‘Through him and with him and in him’, the ‘through’, ‘with’ and twice uttered ‘in’, which though bound ‘in the unity of the Holy Spirit’ are understood as continuing without end.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 29, 146. ‘Meadow larks singing in the snow, along the road from the cow barns. Icy water of the running stream, full of sun, flowing over green watercress between banks of snow. Dark blue water of the lake, edged with melting ice and snow, p. 29. Beauty of sunlight falling on a tall vase of red and white carnations and green leaves on the altar of the novitiate chapel. The light and dark. The darkness of the fresh, crinkled flower: light, warm and red, all around the darkness. The flower is the same color as blood’, p. 146.

Maritain in Chagall and Rouault, but also contributes to the process of text creating a landscape in which to dwell.¹⁰²

The natural environment is a recurring focus, with many references to topographical or meteorological features, as well as the elements of nature, earth, air, fire and water, identified in some form, and zoological, botanical and geological categories.¹⁰³ The human and built environment are visible in walls, shelters, an inner courtyard as well as the more intimate details of interiors: a table, a lamp, rooms and desks, an altar, a chalice, and a corporal. This interweaving of human and natural signals the companionability of place, through which place participates in reflection and ‘speaks’ with urgency. Merton underlines a necessity to listen to the particularity of a given place as a companion for dialogue.¹⁰⁴ Biblical and liturgical resonance is hinted at with frequent images of water, burning, smoke and wind, echoing metaphorical representation of the spirit of God and tools of transformation.¹⁰⁵ The dynamic integral to the

¹⁰² Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 148,149. ‘Looking out of the novitiate, when the winter sun is rising on the snowy pastures and on the pine woods of the Lake Knob, I am absorbed in the lovely blue and mauve shadows’, p. 148. ‘On the snow and the indescribably delicate color of the unlit patches under the trees. All the life and colour of the landscape is in the snow and sky, as if the soul of winter had appeared and animated our world this morning. The green of the pines is dull, verging on brown. Dead leaves still cling to the oaks and they also are dull brown. The cold sky is very blue,’ p. 149.

¹⁰³ In Merton’s attending up on the material world, he displays a reverential focus on different elements. The earth, air, fire and water categorisations, alongside the later 18th century formulations of animal, vegetable and mineral according to the ‘Linnean System of Nomenclature’ suggest not so much a need to categorise as to acknowledge the multiplicity of the created world. Palaeos, ‘The Linnaean System of Nomenclature’, *Palaeos: Life Through Deep Times*, 2020 <<http://palaeos.com/systematics/linnaean/index.html>> [accessed 28/12/2019]. Young bulls figure in one description: ‘A sweet summer afternoon. Cool breezes and a clear sky. This day will not come again. The young bulls lie under a tree in the corner of their field. Quiet afternoon. Blue hills. Day lilies nod in the winds. This day will not come again.’ A bear, a lion and dragon shapes, he identifies in rising smoke, p. 45. Birds are a frequent presence, in particular: meadowlarks, flamingos, hawks, herons, and jays.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 212, 213. Night watch. ‘Even though I am novice Master and am in the novitiate all the time, the novitiate takes on a great air of mystery and revelation when I pass through it on the night watch. The rooms which I hardly notice during the day seem, when they are empty, to have something very urgent to say, so that I want to linger in them and listen. (..) The novitiate no longer speaks to me of my own past, (See ‘Fire Watch, 1952, *The Sign of Jonas*, pp 341-354). To begin with it was remodelled six years ago and now it speaks more of the present generation of novices.’ *Conjectures*, p. 212. ‘As I was going through absent-mindedly on my round, I pushed open the door of the novice’s scriptorium and flashed the light over the desks and the empty room spoke again. I stood there for a long time before going up to the chapel. Four long rows of desks. Their desks are all they have that is more or less ‘theirs’. It is there that they sit reading, writing, thinking whatever is most personal, most truly their own. They keep their letters, their own few books, their own notes there. Looking at the dark empty room, with everyone gone, it seemed that, because all that they loved was there, they too in a spiritual way were most truly there, though in fact they were all upstairs in the dormitory, asleep. It was as if their love and their goodness had transformed the room and filled it with a presence curiously real, comforting, perfect: one might say, with Christ. The sense of graced presence which the human leaves behind. The grace in emptiness’, p. 213.

¹⁰⁵ The reference to a ‘hollow’ echoes both the poem of Raïssa Maritain and with ‘The Song of Songs’ and ‘Exodus’ in which divine presence is detected from rock crevices. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 28. ‘White smoke rises up

surrounding landscape is that potential of reanimating dead bones, met in 'Ezekiel' and that sense of play of the child free of care in the garden in 'Proverbs'.¹⁰⁶ The spotlight is reserved for transfiguring possibility.

The syntactical and grammatical forms that dominate include long, often comma-free sentences, contrasting with sentence fragments. On the one hand, this feature generates a sense of abundant layering to translate a richness of presence. On the other, the sentence fragments allow the thing named to appear uncomplicated by evaluative commentary. It is simply there standing as if in relief from the textual flow. Philip Seal refers to this strategy as a representation of a poetics of thereness, where what is seen stands in bold, 'by becoming alone amongst textual relationships'. It is as if they are cut away from its surroundings like an isolated unit of meaning.¹⁰⁷

These passages serve as a counterpoint to the meandering commentary on world news, current philosophical or theological debates, or personal frustrations over censorship and the tensions of monastic life. The theme of liminality, between place in its material fixity and a more capacious and boundaryless landscape is pre-eminent. There is a seeking to capture that point of stepping over the edge, the particular space of liminality, which Merton describes variously as grasping, hanging on, falling into, plunging in, or swimming through. A further key theme associated with the shift from concrete to mysterious is Eucharist. It is depicted variously, in the sacramental interweaving of nature and grace, in the invitation to contemplative stillness and in the etymological root of thanksgiving. The extracts nudge the reader towards a solitude which attends in silence to the material and, for Merton, intrinsically graced reality of a given place.

In the following five analyses of text, the first two focus on liminal space; the second two on the theme of Eucharist. The final extract integrates the themes of liminality and sacramentality into a signalling of contemplative quietude.

in the valley, against the light, slowly taking on animal forms, against the dark wall of wooded hills behind. Menacing and peaceful forms. Probably this is the smoke of brush fires in the hollow.'

¹⁰⁶ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 29. 'Evening: cold winter wind along the walls of the chapel. Not howling, not moaning, not dismal. Can there be anything mournful about wind? It is innocent, and without sorrow. It has no regrets. Wind is a strong child enjoying his play, amazed at his own strength, gentle inexhaustible, and pure. He burnishes the dry snow throwing clouds of it against the building. The wind has no regrets.'

¹⁰⁷ Seal, p. 155.

III.i The Place of the In-between

Merton recounts an experience of being night watchman in the monastery during heavy rain. He does not describe the nature of the task, but rather seeks to capture how he experiences the process, as a time in which he drifts on the cusp of awareness between the conscious and the semi-conscious. Water in various forms as steam, ice, snow, rain, rivers, streams and clouds are a frequent focus of Merton.¹⁰⁸ In this extract, the rain takes on the role attributed to water, in *The Tears of the Blind Lions*, representing the power of contemplative vision to pierce through the limitations of surface reality, there to unearth an original purity and unity:

Last night I was on the night watch. It rained heavily. Between rounds I went into the little shelter in the middle of the cloister court, which is traditionally called by the French name of *préau* here. Rain poured down on the walls of the building, on the four big maples, on the roof of the shelter. I was sleepy, and sat in the chair, nodding in the dark. Hanging on the edge of sleep I could hear the rain around me like a huge aviary full of parrots: but just as the aviary became real I would wake up, rescue myself from this strange world of sound, until gradually I would fall into it again.¹⁰⁹

Merton's choice of verbs underlines a sense of liminality and movement from and towards: pouring; nodding; hanging on the edge; waking up; rescuing from; falling into. A series of prepositions provide close observance of locational detail.¹¹⁰ The French term *préau*, meaning an enclosed yard echoes both the French origin of Cistercian monasticism and the French school playgrounds of Merton's childhood. It implies in both cases unprescribed time away from chapel and classroom. The yard shelter fails to protect from the rain, which in its contemplative role invades the space. The sense of amplification in Merton's description, echoes mystical writing: the 'huge aviary', 'the four big maples', where walls, trees and roof are drenched by a relentless pounding, recreated in the sibilant and plosive consonants of 's', 'sh', 'st', and 't', and where the letter 'l' hints at liquification.¹¹¹ The invasion of sound penetrates the silence of the monastery with the rain being compared to parrots full of language. It becomes another place which speaks

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Merton, *When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature* (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2003), pp. 182–85. Kathleen Deignan lists Merton's references to snow under 'Winter' p. 182, clouds, p. 183, rain, p. 184-185 and the elements including water, p. 183.

¹⁰⁹ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 155.

¹¹⁰ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 155. *Into* the little shelter; *in the middle of* the cloister court; *down* the walls; *on* the four big maples; *on* the roof; *in* the chair; *in* the dark; *on the edge of* sleep; the rain *around me*; I would *fall into*.

¹¹¹ Walls, maples, shelter, sleepy, full, real, gradually, fall.

and demands a listening, through the quasi-baptismal drenching by the rain. Merton is located on the cusp between the fixity of his material location and the mysterious capaciousness of contemplation. He is accompanied by language-filled rain. The interplay between the created, uncreated, and verbal of his poetics is encapsulated.

III.ii A Newfound Vision

Merton's famous account of a transformation of perspective in Louisville is interpreted as a pivot in the chronology of Merton's vision, where worldly renunciation is translated into compassionate solidarity. It follows a characteristic meandering earlier in the text, around the wisdom in what seems like trivial detail. The sudden pinpointing of location and the ensuing sense of focus carves out a new space from the flow of narrative:

In Louisville at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.¹¹²

The story telling mode and the neat shaping of sentences with the layering of clauses of further detail, create an ease of engagement as does the careful mapping of spatial detail. Merton pinpoints the geography assisted by a sequence of prepositions.¹¹³ The verbs, 'waking from' and 'overwhelmed by' underline the need to relocate as we recall from the poem 'The Fall' in *Emblems*. The theme of displacement is given multiple names in recognition of how it had dominated his life: alien, stranger, spurious self-isolation, separateness, a special world. This too however is replaced by a startling admission of love and of mutual belonging: 'I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs'. The strong possessive pronouns underline the sense of connection. The phonetic echoes in holiness, whole and holy dissolve the fragmentation of set-apartness into a unity which is experienced as holy.

¹¹² Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 157.

¹¹³ *In Louisville, at the corner of two streets, in the centre.*

The sense of being ‘suddenly overwhelmed’ echoes the ‘jolting’ in Rome¹¹⁴ and the ‘thunderclap’ in Cuba,¹¹⁵ as does the sequence of prepositions. Such similarities demonstrate how Merton had long understood place as a potential source of dialogue and revelation, and belie that insistence within Merton studies, that this moment reflects a sudden stand against a compartmentalised geography. Nonetheless a town hitherto recognised as tedious, dull and alien¹¹⁶ becomes the locus of a transfiguring compassion. William Harmless identifies ‘The Louisville Revelation’ as the representation of a unique vantage point, voicing a ‘profound and fundamental religious insight’ from which ‘people and things are seen in their God-given dignity’. This for Harmless constitutes the particular character of Merton’s vision.¹¹⁷ Mystical vision is hence removed from an association with visionary ecstasy for an elect and becomes more universally accessible. Echoing mystical strategies Merton cannot refrain from seeking words to unpack the experience: ‘I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate’.¹¹⁸ The urge to find words is accompanied by an admission of inarticulateness: ‘I now realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like stars’.¹¹⁹ Bringing the account of his realisation to an end he claims: ‘I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere’.¹²⁰ Holiness is hence experienced *pro-fane*, outside the temple on a high street, allowing all places to become the locus of a God-given dignity and companionability.

In a few engaging sentences, Merton has illustrated his perspective on incarnational understanding, on the gratuity of grace, on the experience of integration and on Gospel revelation, both of the incarnation and of the invocation for human oneness with God as voiced

¹¹⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1998), p. 108.

¹¹⁵ Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation The Journal of Thomas Merton, Volume 1: 1939-1941* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), pp. 217-218, and *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 284.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1953), pp. 144 and 302. ‘Louisville was dull as usual’, p. 144; Louisville: ‘miles and miles of one storey houses’, p. 302.

¹¹⁷ Harmless, p. 32.

¹¹⁸ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 157.

¹¹⁹ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 157.

¹²⁰ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 158.

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in John 17:21-23.¹²¹ He closes with an affirmation of God in all things. It is worth reflecting on the distance Merton's writing lies, in this juxtaposition of material and transcendent reality, from the parallel scholastic analysis of the relationship between visible matter and heaven, as expressed by Thomas Aquinas.¹²² Aquinas begins by asking a question, followed by antithesis, objections, thesis, best arguments for it, then refutation of the arguments for the antithesis, by a strong counter argument. Aquinas thus demonstrates a steady linear progression in thought offering a formula of structured reasoning. This account by Merton, conversely, releasing theology from structured reasoning and a linear progression, begins in a specific and material place and leads into devotional assertion, even effusion beyond reason, in an abandonment of his own erstwhile theses and antitheses concerning monastic life. His arguments on the misplaced need to confine holiness to the temple had foundered.¹²³ He has nothing to prove as the newfound joy makes the theology self-evident.

¹²¹ John 17:21-23: 'that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,^[a] so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. N.R.S.V., p. 1,302.

¹²² *The Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas* Second and Revised Edition, 1920, literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Online Edition 2017, <<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1008.htm>> [accessed 28/12/ 2019]. Question 8: The Existence of God in Things': Question: Is God in all things? Objection 1. It seems that God is not in all things. For what is above all things is not in all things. But God is above all, according to the Psalm (Psalm 112:4), "The Lord is high above all nations," etc. Therefore God is not in all things. Objection 2. Further, what is in anything is thereby contained. Now God is not contained by things, but rather does He contain them. Therefore God is not in things but things are rather in Him. Hence Augustine says (Octog. Tri. Quaest. qu. 20), that "in Him things are, rather than He is in any place." Objection 3. Further, the more powerful an agent is, the more extended is its action. But God is the most powerful of all agents. Therefore His action can extend to things which are far removed from Him; nor is it necessary that He should be in all things. Objection 4. Further, the demons are beings. But God is not in the demons; for there is no fellowship between light and darkness (2 Corinthians 6:14). Therefore God is not in all things. On the contrary, A thing is wherever it operates. But God operates in all things, according to Isaiah 26:12, "Lord . . . Thou hast wrought all our works in [Vulgate: 'for'] us." Therefore God is in all things. I answer that, God is in all things; not, indeed, as part of their essence, nor as an accident, but as an agent is present to that upon which it works. For an agent must be joined to that wherein it acts immediately and touch it by its power; hence it is proved in Phys. vii that the thing moved and the mover must be joined together. Now since God is very being by His own essence, created being must be His proper effect; as to ignite is the proper effect of fire. Now God causes this effect in things not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are preserved in being; as light is caused in the air by the sun as long as the air remains illuminated. Therefore as long as a thing has being, God must be present to it, according to its mode of being. But being is innermost in each thing and most fundamentally inherent in all things since it is formal in respect of everything found in a thing, as was shown above (I:7:1). Hence it must be that God is in all things, and innermost.

¹²³ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 157. The conception of 'separation from the world' that we have in the monastery too easily presents itself as a complete illusion: the illusion that by making vows we become a different species of being, pseudoangels, 'spiritual men,' men of interior life'.

II. iii The Play of Nature and Liturgy

Merton's 'still-points' not only delineate liminal and transitional space but provide a close focus on the play of different elements. The feast of the Cistercian hermit Blessed Conrad invites a frustrated pondering for Merton, as Conrad was a monk 'permitted to become a hermit', a sore point given that Merton had not similarly been granted permission, as yet. The passage emerges from the familiar meandering delivery of *Conjectures*,¹²⁴ but stands out in bold, with vivid description delivered in a long comma-free sentence concluded by a sentence fragment. Following this passage, the text proceeds into a sentence beginning 'And' with a reference to the Gospel of the day as if it were necessary to move on. This sudden picking up of the thread of ongoing commentary underlines that these 'still-points' have to be dug out of the ongoing movement. In this extract Merton shows how liturgy and nature mutually shape each other into splendour:

Sun poured in the novitiate chapel onto the altar and a glory of reflected lights from the hammered silver chalice splashed all over the corporal and all around the Host. Deep and total silence.

In this passage, the chaining together of all the items in a single sentence stresses their enmeshment. Within Seal's exploration of Merton's 'poetics of thereness', he formulates the term de-concatenation to identify a separation from a chain of thought.¹²⁵ In Merton's description, the closing phrase without a verb, the 'de-concatenation', separates from the chain, suggesting the thereness and fullness of the silence, as if emerging three dimensionally from the canvas.¹²⁶ The absence of a verb locates where understanding lingers. The combination of the long sentence with the closing fragment tips the narrative from effusion into silent wonder.

Merton creates an energetic fusion of two entities, nature and the human-made paraphernalia of the liturgy of Eucharist: sun and altar; light and chalice; the geological origin of the metal and its shaping into a vessel; light on the white corporal and on the consecrated bread.

¹²⁴ Examples of Merton's casual expression: 'an odd-ball', 'bothered me a bit' and several adverbial phrases of certainty 'of course', 'obviously', 'in any event', 'certainly', all exemplifying a laid-back quality.

¹²⁵ Seal, p. 161. Concatenation: a series of interconnected things. Seal, p. 150. De-concatenation: freedom from specific context to plant in a wider context.

¹²⁶ Seal, p. 155. 'The poetics of thereness involves an act of reading that apprehends literary objects that exist by being themselves by becoming alone amongst textual relationships that surround them and by occupying a space'.

This interaction is reflected in the mutual exchange represented by the verbs: poured, reflected, hammered, splashed, and in the prepositions, in, onto, from, all over, all around, which indicate invasive movement. The sentence captures the sense of dynamic vitality as grace is encountered through sacrament and through the interplay between objects and the forces of nature. There is an echo once again of that characteristic layering up of similarities found in mystical writing in order to state and re-state a sense of abundance. The multiple sides of the chalice reflect iridescently, ‘all over’ and ‘all around’, suggesting a complete drenching in light and grace. This picture stands with an understanding of Eucharist he shared with Jacques Maritain, to whom he writes: ‘To me the Eucharist has always been light, illumination’.¹²⁷

Merton has transformed the familiar items present in every liturgy of the Eucharist into a symphony of movement and colour. A still life becomes a vivid splash of vitality. There are echoes of the passion in ‘hammered’, the sense of spilling of blood in ‘splashing’, the shroud symbolism of the corporal. An understanding of transubstantiation is hence recreated as the bread and wine become body and blood. Given the further layer of symbolism in the Eucharist of the eternally repeated sacrifice in the now, the action in memory, as well as the coming together of utterance, matter and divine presence, Merton grasps the richness of liturgical pronouncement in the crafting of two sentences.

II.iv Liturgy of the Open Air

The explicit focus on the Eucharist and its invitation to contemplative stillness is reversed in the next extract, where Merton’s contemplative attending on the detail of his physical surroundings unpins eucharistic understanding of transubstantiation outside the specificity of liturgical enactment. The layered richness of this passage is one of the few placed alone between three asterisks, unlike other vignettes I have chosen which sit within the flow of the text. I would suggest that this isolation underlines its importance.

It is 4am the time of Prime,¹²⁸ and Merton describes what he beholds:

¹²⁷ Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 32.

¹²⁸ The Liturgy of the Hours begins with *Lauds* at dawn, then *Prime* around 6am but varying depending on the season and later followed by *Terce* around 9am.

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Cold stars. Steam coming up out of the kitchens into the freezing night (4:00A.M.) Frost on the side of the coal pile outside the furnace room. Dirty bread lying in the gravel, frozen, for birds. Creak of the frosty wooden steps down to the infirmary. Flamingos on the Standard Oil calendar in the kitchen. Hot tea.¹²⁹

The passage is framed within the balance of the two sentence fragments: ‘Cold stars’ and ‘Hot tea’, capturing the place between opposite poles of hot and cold, the expanse of the cosmos and the earthly familiarity of tea. The sentence fragments create a sparseness which gives an immediacy to the description, granting the reader the opportunity to step into the spotlight of Merton’s vision. Emphasis is laid on the simple quality of being there, of the stars and the tea. Once again according to Seal’s formulation, the thereness is made evident as they are cut away from their surroundings in a strategic de-concatenation. They stand alone verbless as isolated units of meaning.¹³⁰

By attending to ordinary detail, Merton offers a striking counterpoint of contrasts of temperature and colour: cold stars, freezing, and frost alongside steam, coal, furnace, hot tea; the monochromes of black, white and grey stand alongside the exotic pink of the flamingos.¹³¹ There is an indirect resonance with Eucharist in the bread, the transforming deep pink of the flamingo and the hot tea, and in the sense of gratitude.¹³² It is worth recalling observations from Chapter Four that flamingos are a significant symbol in Merton’s work as a whole.¹³³ Aside from the personal significance of flamingos, however, the reference to Standard Oil highlights the ambivalence of an oil company, giving away calendars depicting the beauty of nature, which its

¹²⁹ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 346.

¹³⁰ Seal, pp. 150, 155 and 161.

¹³¹ At the start of the century Standard Oil, controlled 90% of the refining of oil in the USA. Their economic power was so excessive that the US Government ordered the company to divest itself of its major holdings. Their company calendars tended to depict rural scenes, as if suggesting a close concern for the natural environment by a hugely polluting industry. In 1911 the Standard Oil empire was dissolved but eight companies retained ‘Standard Oil’ in their names. Jared Cummans, ‘The History of the Standard Oil Company’, *Dividend.Com*, 2015 <Dividend.com> [accessed 28/12/2019].

¹³² Augustine of Hippo, paraphrase of Sermon 272, ‘On the day of Pentecost, to the infants, concerning the sacrament’ in Augustine of Hippo, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. by John E. Rotelle, Sermons, 3 (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1993), iv, pp. 300-301.

¹³³ We can recall that flamingoes first appear in ‘Song for Our Lady of Cobre’. He paints the novices’ classroom ‘flamingo pink’: Matt Torpey, a Cistercian to whom Merton was spiritual director recalls ‘The Flamingo Room’. Elizabeth Eisenstadt Evans, ‘Thomas Merton Had ‘a Most Lively Relationship with God’’, *National Catholic Reporter*, 31 January 2015 <<https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/thomas-merton-had-most-lively-relationship-god-fellow-monk-says>>. In the early poems, Merton’s fellow monks are exotic birds in his early poems, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 74. See Chapter Four, I.II ‘Latin America’.

own industry violates. The passage therefore has an underlay of ecological concern.¹³⁴ Merton pairs the landscape down to its essential elements. Earth air, fire and water are present in coal, oil, gravel, frost, snow, steam, furnace, and hot tea. Other categorisations of animal, vegetable and mineral are captured in birds, flamingo, wheat in the bread, leaves of the tea, wood of the stairs, coal, gravel, and oil. The wider cosmic landscape is captured in stars, night, and cold. This turn to simple elemental presence, uncontextualized, emphasizes thereness as both a material and spiritual reality.¹³⁵

In this short passage, Merton offers a tightly woven picture of a way of being in the world, echoing the theme of the whole work, how the monk and by inference the Christian might relate to the world. Giving shape to the picture is the shadowy presence of the human beholding the stars, tending to the birds, enjoying hot tea, confronting the cosmos, nature, and his own simple pleasure. There is a distillation of a huge range of theological themes: Eden; Incarnation; Eucharist; sacrament; eco-spirituality; the holding of opposites; a theology lived; contemplative stillness; sacred space; becoming Eucharist; the intersection of natural and supernatural; the ‘thereness’ of things. This impressive range of reference is proffered in a passage of concentrated brevity held within the tauter images of the first and last pair of words.

In these four passages, I have identified the place of in-betweenness, the cusp of awareness between attending upon material reality and the gradual recognition of a more capacious and more mysterious understanding. I have explored the sense of fusion of difference met in sacramental envisioning. I have also illustrated Merton’s willingness to yield to the self-disclosure of place. He demonstrates a readiness for play in all its gratuitousness between those elements constituting his poetics. In the final extract for analysis, Merton shows how this readiness, even when set in a landscape with few familiar points of reference, can generate a

¹³⁴ Merton’s environmental vision is the subject of a detailed analysis by Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 2011).

¹³⁵ Merton’s poetics echoes Mary Grey’s description of a sacramental poetics in his reference to basic realities of bread, water, oil, earth. According to Grey ‘Sacramental poetics is about transformation, the transforming of everyday perception and experience into something that satisfies the deepest longing. A sacramental poetics appeals to the imagination, by appealing to the basic realities in our lives – bread, water, oil, salt, earth, trees, in word and symbol, prayer and gesture – it awakens a depth dimension and experience of the sacred. Sacramental poetics has the potential to re-enchant a broken-hearted world, speaking the language and the music of the heart to the addicted consumer, the jaded, hypnotised slave of the market’, Grey, Mary, *Sacred Longings: Ecofeminist Theology and Globalization* (London: SCM Press 2003), p. 86, cited p. 42, O’Leary, *Begin with the Heart*.

sense of overpowering oneness with the world in a capturing of emplacement within displacement.

II.v Clarity from the Rocks¹³⁶

As Merton's dialogue with place steps beyond church interiors, to the open air, to indeterminate corners of the abbey grounds, or to a high street in Louisville, the final extract for analysis moves further from such confines and into a place sacred to another faith in a distant country. Merton has left behind all the props which had come to mean home, including the medieval monastic tradition with its strong associations with the Europe of his childhood, the hermitage and monastery gardens, the communal singing of divine office and Mass, and the connection with friends and writers. We can recall from Chapter Four how Merton's encounter with a sense of belonging in the Church of St Cosmas and Damian followed on from a sense of alienation. Similarly, in Chapter Six, we saw how Merton built beauty within the alienating landscapes of *Emblems*. In this passage, the same juxtaposition of emplacement and displacement features as a key player in releasing revelatory understanding. For twenty-seven years Merton had allowed the geographical stability of the monastery to shape his contemplative vision, demonstrating how the very sameness could offer intimations of a world beyond itself. Now, stepping far beyond the enclosure, his contemplative vision plays with his surroundings and unearths a greater integration and sense of homecoming than ever before.

Merton has arrived in Polonnaruwa, at the ancient site, sacred to Buddhist and Hindu faiths. He takes off his shoes, physically grounding himself in the landscape, as he beholds the smiles of all the Buddhas. In setting the scene he voices his surprise in sentence fragments: 'The great smiles.' 'Huge and yet subtle'. A forty-two word sentence then ensues in a volley of words, chopped up by commas and dashes, reflecting his breathless anticipation and an almost visceral desire to get his thinking over with: 'Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace (..) that had seen through every question without trying

¹³⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1975), p. 84. 'Outside the dirty window I have just opened there is pure morning light on the lower rampart of the Himalayas. Near me are the steep green sinews of a bastion tufted with vegetation. A hut or shrine is visible, outlined on the summit. Beyond, in sunlit, back-lighted mist, the higher pointed peak. Further to the left a still higher snowy peak that was hidden in cloud last evening and is misty now. Song of birds in the bushes. Incessant soft guttural mantras of the crows. Below, in another cottage, an argument of women.'

to discredit anyone or anything – *without refutation* – without establishing some other argument'. He is then temporarily forced to put aside his obsessive verbalisation, as the place takes over:

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. (...) The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle no problem and really no 'mystery'. All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. (..) everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. 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.¹³⁷

All the familiar features of Merton's encounters with place are evident. He identifies his characteristic sense of jolting, thunderclap, sudden revelation, in his description of being 'almost forcibly jerked', and clarity 'exploding'. The locatedness of the experience is underlined with a prepositional sequence, 'out of', 'from the rocks' and the phrasal verb 'running in'. He acknowledges an overflowing abundance and layered expansiveness within the experience with 'everything', 'all this', 'such a sense', as well as the tautology of 'evident' and 'obvious', 'clearness' and 'clarity'. A sense of rupture with known quantities is recreated in the sequence of clauses broken by commas. The final long sentence, without commas suggests the all-consuming magnetism of the revelation. It is a moment of intense awareness mediated both by the place and the materiality of the human-made sacred forms, where the divine and the human are vividly interwoven. It is as if the holy is no longer in the shadow or the signpost of apophatic statement but is fully present.

Merton's vision is caught in an intense experience of paradox: the clash of the numinous and the material, the sense of home when far from home, a Christian receiving enlightenment in space sacred to other faiths, fullness in emptiness, clarity in darkness, order in seeming disorder. The smiles of the Buddhas suggest a complete absence of gravitas. They reflect the canvas of welcome met in *Emblems*: the warm embrace of Muslim philosopher, Averroes;¹³⁸ the smiling at rainbows of the poet Alfonso Cortes;¹³⁹ the wide-eyed smiles of the faces and the animals in the

¹³⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, p. 235.

¹³⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1980), pp. 325-329. 'Song for the Death of Averroes'.

¹³⁹ Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 355-356.

poem 'Grace's House'. The fusion of a gesture, the smile, simple and human, with the forms in the rocks, which themselves emerged at the point of creation, recreates the intensity and enormity of the paradox he steps into.

In critical commentary on Merton's account of the experience at Polonnaruwa, there is a repeated emphasis on this element of paradox. De Waal explains how unity is encountered in the multiplicity of material objects configured around being awake and aware.¹⁴⁰ Altany similarly underlines the immensity of the paradox within this 'geography of his last years' as 'a dialectical movement towards a union of fullness and emptiness, God and not-God, aesthetic and mystical, sacred and profane'.¹⁴¹ Christie, reflecting Altany's emphasis on geography, identifies the experience as 'without question a profound encounter with a *place*, (..) and a subtle, mysterious expression of contemplative place-making, an experience of homecoming, a sense of having arrived home after a lifetime of restless wandering'.¹⁴² On the one hand, the sense of integration and wholeness is a home-coming. On the other, the experience reaches away from the particularities of place into that disembodied clarity in a glimpse which will certainly fade as it reaches into a space beyond the place. Christie continues to describe the experience as a 'moment of intense displacement', which he interprets as 'one of the most significant aspects' of how contemplation reconfigures place. He thus identifies the eagerness on the part of the contemplative to wrestle with the ways place and loss of place shape and form us'.¹⁴³ Merton underlines repeatedly how in the meeting of the cataphatic and apophatic or of the recognisable displacement with the ineffable emplacement, a sense of arrival and of home is created. It is on this basis that Christie insists that contemplative practice is 'bound to place (..) rooted but always moving toward an immense, limitless horizon'.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Esther de Waal in A. M. Allchin, *Thomas Merton - Poet, Monk, Prophet: Papers Presented at the Second General Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland at Oakham School, March 1998* (Abergavenny, Wales: Three Peaks Press, 1998), p. 49. 'He sees all this profusion gaining order from the seated presences, burning with flame-like continuity, centres of awareness – profusion of dwelling, rocks, woods, farms gulfs, falls and heights, flowers, bowls, rugs lamps and images'. De Waal's assertion summarises the process by which Merton can observe multiplicity and a seeming haphazard materiality, as evidenced in the extracts explored here, and find the point of unity.

¹⁴¹ Alan Altany, 'The Rediscovered Geography of an American Mystic' <<http://thomasmertonsociety.org/Epubs/altany.htm>> [accessed 23/04/2020].

¹⁴² Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: OUP, 2012), p. 119.

¹⁴³ Christie, p. 121.

¹⁴⁴ Christie, p. 121.

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Christie's trenchant observations also identify further how the juxtaposition of wholeness with fragmentation in Merton's work has a precariousness, suggestive of the experience of dislocation experienced by the marginalized and the homeless. It thus, taps into that sense of complicity and solidarity with the world, wherein, for those on the margins, 'a sense of place and belonging had long remained a distant dream'.¹⁴⁵ This is the case with those heroes and heroines of *Emblems*: the rejected refugee, the victims of the Holocaust, the sex-workers, the child civil rights activists imprisoned, or the homeless God without a number who entrusts himself to sleep.¹⁴⁶ This absence of home delivers a resulting sense of place which demonstrates profoundly how a sacred wholeness is embedded in an arresting, material brokenness.

Given Merton's preoccupation with liturgy as outlined at the start of this chapter and his definition of liturgy as theology lived accompanied by contemplative possibility, it is evident that Merton's textual craftsmanship not only echoes the Eucharist, but also the doxology in which a sequence of prepositions resolve into 'the unity of the spirit'. Such crafting also reflects the unfolding of liturgy which creates a space in which to dwell, as a verbal and located sanctuary, merging linguistic, spatial, and sacred. The creation of these still-lives and scenes resembling clips of film, amid the flow of chat about political issues and theological standpoints, crosses thresholds into a space, which shifts from being observed, to being participated in, and becoming one with. This trajectory echoes liturgical processes, that play of the liturgy demanding observing and participating, where each item, each gesture is invested with meaning. Merton recreates this pattern as he guides an oblique light through the detail of his canvases, endeavouring to make visible a form of liturgy as a theology-lived. He equally seeks to tip the observer and participant into a composed and attentive stillness. His prose shows how a theology-lived is interrupted by the 'still-points', underlining how a sacred wholeness can in fact emerge from the random, haphazard patterns of living. This understanding emerges not only from the content but is powerfully manifest in the crafting of his expression.

¹⁴⁵ Christie, p. 119.

¹⁴⁶ Christopher Pramuk, *At Play in Creation: Merton's Awakening to the Feminine Divine* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015), p. 79.

III

Conclusion to Part Two: Primary Text Analysis

'A Distinctive Form of Religious Expression'

The quest for wholeness in the midst of fragmentation is central to Labrie's study on Merton's inclusive imagination, in which he identifies Merton's 'distinctive form of religious expression'.¹⁴⁷ Underlining Merton's unwillingness to arrange his thinking systematically, he identifies a "seamless intermingling of religious and romantic elements", drawn from a concern for unity and wholeness, shaped by the romanticism of Blake and Hopkins.¹⁴⁸

It is this distinctive form which I suggest creates an alternative language for theology. We can recall from the conclusion of Chapter One that it is an aspiration for an integrated theology that drove *ressourcement* endeavours. They sought to step back from the compartmentalising process which characterised the scholastic tradition and in Guardini's words 'to penetrate, to move within, to live with'.¹⁴⁹ We can recall too from Chapter Six, with reference to Poks, that Merton's way through the multiple paradoxes he encountered was to 'emphasise that which binds', and 'to underline unitive knowing of ultimate reality'.¹⁵⁰

Throughout the four chapters of textual analysis multiplicity and unity are in constant dialogue. Merton relays variety of form, of tone, and of content in a clashing array of different landscapes. The verbal constructs include the casual intimacy of journal-like writing, a profusion of poems which tend towards an increasingly freer idiom, the anti-poetry in *Emblems* adjoining Zen-like *koans* and the haunting landscapes closer to prose, of 'Grace's House' and 'Hagia Sophia'. Finally, the casual discussion of headlines and random sequencing of thought in *Conjectures* pivot around the vignettes of distilled vision, I have named 'still-points'.

¹⁴⁷ Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. vii.

¹⁴⁸ Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*, p. viii.

¹⁴⁹ Romano Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como: Explorations in Technology and the Human Race* (Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), p. 43.

¹⁵⁰ Poks, Malgorzata, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices*, p. 9, see Chapter Five, I 'Critical Response to Poetry', p. 136.

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Within this variety of forms, disorientation meets a corresponding reorientation, highlighting Merton's resolve throughout to build ever anew in a place of alienation. In Chapter Four, the first chapter of textual analysis, he carves out a sense of rightness from the solitariness of his walking in Sussex,¹⁵¹ of belonging from the alienation marking his journey to Rome,¹⁵² and of holiness from the experience of being a stranger in foreign land in Cuba. Merton invites participation in the resultant experience of integration in the very formal qualities of his writing: the sequencing of prepositions as if signalling precisely where he is looking; the layering of synonyms to increase nuance, reflective of the *excessus* of mystical writing; the repeated demonstratives which suggest a shared proximity; the sensual warmth emerging from the balance of movement, colour and disarming contrasts in 'Song for Our Lady of Cobre'.¹⁵³ Merton's testing of a dualistic carving up of the world, in his adoption of scholastic categories, is quickly dismantled, as he resumes his earlier and more characteristic tendency to step aside from 'enframing' and to allow mindfulness of language and place to mould his vision. From the ensuing sounding out of his verbal and spatial territory, scriptural reality blends with his own, and he develops that rich interweaving of language and place, stamped with intimations of divine presence, which characterises his poetics.

The building of a sanctuary, however, is no escapism into a mere verbal reality. The stark image of a piece of torn cowl caught on barbed wire underlines that Trappism is a lived reality not simply performed.¹⁵⁴ In Chapter Five, through the poems of the 1940s, Merton relays his experience of darkness and even abandonment, out of which he ultimately unearths redeeming hope. The intense disorientation which emerges from the poems conveys the physical affront of the monastery: the chill of the dormitories, the limited food, the fasting and the interrupted sleep, all conducive to recurring illnesses; the suggestion of high fever, transposed to the bleak devastation of WWI trenches; the sense of women's absence; the unwashed bodies and uncomfortable clothes. This physical discomfort is compounded by psychological turmoil: the anxiety that his vocation and his superiors would refuse him the solace of writing; the indelible

¹⁵¹ Mott, p. 58. From *Fitzgerald File*, p.15. See Chapter Four, I,i, p. 105.

¹⁵² Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, p. 110. 'I loved to be in these places. I had a deep and strong conviction that I belonged there'. See Chapter Four, I,i p. 107.

¹⁵³ See Chapter Four, Chapter Four, I ii, 'Latin America', pp. 108-112.

¹⁵⁴ See Chapter Four, II, 'The Mooring Point of Gethsemani', p. 121.

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sense of loss imprinted on his memory of childhood in the early death of his mother; the dismay at the indifferent parenting of the father he loved; his own abandonment of the child he fathered; the chasm of the Atlantic which exiled him from the well-loved landscapes of France and of home. His disorientation is conveyed through a sense of being shipwrecked, tossed in a dark and turbulent sea without shores. He thus utters a powerful dark night of the soul.¹⁵⁵ It is within this unprepossessing territory that Merton shows a way of reconfiguring the landscape and finding reconciliation, where his cellar becomes that ‘heaven of naked air’, his assertion that human and divine space can meet and merge.¹⁵⁶

The landscape of *Emblems* in Chapter Six provides an ever more astonishing series of juxtapositions. On the one hand is a dehumanised landscape of military campaigns, prison management, the rough and indifferent treatment of refugees, elderly people, and child activists. On the other, is the humanity, intimacy and openness of Merton’s welcome to the stranger in the many writers he invites onto a now shared canvas, in the ground of wisdom borrowed from other faith traditions and in the invitation to participate in contemplative quietude. In showing how something new can emerge from unpromising terrain, it is never a facile re-enchantment of the landscape but a careful signalling of where he is looking, to show how such brokenness can become the locus for redeeming possibility.

In this final chapter of textual analysis, Merton’s still-points, arising from the randomness of his commentary on social, political, and theological issues develop further a highly distinctive response to those aspirations for theological language, outlined in Chapter One. Merton finds a means of correcting what Congar named an ‘incarnation deficit’, as theology becomes tangible in images of highstreets, in the play of light on altar vessels, in colours and hot tea, in walking and in experiencing what for Merton is primordial: ‘the times and moods of one good place’.¹⁵⁷ We find a means of seeing Maritain’s ‘magical light’,¹⁵⁸ that depicting of divine beauty in unpromising materiality,¹⁵⁹ and hearing those ‘passwords and the secrets that are stammering in

¹⁵⁵ See Chapter V, Section II, ‘The Poems’.

¹⁵⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 221. See Chapter Five, Section II.v.

¹⁵⁷ Yves Congar, ‘Déficit de la théologie’, cited by Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie - New Theology*, p. 14. Chapter One, II.i ‘The Ressourcement Lament’.

¹⁵⁸ Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, p. 10.

¹⁵⁹ Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, p. 17.

things’ as Merton places a spotlight on a company’s calendar and the black dust on the discarded bread.¹⁶⁰ We encounter that sacred place identified by Rahner ‘where the laboured, humble daily word dwells’,¹⁶¹ which yet relays a ‘captivating incomprehensibility’ as Merton demonstrates how ordinary seeing can become dreamlike.¹⁶² When Merton identifies the God-given dignity of people, rescuing it from invisibility, we identify Balthasar’s dialogue of created and uncreated, a drama open to the non-sequential and unexpected, hovering on the edge of anticipation and unknowing, and offering a similar ‘dark radiance’ to that identified in Maximus.¹⁶³ Also significantly, there is something of that excitement which the *ressourcement* theologians identified in medieval and patristic theology, in which the text became a vital spring,¹⁶⁴ dissolving boundaries, through which they might dismantle the perceived bulwark of scholastic abstractions and step into a new kind of theological creation.

Merton invites participation in his receptive openness to place from his earliest years, where place is perceived as a companion to dialogue and to fresh understanding to the still-points of his mature writing. He thus models that imitating of the docility of the natural world, promoted by Weil, Heidegger’s arguing for *gelassenheit* and Bachelard’s call for a readiness to be shaped by place.¹⁶⁵ Equally, he echoes the quest for ‘emplacement within displacement’, of mid-century British poetry,¹⁶⁶ and like Thoreau and the mid-century French poets, he walks through and converses with the physical affront of the place, pondering the signals towards

¹⁶⁰ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 83.

¹⁶¹ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations: Theology of the Spiritual Life*, III, p. 314.

¹⁶² Karl Rahner and Karl Cardinal Lehmann, *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life*, ed. by Annemarie S. Kidder (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), p. 126.

¹⁶³ Balthasar, pp. 81, 97.

¹⁶⁴ Marcellino D’Ambrosio, ‘Ressourcement Theology, Aggiornamento, and the Hermeneutics of Tradition’, Crossroads Initiative, 2017 <<https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/ressourcement-theology-aggiornamentoand-the-hermeneutics-of-tradition/>> [accessed 28 June 2017] See III. Ad Fontes! Ressourcement as Revitalization. ‘The goal of the *ressourcement* theologians was to prune away the dead canes and bring the Church back to tradition’s living root so that the vitality inherent in it might give rise to a fresh pastoral and theological renaissance.’ See also: Charles Peguy, *Oeuvres Complètes de Charles Peguy, 1873-1914: Oeuvres de Prose; Lettre de Provincial; De la Grippe; Entre Deux Trains; Pour Ma Maison, pour Moi; Compte Rendu de Mandat; La Channon du Roi Dagobert* (London: Fb&c Limited, 2017), ‘a new and deeper sounding of ancient, inexhaustible and common resources’, pp. 186-19.

¹⁶⁵ Chapter Two, III.i ‘The Socio-cultural Canvas’.

¹⁶⁶ Neal Alexander and David Cooper, *Poetry & Geography: Space and Place in Post-War Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 5. See Chapter Two, III.ii, ‘The Literary Canvas’.

infinite space.¹⁶⁷ Finally, recalling the Catholic American context outlined by O'Connor, his writing responds distinctively to the task she establishes for the Catholic writer, to locate the 'peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet'.¹⁶⁸

In multiple ways, Merton summons an alternative canvas marked by a boundaryless freedom. The dynamic of his language creates a theology in effect made strange by more liberated and unfamiliar textual dynamics. Integral to Merton's poetics is its kinship with an understanding of the trajectory of grace, which transforms the attending to people, things, places, and ordinary activity into a sacred ground for theological enquiry. In this way Merton models a liberating idiom for theology.

Having located Merton's style of writing as a response to *ressourcement* aspirations, and reflective of the wider socio-cultural and literary mid-century contexts, it is to contemporary theologians that my final chapter turns, with a particular focus on genre, and on theology in its spatial turn.¹⁶⁹ This scanning of the contemporary interrogation of place and of poetics will bring to culmination my presentation and evaluation of Merton's poetics of place, as an alternative language to the theology of his time, shaped by *ressourcement* endeavours. In addition, it will boldly underline my further claim concerning the ongoing relevance for contemporary theology of exploring Merton's theological form.

¹⁶⁷ Chapter Two, III.ii 'The Literary Canvas', pp. 66-70.

¹⁶⁸ O'Connor, p. 848.

¹⁶⁹ Sigurd Bergmann, 'Theology in Its Spatial Turn: Space, Place and Built Environments Challenging and Changing the Images of God', *Religion Compass*, 1.3 (2007), 353–79 (pp. 353–79) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2007.00025.x>>. The spatial-turn in theology, is a phrase devised by Sigurd Bergmann, in *Theology in its Spatial Turn: Space, Place and Built Environments Challenging and Changing the Images of God*. It acknowledges an increased focus on the theme of place in the study of theology. Studies with this focus tend to interpret their work as pioneering. This is the case from 1989 studies to those of the 21st century. They build in fact on a long history in which geography is acknowledged as an element in theology, in particular the fields of mystical theology, in which beauty is embodied in material reality; desert spirituality which emphasises the fertility of the desert. It also informs eco-theology and the locatedness of liberation theology.

PART THREE:
AN ALTERNATIVE LANGUAGE FOR THEOLOGY

Chapter Eight

The Continuing Relevance of Merton's Theological Genre

It remains for me now to establish how Merton's distinctive mode of theological expression offers a meaningful model for more recent interrogations, concerning both theological genre and the role of place as a partner to theological understanding. This thesis began with an outline of key figures in Catholic history who represented a meeting of polarised opinion. It proceeded to outline the *ressourcement* lament against the scholastic manual tradition and the accompanying aspiration for an alternative mode.¹ Their endeavours were identified pejoratively as a 'new theology' by opponents of their aspirations.² Bolstering such opposition, we can recall that Louis Ott's theology manual published in 1955, continuing the very tradition which stoked the antagonism of the *ressourcement* thinkers, is even now considered remarkable.³

When scanning the contemporary context, there is similar evidence of polarised views concerning modes of theological expression. A tendency to belittle opposition echoes not only the antagonism within the *ressourcement* lament but is also symptomatic of the adversarial mode within the discipline of theology. In a recent study, for example, advocating the value of analytical theology, Michael Rea outlines that there is a widely held view that theologians have been 'beguiled and taken captive' by alternative approaches designated as 'continental', of which

¹ We can recall that according to the *ressourcement* theologians, the manual tradition of scholastic theology had overtly prioritised abstractions, had neglected context, had displayed arrogance and narrowness in its certainties, and emptied theology of mystery, resulting in a form of theology they perceived to be dull, repetitive, and self-referential. Reflecting a militaristic and legalistic character in its obsession with categories, in a painstaking adherence to the formula of thesis and antithesis, it tended to theologise through intellectual aggression and defensiveness. Chapter One, II.i 'The *Ressourcement* Lament' pp. 14-16.

² Garrigou-Lagrange, Reginald P. 'La Nouvelle Théologie Où Va-t-Elle?' *Angelicum*, 23.3/4 (1946), 126-145. *Salve Regina*, 1943 <http://salve-regina.com/index.php?title=La_nouvelle_th%C3%A9ologie,_o%C3%B9_va-t-elle_%3F>. Chapter One, II.ii 'The Return to the Sources', p. 41.

³ Bishop Athanasius Schneider in the 'Foreword' to the 2018 English edition outlined the achievement of Ott's work: '*Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* has been considered as the definitive single volume summary of Catholic dogmatic theology ever since its original publication in German in 1952. This great work by Ludwig Ott presents a comprehensive yet concise outline of the entire system of Catholic doctrine, laying out its sources in Scripture and Tradition as taught by the Magisterium of the Church. The level of authority behind each doctrinal point is indicated and there are frequent references to the teachings of Fathers, Doctors and numerous Saints of the Church.' Dr Ludwig Ott and Dr Patrick Lynch, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Baronius Press, 2018).

the effects have been largely ‘deleterious’.⁴ For the analytic theologian, to adopt an approach to theology which admits that God is beyond comprehension, or as Merton said of the Incarnation, ‘cannot be fitted into a system’,⁵ is seen as opting out of the challenge of analysis. In their prioritisation of logical coherence, they avoid any ‘substantive use of metaphor and other tropes whose semantic content outstrips their propositional content’.⁶ This rejects the very character of the unsystematic, frequently ambiguous and imagery-rich writing of Merton, discussed in Chapter Seven.

Related to the advocacy for analytical theology is a renewed interest in the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas. In a review of this new tendency, we meet a similarly voiced criticism against those who do not welcome such a revival. Fergus Kerr refers to ‘glazing over of eyes especially amongst continental European faces’. Highlighting their antagonism, he mocks their judgement concerning Aquinas with ‘his thought is supposed to exhibit an intolerable clarity’.⁷

It was this combative mode which Merton found so tedious, in spite of his own polarising tendencies and frequent provocations.⁸ The clarity ‘from the rocks’⁹ which emerges from his alternative style as explored in Chapter Seven is not only the antithesis of Thomistic clarity, but when set against the preferred mode of analytical theologians would likely be described as deleteriously ‘continental’.¹⁰

It is worth reflecting however on this readiness to categorise. Does the tendency to label disparagingly constitute a disservice to theology? Might the real challenge be to emulate the

⁴ Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea, *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 1–2. Michael Rea outlines that ‘the idea that theology has been taken captive is made explicit in R.R. Reno’s ‘Theology’s Continental Captivity’, *First Things*, 162, (2006), pp. 26–33.’ Crisp, p. 1.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 17.

⁶ Crisp and Rea, p. 5.

⁷ Fergus Kerr, ‘Recent Thomistica IV’, *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 87.No. 1012 (2006), 651–659 (p. 651).

⁸ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 81–82. ‘We are all pontiffs haranguing one another, brandishing our croziers at one another, dogmatizing threatening anathemas!’

⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1975), p. 84. ‘Outside the dirty window I have just opened there is pure morning light on the lower rampart of the Himalayas. Near me are the steep green sinews of a bastion tufted with vegetation. A hut or shrine is visible, outlined on the summit. Beyond, in sunlit, back-lighted mist, the higher pointed peak. Further to the left a still higher snowy peak that was hidden in cloud last evening and is misty now. Song of birds in the bushes. Incessant soft guttural mantras of the crows. Below, in another cottage, an argument of women.’

¹⁰ The overriding aim of the analytical theologian is to model theological method on analytical philosophy, the task being ‘to do theology in a way that conforms to the prescriptions that characterize analytical philosophical writing’. Crisp and Rea, p. 5.

stance of the creatively faithful thinkers, with whom this thesis began and with whom I identify Merton? There is a clear weakness in the tyranny of categorising, evident in Lubac's description of theology's inventorying and ordering so that 'If there is still a mystery there, at least we know exactly where to place it'.¹¹ The finding of a category becomes of more value than the content that is being addressed. Evidence of further diminishment which categorising brings is highlighted even within the claims of the analytical tradition. In the case of Kerr and Rea, 'continental' gives a geographical term to signal a theological adversary.¹² Kerr's later reflections unintentionally underline the disservice to theology which this term brings. After mocking the 'continental' standpoint, Kerr refers to an encounter between Josef Ratzinger before he was Pope Benedict and Karl Rahner. 'Continental' represents the geographical provenance of both theologians yet Kerr describes Ratzinger's realisation that he and Rahner are on 'different theological planets'.¹³ Two continental theologians are identified as holding extreme differences of opinion, hence, the reasoned parameters of the term 'continental' dissolve. In a further study

¹¹ Henri de Lubac *Causes internes de l'atténuation et de la disparition du sens du Sacré*, in *Théologie dans l'histoire: II Questions disputées et résistance au nazisme* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1990)13-30. p.23, cited by Komonchak, p. 583. Chapter One, II.i 'The *Ressourcement* Lament, p. 19.

¹² It may be helpful as a shorthand to deploy such terms as 'continental' but in terms of precision and definition such a blanket term demands over-generalising or simplifying and sets up unhelpful binaries, given that different approaches each have important contributions to make. William Wood outlines the problems this leads to in terms of the discipline of theology: 'From a certain point of view, the entire situation is bizarre. On the one hand, what can only be called constructive theology, and of a very traditional sort, is currently flourishing in philosophy departments, in near total isolation from the actual academic discipline of theology. On the other hand, the actual academic discipline of theology remains fractured and embattled, under attack from all sides, unsure of its place not only in the academy, but in churches and divinity schools as well.' William Wood, 'On the New Analytic Theology, or: The Road Less Traveled', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 77.4 (2009), 941–60. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfp066>>. The binary established by juxtapositions such as continental/Anglo-American or continental/analytical is identified in the title of a collection of essays, edited by C.G.Prado as *The House Divided*. Prado seeks to capture the over-riding differences: 'The heart of the analytic/Continental opposition is most evident in methodology, that is, in a focus on analysis or on synthesis. Analytic philosophers typically try to solve fairly delineated philosophical problems by reducing them to their parts and to the relations in which these parts stand. Continental philosophers typically address large questions in a synthetic or integrative way and consider particular issues to be 'parts of the larger unities' and as properly understood and dealt with only when fitted into those unities.' *A House Divided: Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophers* (Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 2003), p. 10. Kile Jones summarises the summary bringing in further evidence: analytic philosophy is concerned with analysis – analysis of thought, language, logic, knowledge, mind, etc; whereas continental philosophy is concerned with synthesis – synthesis of modernity with history, individuals with society, and speculation with application'. She refers further to Neil Levy's outline of difference: in *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 34, No 3, in which he describes analytic philosophy as a 'problem-solving activity,' and continental philosophy as closer 'to the humanistic traditions and to literature and art... it tends to be more 'politically engaged.' Cited Kile Jones, 'Analytic versus Continental Philosophy', *Philosophy Now*, 2009 <https://philosophynow.org/issues/74/Analytic_versus_Continental_Philosophy> [accessed 23/04/ 2020].

¹³ One recent example highlighting this disagreement is Pope Benedict XVI's rejection of Rahner's concept of 'Anonymous Christians'. Christopher Lamb, 'Benedict Rejects Theology of "Anonymous Christians"', *The Tablet*, 24 March 2016 <<https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/5334/benedict-rejects-theology-of-anonymous-christians->>.

of Aquinas, Kerr refers to there being ‘too many Thomisms’,¹⁴ signalling both Thomas O’Meara’s claim that ‘there has never been one Thomism’ and Alasdair’s MacIntyre’s that there are ‘too many Thomisms’.¹⁵ Terms within the analytical tradition demonstrate the limitations of their own categorisations and signal how too much analysing of differences renders the terms unrecognisable.

This chapter, therefore, in bringing a host of witnesses to demonstrate the importance of Merton’s genre to contemporary theology, underlines not simply a clear advocacy for his unanalytical mode of expression. I am also mindful of a wider critique of the discipline which questions the adversarial and systematising tendencies. The contemporary witnesses I bring, like the *ressourcement* theologians, prioritise patristic and biblical texts. They are hence well versed with a breadth of theological forms of expression, but with an emphasis on those in which the habit of systematising was less endemic.¹⁶ They reflect the creative fidelity I identified in Bernard of Clairvaux, Erasmus, Montaigne and Newman. They build their creativity by pushing the boundaries of contemporary disciplinary norms and they witness to their fidelity through close attention to biblical texts and to patristic theology, thus underpinning their aspirations theologically, rather than analytically. With a common voice they dilute the pre-eminence of an adversarial or an overly rational mode.

In voicing a concern for genre and for theology in its ‘spatial turn’ these contemporary Anglo-America theologians continue the continental *ressourcement* endeavour by prioritising synthesis over analysis, reflective of the character of patristic texts. They represent the fields of feminism, biblical studies, postmodernism, and eco-spirituality. As such, they exemplify developments of strands established in what Kerr describes as the ‘the reorientation of Catholic theology after the Second Vatican Council’ with its emphasis ‘on biblical and early-Christian

¹⁴ Fergus Kerr, ‘Why Still Read Thomas Aquinas?’, *Thinking Faith - Jesuits in Britain*, 2014, p. 174 <<https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/why-still-read-thomas-aquinas>> [accessed 23/04/2020].

¹⁵ T.F.O.Meara *Thomas Aquinas Theologian*, (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997) p. 195. A. MacIntyre *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, (London: Duckworth, 1990), p. 58. Cited by Antony Lisska in ‘Innovation with Tradition: Considering Thomas Aquinas’ in *Tradition as the Future of Innovation*, ed. By Elisa Grimi, (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015) P. 49.

¹⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996). Berkhof outlines how ‘There was little attempt in the first two centuries of the Christian era to present the whole body of doctrinal truth, gathered from the word of God in a systematic way’, p. 8. He describes ‘continental’ theology similarly, as ‘less interested in systematics’. Rather they sought to ‘unify or move closer together questions of knowledge and wisdom’, p. 17.

studies, existentialism and phenomenology'.¹⁷ It is notable that a trajectory which began with the *ressourcement* develops through these Vatican II shifts in emphasis. By showing how Merton's genre models their varied aspirations alerts us not only to the importance of his contribution to theology across varying paradigmatic concerns and to the relevance to contemporary theology of his theological form. It also questions the analytical and systematising approach by grouping the theologians outside the categories accorded to them. This survey is, therefore, characterised by a limited regard for such classifications except in so far as they demonstrate a commonality across varying aspirations. By drawing a line of what is held collectively, I show how the will for synthesis over analysis allows for a common voice to emerge across a breadth of theological categories.¹⁸

The recent revivals of interest in Thomas Aquinas and in the value of an analytical approach to theology are both radically opposed to the aspirations outlined and hence to the kind of theological expression which Merton provides. As the emphasis in this study is on an alternative idiom, such opposition is not surprising given that these revivals seek a retrenching in theological norms, defining themselves against 'alternative' approaches. In contrast, the witnesses I present seek not so much to reject reasoned investigation as to topple it from its position as the definitive and exclusive mode of theological expression.

In order to explore their aspirations in terms of Merton's poetics, I sketch three dialogues which represent the possible interactions within Merton's poetics of place: language with theology; place with theology; language with place, with input drawn from the decades following Merton's death and on into the 21st century. The first dialogue explores theological genre, the second, the role of place in theological enquiry and the third, the field of geo-poetics and associated enquiries into text as a spatial construct. These richly layered aspirations find a model in Merton's distinctive mode of theological expression, demonstrating the extent to which he pushes the boundaries prophetically against the prevailing theological norms of his time.

¹⁷ Fergus Kerr, 'Why Still Read Thomas Aquinas?' Kerr claims that this resulted in 'the disappearance of Thomist apologetics'.

¹⁸ This is an approach which Merton applied in the writing of *The Ascent to Truth* in which he endeavoured to create a dialogue between Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross. His deep frustration with the work, classified as his most scholastic suggests a sense of failure in achieving its purpose and his struggle with a scholastic mode. Nonetheless, it shows a way of doing theology which seeks integration. Rather than create a division between mysticism and systematics, he demonstrates the will to reconcile the two, to abandon the necessity of dividing theology into opposing domains and defining by difference.

I

Dialogue I: Language and Theology

This dialogue identifies an ongoing lament among theologians concerning theological genre, which continues the thread of *ressourcement* critique into the 21st century. It could be argued that the perpetuation of the lament, irrespective of context, is an existential quality of theology. The gap between the limitations of language and a subject focus, which purports to speak of God, cannot be closed. The lament is therefore voiced without any anticipation of finding an appropriate form. Oliver Davies highlights this ambiguity:

those who are summoned to theology can be said to be drawn ultimately to speak in God. Theirs is a speech which is not to be of their own making, but which radically is to belong to another. To do theology, therefore, is in a sense, to turn oneself over to another, it is to be dispossessed of self, stripped of one's own meaning'.¹⁹

A discrepancy between the how and the what of theological communication is thus deemed inevitable and irremediable and leads to a theological norm characterised by 'analysis, debate, investigation, clarification'. Davies, however, claims that the exclusivity of such a form is not justified:

(analysis) cannot fundamentally be set apart from other kinds of Christian speaking such as prayer and praise, worship, proclamation and blessing, truth-telling and saying' what is useful for building up' (Eph 4:29) For Christian speaking is as such a particular way of being: a faithful and kenotic interacting with God and the world. (..) The theologian then who is called to participate in this divine speaking with, is also a Christian whose personal faith includes the call to enact the primal, overflowing and unsurpassable clarity of the inner discourse of God'²⁰

The conjunction of analysis with a primal abundance seems a contradiction in terms. Moreover, the demand for theology to reflect a kenotic exchange with God means that any tool brought to bear will always deal in approximations. Clarity of analysis therefore as Davies claims, has no obvious greater credence as an acceptable norm than any other form of God-focused expression.

¹⁹ Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2016), p. 168.

²⁰ Davies, p. 168.

In spite of the success of *ressourcement* aspirations in expanding the remit of theological expression, a normative mode for theology has clearly persisted. Lawrence Cunningham could hence say in 1978, several years following the reforms of Vatican II, that Merton, as a ‘theologian in the patristic sense’ is not a theologian in the conventional sense.²¹ It suggests a fixity in interpretation of what constitutes ‘conventional’ theology. The style of writing theology by the *ressourcement* theologians went some way towards redefining the norms of theological expression, as a counter to an exclusively analytical mode, as noted in Chapter One.²² Merton’s more extreme remoulding of theological expression conversely deprives him of the title theologian. For all the championing of patristic forms by the *ressourcement*, it is as if to adopt them is understood as a circumvention of theology.

This marginalisation of non-analytical forms is the driving force behind an ongoing interrogation of genre within theology. The variety of biblical genres, including parable, poetry, miracle stories and proclamatory performance offset what many critics of theological style perceive as the analytical monochrome of expression within the discipline. Such variety captures in their view, the multiple dimensions met in human experience of God.²³

Sallie McFague’s 1975 study on metaphor identifies the parable as a model for theological expression. She claims that by expressing theology through story and autobiography, traditional symbols of Christianity are rearranged and through an ensuing freshness of context become revelatory again.²⁴ She seeks a reframing of theology through what she would call intermediary texts which offset a revelatory, metaphorical language, against the ordering and precision of systematic theology.²⁵

²¹ Lawrence S Cunningham, ‘Thomas Merton as Theologian, an appreciation’, <<https://uknowledge.uky.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1162&context=kentucky-review>> [accessed 13/06/2020], P. 90.

²² See Chapter One, II.v ‘Towards a *Ressourcement* Alternative’, pp. 28-37.

²³ Some examples: Proverbs represent wise sayings; Psalms offer prayerful invocation; Ecclesiastes provides philosophical reflection; Lamentations model the lament as do the Psalms; Song of Songs provides a declaration of love; in Job there is drama and throughout both testaments there are multiple examples of story-telling.

²⁴ Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1975).

²⁵ McFague Chapter 1: ‘A Trial Run: Parable, Poem, and Autobiographical Story’: ‘For many of us the language of the Christian tradition is no longer authoritative; no longer revelatory; no longer metaphorical; no longer meaningful. Much of it has become tired clichés, one-dimensional; univocal language. When this happens, it means that theological reflection is faced with an enormous task -- the task of embodying it anew. This will not happen, I believe, through systematic theology, for systematic

We can recall through Merton's autobiographical and journal adaptations, characteristic of such intermediary forms, that through his emphasis on the experiential character of faith, he provides a means of showing how a sacred text moves into a life, and how a life such as his own, and by analogy the reader's, can itself become a sacred text in a reshaping of the ordinary by the extraordinary. It is apt to note the resonance of McFague's aspirations with the defining dynamics I identified in *Conjectures* in which a seeming haphazardness confronts the revelatory quality of Merton's 'still-points'.

The first part of the title of Walter Brueggemann's study of biblical poetry, *Finally comes the poet*, (1989) echoes Rahner's assertion that it is to the poet, that the Word is entrusted,²⁶ with a bewildered sense of why has it taken so long. Brueggemann's stated intention in this study is to 'break the fearful rationality that keeps the news from being new', thus questioning the appropriacy of rational analysis as the dominant mode for theology.²⁷ This study was later relaunched as *The Prophetic Imagination*, (2001) which reiterates the primacy of poetry for theological proclamation. For Brueggemann, it is poetry which can best communicate a eucharistic imagination in which 'human transformative activity depends on a transformed imagination',²⁸ and which is prepared to take on board the necessity and power of the lament. He will claim that a function of theological proclamation is to mirror prophetic speech, in which 'anguished abandonment is mobilised into utterance in the midst of an assurance that God will respond'.²⁹ We can recall Raïssa Maritain's plea for such a voice and Merton's response in *Emblems*.

The sense of a performance, characteristic of a song, story, or lament is placed in the spotlight in Regina Schwarz's proposal of a performative poetics.³⁰ She identifies a way of

theology is second-level language, language which orders, arranges, explicates, makes precise the first-order revelatory, metaphorical language'.

²⁶ Rahner, III, p. 294. 'To the poet is entrusted the Word. Alas, that there should still be no theology of the word!'

²⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 6.

²⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2001), p. xx.

²⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 40. Brueggemann draws attention to the managed prose of modernity, which forces the poetic imagination to be 'the last way left to challenge and conflict the dominant reality, in order to avoid domestication and commodification of vision'.

³⁰ Regina Schwarz, 'Communion and Conversation', in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* ed. by Graham Ward, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 48-57, (p. 49). See also Regina Mara Schwarz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (California: Stanford University Press, 2008).

theologising which creates its own dynamic, inviting to reflection rather than a synthesis of thought. Echoing Balthasar's preference for the model of drama which allows events to stay with anticipation and unknowing, she considers that a performative poetics has the potential to offer a mystical rather than rational unpacking of text. This reflects the kind of reading demanded by Merton's vignettes of description in *Conjectures*, or the contemplative landscapes of *Emblems*. Significance lies in the space created by what is left unsaid.³¹

This focus on an open-ended dialogue and drama are also central to Edward Robinson's work, *The Language of Mystery*, in which he advocates a theology of the spirit, blowing where it wills, and therefore pre-empting all predictable assumptions about an appropriate language.³² He seeks a form which generates a readiness to accept a strange magic,³³ promoting an epistolary or dialogical model where both sides allow the truth to take shape out of the encounter, as in the unfolding of drama,³⁴ or 'a poetics of seduction'.³⁵ For Robinson, a fixed language for communicating theology risks side-stepping the distinctive character of religious experience, which, due to its immediacy, in his view demands ongoing experimentation.³⁶

This idea of theological understanding taking shape through participation and encounter is at the heart of both the journal-like quality of Merton's texts, the huge corpus of letters, and the poems which feature several with titles of postcards or letters.³⁷ They attest to the importance Merton granted to enabling his thinking to be shaped by the written encounter. Theological

³¹ Regina Schwartz, 'Communion and Conversation', p. 56. Schwartz proposes abandoning interpretation of biblical language simply as narrative, to serve the purpose of teaching. She demonstrates the failure of this form of exegesis with the examples of Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, pointing out that by using the text instrumentally, it has been possible to condone the injustices of slavery, racism, exploitation of the other and misogyny, serving the ends of distorted Christian thinking. In a performative interpretation, however, the stories close respectively with the laments of Abel and Esau. Instead of a complete story, what is heard is an ongoing voicing as in liturgy. No explanation is called for. Voices of pain and exaltation communicate differently than a neatly analysed narrative. They are open to interpretation rather than closure. An emphasis on such a textual model in which Biblical narrative is reconfigured as a theatrical performance or a liturgy, underlines the notion of a listening God who is alongside the one who cries, and a responsive human being who stands in solidarity. In an imitation of liturgy where importance is granted to the uttered word, theology may thereby become a channel for a mysterious geography of hope. With an emphasis on dialogue, there is an ongoing possibility of fresh encounter.

³² Edward Robinson, *The Language of Mystery* (London: SCM Press, 1987), p. 81.

³³ Robinson, p. 79.

³⁴ Robinson, p. 11.

³⁵ Robinson, p. 83.

³⁶ Robinson, p. 3.

³⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, (1940s): pp. 90-93; 151-53; 153-55; 184. (1960s): pp. 332-334; 356-359.

understanding thereby emerges from a dialogical and implicitly performative exchange. The intimacy and lightness of such exchange serve as a model for Merton's interpretation of divine relationship as one which welcomes human dialogue and has no need for formalised orderly expression. Merton initially coaxes into reading by his informality, then into participation in what he sees rather than evaluation, thus creating a readiness for strange landscapes from which clarity may emerge.

Contemporaneous Catholic theologians, also concerned with theological genre include John Caputo, Mary Hilkert, Daniel O'Leary³⁸ and James Hanvey. They all focus on sacramental vision and on naming the exchange between the extraordinary in the ordinary. Caputo asks theology to prioritise strangeness and non-conformity. With patristic texts as models,³⁹ he advocates a 'poetics of the impossible' to reflect 'God's pulse, God's echo, God's orchestration'. The task of the theologian for Caputo is to 'sort out the fortes and pianissimos of God's music from the background noise of the world'.⁴⁰ His image suggests God's music and the world's music are bound in such tight counterpoint that it is theology's role to help extract the music from the overriding noise. As a model, Caputo turns to the miracles stories for what he will name a poetics of interruption, which in their suspension of the natural course of events offset the predictability and methodological conformity of analytical writing.⁴¹ An element of surprise is fundamental. This power to startle is a key feature of Merton's prose and poetry wherein incongruous juxtapositions both bewilder and enchant.

Caputo's model reflects theology with a quasi-salvific role in crafting divine space within a broken space. This idea of a transformative space has a distinctive character for Caputo, when in a later study, 'Theology of the Perhaps', he sees the role of religion as 'offering hospitality to God, answering to what is going on in the name of God, making room for God, welcoming God,

³⁸ Daniel O'Leary (1937-2019) died in January 2019.

³⁹ John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London; New York: Psychology Press, 2001), p. 2. Caputo acknowledges his patristic allegiance by claiming to have Augustine as his hero.

⁴⁰ John D. Caputo, 'The Poetics of the Impossible and the Kingdom of God', in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. by Graham Ward, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 469-481, (p. 472).

⁴¹ John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 187.

receiving God'.⁴² Rather like Certeau's opening a space for beauty the theologian becomes responsible for creating a place, in which the divine can dwell. The act of making room for the divine serves as a redeeming counterpoint to human fragmentation.

In Mary Hilker's work *Naming Grace*, it is naming the brokenness which is the central function of theological language:

the ongoing experience of the crucified of this world calls for a rethinking of the mystery of the cross and the retrieval of the tradition of lament [...] if communities of faith are to proclaim an authentic word of hope in the power of the resurrection, in today's global context.⁴³

By reclaiming the lament, theology becomes a naming of grace and dis-grace.⁴⁴ Hilker identifies a confused relationship with lament of modernity, where the suppression of anguish is a fundamental aspect of culture.⁴⁵ For Hilker, however, it is not simply the naming that matters. Rather, it is necessary to acknowledge the power within words to embody the truths they signal towards. Hilker enlists Augustine's insight: 'sacraments are visible words; words are audible sacraments',⁴⁶ thus 'any word spoken in truth from the depths of human experience is sacramental in the sense of embodying or 'making audible' an experience too deep for words'.⁴⁷ The sacrament is simultaneously words and something that can be handled, seen, tasted and swallowed. Her reference recalls the Jewish association of word and matter sketched in Chapter Six. Through an emphasis on the materiality of words, an embodied theology becomes possible as the constructive power of words creates a dwelling place for the divine.

⁴² John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 42. Pope Francis in 2019 made a plea for a theology of hospitality to which I shall refer in the conclusion.

⁴³ Hilker, p. 109.

⁴⁴ Hilker, p. 112..

⁴⁵ Hilker, p. 111.

⁴⁶ St. Augustine, (Tract 80, in Joan.) asks: 'What is the water of baptism without the word but just a corruptible element? The word (he immediately adds) not as pronounced, but as understood.' By this he means, that the sacraments derive their virtue from the word when it is preached intelligibly. Without this they deserve not the name of sacraments. Tract 80, paragraph 3 'Tractate 80', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by Philip Schaff and Kevin Knight, trans. by John Gibb, (Buffalo NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888. Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight., 2020), vii <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701080.htm>> [accessed 28 December 2019].

⁴⁷ Hilker, p. 192.

Underpinning all these aspirations for a different language is a desire for theology to acknowledge and embody the multiplicity of human experience. Continuing into the 21st century, Daniel O’Leary laments the perpetuation of a barren and authoritarian theological voice, and the non-emergence of any new sacramentally envisioned theological language. He emphasises his sense of a discipline compromised and calls for ‘a renaissance of sacramental imagination’:⁴⁸

It is no exaggeration to say that a theology of nature and grace, of creation and incarnation has led, for centuries a lonely existence on the margins of our common theology. Its potential – its vast potential to infuse a much-needed energy and vibrancy into an often bloodless, doctrinaire theology – has remained unexplored.⁴⁹

On this basis, in the preface to O’Leary’s work, James Hanvey calls upon theology to limit the mode of argument and counterargument, and instead be shaped more readily by the ‘adventure of faith’. He defines this adventure as something ‘more than a conceptual coherence which engages reason and imagination’, claiming that ‘if all we are asked for is our intellectual assent, faith remains largely formal and to some extent, dead’.⁵⁰ Rather,

the adventure of faith does not take us out of the world but opens up a path that leads more deeply into it. And so, we find ourselves on a road at once familiar but also strangely and inexplicably always new. It is the road of humanity itself and yet we find again and again that faith gives us a new way of seeing and understanding – a new way of being and maybe even opening up this way for others.⁵¹

Hanvey in 2008 is restating that plea by Congar for a theology vitally connected to human activity of 1935, that plea framed by the Maritains to create a channel of contemplation on the ‘roads of the world’ in 1959, as well as that opening up a space, identified by Certeau in 1982 and again by Caputo in 2013. This study has shown that this line of aspiration is at the core of Merton’s theological expression.

⁴⁸ O’Leary, Daniel, *Begin with the Heart*, (Dublin: Columba Press, 2008), 12.

⁴⁹ O’Leary, p. 62.

⁵⁰ Hanvey continues by suggesting that knowledge of the arguments does not necessarily lead to faith in them. ‘Indeed, we can find many men and women who know all the arguments and counter arguments, but still somehow faith remains elusive’. O’Leary, pp. 8-9.

⁵¹ O’Leary, pp. 8-9. James Hanvey in the preface to *Begin with the Heart* will claim that this opening up demands courage: ‘it is a heart that carries with it a sort of wisdom and courage, a sort of inventiveness also’ which allows ‘the Christian heart’ to see ‘all things in Christ and traces the lines of his work – even in the darkest moments and the desert places. It has courage and it has truth; it is not some story of enchantment which the Christian invents as a sort of protective mantra against a hostile emptiness. It is truly the vision of faith because it sees God’s faithfulness at work and knows how to wait upon him.’

II

Dialogue II: Place and Theology

We have seen how Merton's poetics are shot through with spatial concepts within which he negotiates the leap between the elusiveness of transcendent reality and the groundedness of human living.⁵² This dichotomy is the principal focus of the various studies which claim to offer a theology of place. Each study begins with an initial premise of broaching new ground, to counter a perceived neglect within theology of attending to the importance of place in shaping understanding. Whilst acknowledging the fresh impetus such studies bring to the dialogue between geography or spatiality and theology, I begin by considering the rich legacy of theology's relationship to place, on which these new studies build.

II.i Predecessors of 'Theologies of Place'

As scriptural exegesis led Brueggemann to question theological genre, it similarly called for an engagement with place, through the spatial tropes of the garden of Eden, banishment, cultivating the earth, exile and promised land. Brueggemann outlines his realisation:

theological articulation, (..) was concerned with place, specific real estate that was invested with powerful promises. (..) Once I had seen that much, then it was a ready development to see the dialectic in Israel's fortunes between landlessness (wilderness, exile) and landedness, the latter either as possession of the land, as anticipation of the land, or as grief about loss of the land.⁵³

On this basis, Brueggemann insists that theology cannot be left 'disconnected from real public life in the world with its socio-political, economic dimensions'. With reference to his contemporary context, he draws attention to the dehumanising effects of displacement characterising the 20th century.⁵⁴ For Brueggemann, the central problem for modernity in relation

⁵² To provide a summary: the frequency of prepositions and phrasal verbs of motion; the frequent references to topographical and architectural detail; the embedding of theological concepts in physical surroundings; the regular acknowledgement of the natural world in its abundant multiplicity; the signalling of an Edenic canvas; the beauty on the crossroads of the ordinary; finally, those ambiguous bookends to his huge poetic corpus: 'Geography has come to an end', and 'Geography is in trouble all over'. (Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 2, 24, 516.

⁵³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2002), p. xi.

⁵⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, p. 10. Cited Inge, John A *Christian Theology of Place* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2003), p. 35. He highlights in particular the search for work due to war, economic

to place is ‘not emancipation but rootage, not meaning but belonging, not separation from community, but location within it’.⁵⁵ Referring to Isaiah 51:1-2, he associates understanding of the divine, with an understanding of the lay of the land.⁵⁶ For Brueggemann locatedness helps embody theological concepts.

It is an emphasis on embodiment which is central to Grace Jantzen’s critique of theology in which she underlines the importance of the material, contingent and located. Her focus is not so much on the side-lining of place within theology, as on the side-lining of beauty, by theology’s close entanglement with a restrictive rational underpinning.⁵⁷ Jantzen underlines the incongruity of theology being tethered to intellectual aggression, in which the theologian addresses an imagined opponent antagonistically with familiar verbs being advance, attack and defend.⁵⁸ Rather than an embodied theology uniting nature and grace, Jantzen suggests conventional legalistic methodology confines theology, closing down rather than inviting in the possibility of a deeper mythology,⁵⁹ which might assist human flourishing.⁶⁰

Once again patristic theologians provide the model. Jantzen highlights their attention to beauty: ‘If we compare the centrality of beauty in the religious writing of late antiquity and the medieval mystics and theologians with its virtual absence in contemporary Christian theology and philosophy of religion the contrast is startling’.⁶¹ She reiterates this emphasis in *God’s World, God’s Body* (1984), with an accompanying focus on natality and embodiment, and

expediency, the dismantling of colonial rule or the glamorization of ‘virtues of mobility and anonymity which seem so full of freedom and self-actualisation’.

⁵⁵ Walter A. Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, p. 4.

⁵⁶ Walter A. Brueggemann, *Finally comes the poet*, p. 126. Isaiah 51:1-2: ‘Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness /and who seek the LORD: /Look to the rock from which you were cut / and to the quarry from which you were hewn’, N.R.S.V., p. 919.

⁵⁷ Grace Jantzen, *Death and the Displacement of Beauty: Foundations of Violence* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 147.

⁵⁸ Grace Jantzen, *Death and the Displacement of Beauty*, p. 15.

⁵⁹ Ward, *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, p. 289.

⁶⁰ Grace M. Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence: 1*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 3.

⁶¹ Grace M. Jantzen, ‘Changing the Imaginary’ in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* ed. by Graham Ward, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 280-293. (p. 289).

proposes ‘the model of the universe as God’s body’ which ‘helps to do justice to the beauty and value of nature’.⁶² For Jantzen, an embodied beauty transforms the imagination by imparting:

alertness to those things which would call our metanarratives into question. Our search must be for instabilities, the alien, the marginal and the foreign, which discomfort us in our too-easily unchallenged scheme of things.⁶³

Such a spotlight echoes Maritain’s highlighting of Rouault, O’Connor’s prioritisation of the perverse, and the shifting between places,⁶⁴ and ‘murky indeterminacies’ of the mid-century poetic canvas.⁶⁵ Jantzen highlights, however, a strong biblical underpinning. Referring to Psalm 27:104 and to Isaiah 6:1-3, she claims the biblical response to beauty stretches language into images that draw the reader into wonder and worship,⁶⁶ whilst with reference to Job 38:7 she underlines how such beauty is not abstract or universal,⁶⁷ but is ‘a direct activity of divine fecundity’.⁶⁸ By emphasising beauty, natality and embodiment Jantzen insists on the necessity of a spatial aesthetics which understands the material world as the locus for human flourishing and source of reverent wonder.⁶⁹

With similar biblical and patristic emphases, the withdrawal into the deserts of Egypt, Syria and Palestine by the Desert Fathers and Mothers places theology in dialogue with geography. Belden Lane in a richly perceptive study focuses on the apophatic Christian tradition and its associated wilderness landscapes.⁷⁰ He emphasises the stripping to essentials that life in a wilderness brings, paradoxically becoming a source of release and communion. From this premise, he claims that bringing theology into dialogue with geography may offer a compass to restore postmodern connection with place. He therefore asks theology to imitate cartography,

⁶² Grace M. Jantzen, *God’s World, God’s Body* (London: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 150.

⁶³ Grace M. Jantzen, *Violence to Eternity*, ed. Jeremy Carrette and Morny Joy (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 36.

⁶⁴ Alexander and Cooper, p. 5, citing Ian Davidson from *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry*, (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 31.

⁶⁵ Alexander and Cooper, p. 5, citing Eric Falci in ‘Place, Space and Landscape’ in *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry*, ed. by Nigel Alderman, C. D. Blanton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009) pp. 200-210, (p.201).

⁶⁶ Grace M. Jantzen, *Violence to Eternity*, p. 139. ‘The play of light and shade as a garment for God; the wings of the wind carry the divine in their breath’.

⁶⁷ ‘The morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy’

⁶⁸ Grace M. Jantzen, *Violence to Eternity*, p. 143.

⁶⁹ Grace M. Jantzen, ‘Changing the Imaginary’, pp. 289-291.

⁷⁰ Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

which in naming a place and mapping the surroundings overlays the place with words and symbols. Theology is asked to construct a landscape, superimposing the symbols and language of theological inheritance, enabling both geography and theology to share a platform.⁷¹

Lane highlights the frequent link within the apophatic tradition of making use of topographical detail, elements characteristic in Merton's own choice of titles.⁷² He insists that the physicality of such terms needs to be acknowledged. If used only metaphorically or psychologically, 'We lose the sacramental affront of the place itself, its sense of danger, its powerful critique of language, its irrepressible challenge to human frailty'.⁷³ Such acknowledgement according to Lane, provides 'a point of embodied contact where apophatic obscurity can meet cataphatic clarity 'the emptiness of the one preparing for the plenitude of the other'.⁷⁴ It thus allows for the abstract to be grasped by way of the concrete,⁷⁵ echoing Jantzen.

One feature emerging from this confrontation with physicality is according to Lane 'the wildness of God as a theological category too often ignored' through which the desert dwellers were able to accept the hauntingly unpredictable.⁷⁶ This wild unpredictability demands a *habitus*, or way of living, which 'draw(s) meaning from the particularities of the environment',⁷⁷ thus sidestepping an emphasis on the universal and anonymous. Rightful *habitus* for Lane is a humble stance before the material world in a willing acknowledgement of 'a vale of ordinariness' as 'a way of being committed to the concrete, of being bound to the familiar.'⁷⁸ Lane challenges theology to develop such a *habitus*.

This reverent waiting upon geography is also characteristic of discourse linking theology and ecology, though specifics of landscape are set aside in order to highlight a global and cosmic

⁷¹ Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*, p. 16. This process is described as one involved in 'reading cultural meaning back onto the natural world'.

⁷² *The Seven Storey Mountain; The Ascent to Truth; Seeds of Contemplation; The Wisdom of the Desert; The Waters of Siloe; Bread in the Wilderness; Man in a Divided Sea; The Strange Islands.*

⁷³ Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, p. 20.

⁷⁴ Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, p. 113.

⁷⁵ Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, p. 28.

⁷⁶ Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, p. 187.

⁷⁷ Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, p. 10.

⁷⁸ Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, p. 42.

relationship to planet Earth. James Conlon advocates ‘the language of story’ to express and communicate experience,⁷⁹ concerning ‘the sacredness of Earth’ and ‘an increased reverence for all its dwellers’, which will invite in ‘beauty, pain and surprise’.⁸⁰ Eliminating global frontiers even further, Thomas Berry identifies a form of compassion which flows out of an awareness of the sacredness of Earth.⁸¹ He seeks to dismantle national limitations,⁸² and urges theology to embrace ecological concerns not simply for humanist reasons, but in order to recognise the ‘sacred character of all habitat’.⁸³ This demands a different practice of relationship:

We need to present ourselves to the planet as the planet presents itself to us, in an evocatory rather than a dominating relationship, which displays an absence of courtesy towards the earth and its inhabitants, and a lack of gratitude.⁸⁴

If not, ‘we fail to let the outer world flow into our own beings. We cannot hear the voices or speak in response’.⁸⁵ We can recall further how this need to listen to the particularity of geography featured in South American liberation,⁸⁶ on the basis that there is nothing which is ‘pro-fane’.⁸⁷ Brueggemann, Jantzen and Lane stand with the eco-theologians in highlighting the value of materiality and human habitat as a partner to theological dialogue. Together they demand a humble attention and reverence towards self-disclosure of place as well as towards that which is marginalised or silenced

⁷⁹ James Conlon, *Earth Story, Sacred Story* (New London: Twenty-Third Publications, 1994), p. 79.

⁸⁰ Conlon, p. 78.

⁸¹ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (Sierra Club Books, 1988), p. 42. Such compassion for Berry is ‘the litmus test and culminating touchstone of a spirituality of Earth’

⁸² Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, p. 21. ‘We talk about ourselves as nations. We think of ourselves as ethnic, cultural, language or economic groups. We seldom consider ourselves as species among species – except in biology’

⁸³ Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, p. 2. He continues ‘our capacity for the awesome, for the numinous quality of every earthly reality’.

⁸⁴ Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, p. 14.

⁸⁵ Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, pp. 16-17.

⁸⁶ Robert S. Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesus: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1959), pp. 191-192. Cuban theologian Roberto Goizueta insists that ‘in its fundamental sense, the locus of theology is the physical, spatial, geographical place of theological reflection’. He continues: ‘In a society where barriers, spatial separation, isolation and distance are chief means of exclusion and oppression, (...) theology cannot ignore the importance of physical location or space as a theological category,’ p. 191.

⁸⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 194, ‘That which is located outside the temple, no longer exists’.

II.ii 'Theologies of Place'

Notwithstanding the legacies from this place-focused theological thinking, the expansion of so-named theologies of place from the late 20th century onwards underlines a need to identify new ground. The very titles: *A Sense of Place a Christian Theology of Land, A Christian Theology of Place, Religion, Space and the Environment* underline how place and space are the prime focus and are presented as a fundamental theological concern. Whereas the theological legacy concerning place, that I have outlined, explored the theme of place in relation to an accompanying theme including eco-spirituality, desert spirituality, biblical exegesis, liberation theology's concern for justice and Jantzen's concern a new imaginary for theology, these theologies begin with place. By interweaving topographical themes with theological, the discourse seeks to name the multiple layers encountered in exchanges between place and theology.

Lilburne firstly identifies place as a marginalised concern for theology.⁸⁸ Echoing Brueggemann, he remarks that, in contrast, contemporary literature voices a preoccupation with place in a recurring theme of 'the human being in a void, without home, without a sense of direction without a place'.⁸⁹ He outlines how such homelessness is exacerbated by globalisation which undermines the reality of home and leads to an increasing loss of 'a sense of the local and unique, except where these can be packaged and marketed for national and, if possible, international consumption'.⁹⁰ He suggests that it is not only the loss of home, but the loss of symbolisms which create a 'horizon of reach',⁹¹ demanding a reciprocity between dwelling and reaching beyond,⁹² that longing within belonging of Merton's earliest writing.

As Lane explores the sacredness of 'fierce' landscapes, Philip Sheldrake explores how theologians of place turn their attention to the aesthetic, theological and social significance of the

⁸⁸ Geoffrey R. Lilburne, *A Sense of Place: A Christian Theology of the Land* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 71. 'Western philosophical tradition (...) has tended to move issues of place to the very periphery of philosophical reflection'.

⁸⁹ Lilburne, p. 76.

⁹⁰ Lilburne, p. 78.

⁹¹ Lilburne, p. 77.

⁹² Lilburne, p. 78. As I have done in Chapter Two, Bachelard and Heidegger are cited as witnesses for Lilburne's thesis in order to provide a methodology for fashioning an incarnational theology of place: (Lilburne, p. 80). 'Bachelard, like Heidegger, is prescribing a new way of listening, a form of meditative thought in which place will disclose itself.' (Lilburne, p. 81).

built environment.⁹³ Following a similar trajectory to other writers on place, he begins with a focus on the dislocation of modern living, which generates an urgent need to understand and interpret place.⁹⁴ His biblical focus is the Incarnation described as an entering into and commitment to ‘the concrete, specific, and particular’ thus redeeming ‘*all* that humanity is, including what is unacceptable and ‘other,’ and all the places where humans dwell.’⁹⁵ On this basis the Incarnation demands a theology of place which engages with materiality however it manifests itself.⁹⁶

Inge’s study *A Christian Theology of Place* 2003 underlines again the neglect of place in theology⁹⁷ and that the geographics of religion are in their infancy.⁹⁸ We can recall from Chapter Three how this situation developed from the separation of the holy, determined by the etymology of the word *sanctum*, a space set apart.⁹⁹ For Inge, this stance emphasised the distance of God. Inge asks theology to highlight a greater intimacy in which wonder is part of the canvas.¹⁰⁰ Taking a cue from cultural geographers, he recommends an attentive waiting on place, with

⁹³ Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 23. Sheldrake has an ever-growing corpus on this investigation *Spaces for the Sacred, Place, Memory and Identity*, 2001; ‘Human Identity and the Particularity of Place’ 2001. A more detailed canvas is found in *Theology in Stone* 2006, *A Spiritual City: Theology, Spirituality & The Urban* 2014

⁹⁴ Philip Sheldrake, ‘Human Identity and the Particularity of Place’, *Spiritus A Journal in Christian Spirituality*, Volume 1, Spring 2001, pp. 43-64. Sheldrake explores in what ways place can be regarded as spiritual and he highlights key thinkers in the field referring specifically to the concept of ‘dwelling’ in Heidegger and that of ‘belonging’, in Michel de Certeau. Scanning other thinkers on place, including Brueggemann, Weil and Bachelard, he underlines the value of Duns Scotus and Francis of Assisi in linking theology and place, pp. 44-46.

⁹⁵ Philip Sheldrake, ‘Human Identity and the Particularity of Place’, p. 60. Merton’s affinity with Scotus is evident in his poems addressed to the Franciscan friar. He identifies Scotus as a wild creature which can escape the fixity of its own location, and command attention, through a vivid presence, having no need of language: ‘Language was far too puny for his great theology (..) Scotus comes out, and shakes his golden locks And sings like the African sun’. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 164–65.

⁹⁶ Philip Sheldrake, ‘Human Identity and the Particularity of Place’, pp. 44-46. Sheldrake continues by claiming that theology ‘must maintain a balance between God’s revelation in the particular and a sense that God’s place ultimately escapes the boundaries of the local and embraces universality’, p. 61. Sheldrake highlights his ‘theology of particularity and individuality’ drawn from a ‘distinctive understanding of the doctrine of Incarnation’, which leads to a ‘theologically positive view of the specific and individual, even to the smallest of details’. Sheldrake, pp. 57-58.

⁹⁷ Inge, p. 32. ‘Theologians have not given much attention to place’.

⁹⁸ Inge, p. 127. Bergmann echoes this view concerning the neglect of place with reference to Inge, Sheldrake and Lilburne. He views each writer as part of the spatial turn in theology in which theologians broach new ground in giving attention to a theologically shaped perspective on place. Bergmann, ‘Theology in Its Spatial Turn’.

⁹⁹ To recall: ‘John Inge in *A Christian Theology of Place* claims that the notion of a sacred place became shaped by the etymology of the word *sanctum*, a space set apart, quintessentially symbolised in the isolation of convents, monasteries and in Christian architecture with a gated sanctuary or the iconostasis of Orthodox churches. Inge, p. 27.

¹⁰⁰ Inge, p. 82.

reference to Yi-Fu Tuan, who suggests that such attentiveness will allow the landscape to reveal its ‘personality’.¹⁰¹ Tuan insists that the first danger of the theologian is being able to write without astonishment. The planting of wonder, therefore, is, according to Tuan, the only adequate category by which theologians properly begin and end their work.¹⁰²

This sense of wonder, Inge identifies as part of the medieval conception of place which ‘allowed geography to be the handmaiden of theology’,¹⁰³ with ‘locality a vital ingredient’.¹⁰⁴ He identifies a trajectory across the disciplines through which life is observed and recorded, in which this attention to the local and particular, was downgraded: ‘Theology downgraded particularity. Science looked to infinity. Cartography replaced the itinerary with the map and so homogenised space’.¹⁰⁵ Without the local and particular, moorings are lost.¹⁰⁶ With reference to Bauman and echoing Lilburne, he suggests that this absence of bearings creates populations of homeless wanderers: ‘a pilgrim without a destination; a nomad without an itinerary.’¹⁰⁷ The belonging that a sense of place would bring remains ever elusive. Inge’s challenge to theology is to restore a sense of place.

It is in place and ‘new forms of spatiality’ that Graham Ward embeds a compendium of enquiry on the theme of *The Postmodern God* (1997). Describing postmodern existence he uses a multiplicity of spatial terms:¹⁰⁸ ‘the tide fast forwards toward pleasure yet to be located’; ‘desire circulates globally’; ‘dwelling voyeuristically’; ‘essentially nomadic lifestyle’; ‘undefined spatiality’; ‘ceaseless journeying’.¹⁰⁹ Turning to the theological context, he identifies a pendulum shift in relationship to space, beginning in allegorical interpretations of pre-modern theology

¹⁰¹ Yi-fu Tuan, *Religion: From Place to Placelessness* (Chicago: Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2009), p. 537. Cited by Inge, p. 85.

¹⁰² Tuan, p. 62.

¹⁰³ Inge, p. 127.

¹⁰⁴ Inge, p. 29.

¹⁰⁵ Inge, p. 110.

¹⁰⁶ Inge, p. 27. Echoing other theologians of place, Inge identifies emigration, globalisation, colonialisation, and technological developments which determine the loss of moorings in definite places. Like Brueggemann, Inge draws from Old Testament models of the garden, exile and promised land, as well as the complex layering of attitudes towards place in the New Testament, with the tension between place and placelessness, apocalyptic geography and a Christ focused concept of space. Through the loss of associated symbolisms, he reiterates the loss of moorings within modernity.

¹⁰⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (New Jersey: Wiley, 1993), p. 243. Cited Inge, p. 137.

¹⁰⁸ Graham Ward, *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. xv.

¹⁰⁹ Ward, *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, p. xvi.

which sprang from a doctrine of creation as gift and on this basis ‘corporeality had to be understood theologically’,¹¹⁰ moving to space as understood in the high Middle Ages¹¹¹ as ‘mathematically determined, empirically perceived and calibrated’.¹¹² Returning to the postmodern context he signals the multiplicity of space in the ever-widening expansion of the capacities of the human to locate itself, to organise its immediate surroundings perceptually. He insists that postmodernism, in the context of a discussion of God, takes its standpoint, its spatial positioning seriously.¹¹³ Ward will develop further what this standpoint is in an interview in which he is asked about his own question: ‘Where does theology speak from?’ His response locates theologians inside a church, but at the door, and specifically the east door, which is symbolically looking over the city. In this respect theology becomes a bridge between two diverse locations.¹¹⁴

Surveying the subsequent growth in contextualised theologies, Sigurd Bergmann in one of the most recent studies in the relationship of theology and spatiality, covers a huge canvas in which he begins to model his own premise that an interrogation of space is needed at theology’s own depth.¹¹⁵ Bergmann insists that it is intrinsic to theology to recognise its own material locatedness and he therefore seeks a greater ‘embedding of theology in a broader ecological perception and understanding of Creation’, underlining a ‘deep challenge and urgent necessity within theology to become aware of its embeddedness in the existential spatiality of life’.¹¹⁶

Bergmann’s wide canvas, which encompasses themes of home, urban space, marginalised indigenous communities, religion in conflict with ecology as well as the mobility brought by transport and technology, seeks to open up: ‘the significance of space for the human condition in general and religious belief in particular’, to insist ‘that ‘religious ideas’ (..) are part of what it means to be spatial, and that spatiality, in its turn, transforms the meaning of religious

¹¹⁰ Ward, *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, p. xix.

¹¹¹ 1000 A.D. – 1250.

¹¹² Ward, *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, p. xvii.

¹¹³ Ward, *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, pp. xv, xxii.

¹¹⁴ Brandy Daniels and Graham Ward, ‘The Academy, the Polis, and the Resurgence of Religion: An Interview with Graham Ward’, *The Other Journal*, 12 (2008) <<https://theotherjournal.com/2008/11/18/the-academy-the-polis-and-the-resurgence-of-religion-an-interview-with-graham-ward/>> [accessed 29/12/2019].

¹¹⁵ Bergmann, Sigurd, *Religion, Space, and the Environment* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2016).

¹¹⁶ Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment*, p. 369.

belief.’ The key to Bergmann’s study lies in his claim that ‘Wisdom emerges in lived space, which is not abstract, but inhabited, so that life and a life that expresses wisdom, becomes part of that space’.¹¹⁷ Hence, the human is ‘entangled with, rather than separate from the spatial environment,’ which demands some urgency in accelerating ‘the recently initiated spatial turn of theology and religious studies’.¹¹⁸

It is this constructive capacity which is at the heart of Bergmann’s opening assertion, that an enabling towards a being at home in the world is central to theology’s purpose: ‘It makes sense to overcome the ‘spacelessness’ of our culture by depicting religion as the skill of *Beheimatung* or the process of ‘making oneself at home’.¹¹⁹ The sense of home is not confined to belonging. Within home there is equally a parallel longing or restlessness which imagines the promised land. Hence home is ‘a land to long for and to walk toward’,¹²⁰ an echo of Lilburne’s association of a home with ‘horizon of reach’.¹²¹ For all the emphasis on spatiality and its materiality, this longing reflects apophatic theology on God’s elusiveness and unplaceability. The interplay of knowing and unknowing demonstrates that for Bergmann being at home does not necessarily demand a welcoming terrain but can be in a place where disorientation and reorientation, decontextualisation and recontextualisation, despatialisation and respatialisation are constants. The resulting layered complexity reflects the ‘stillpoints’ in *Conjectures* which encompass surface and depth, distance and proximity, what can be seen and heard as well as the boundlessness of the horizon. Home and alienation then become not antitheses but correlatives where belonging exists alongside a sense of insufficiency manifest as a longing for a greater belonging.¹²² We can recall again the dynamic exchange in Merton’s juxtapositions: ‘my room the sea’, ‘the jails of movies’ with a ‘heaven of naked air’, the light on the hammered gold of the chalice, the city street where people ‘shine like suns’. Such juxtapositions reflect an interplay

¹¹⁷ Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment*, p. xvii.

¹¹⁸ Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment*, p. 4. Quoting Goethe he underlines: ‘The human being only knows herself in so far as she knows the world’.

¹¹⁹ Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment*, p. 4.

¹²⁰ Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment*, p. 19.

¹²¹ Lilburne, p. 77.

¹²² Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment*, p. 6.

between a boundaryless capaciousness and the confines of a particular dwelling, an interaction which creates a welcoming space.¹²³

According to Bergman, in the light of a prevailing emphasis in theology to identify ‘religion’s destructive and violating power’, this constructive quality allows ‘theology in its spatial turn to be regarded as countervailing encouraging development that does not let religion’s destructive dimension cloud the sight of its constructive capacity’.¹²⁴ It is significant that this reflection echoes the criticism with which I began this chapter, and that of several witnesses for an alternative mode to theology. There is a plea to overcome the divisive and combative character associated not only with religions as Bergmann suggests but also with theology.

III

Dialogue III: Place and Language

The final dialogue in this chapter, representing the remaining interaction between the elements of Merton’s poetics of place, explores the revelatory power of material reality and that creation of welcoming space through text which these varied thinkers challenge theology to create. The dialogue between place and language invites conversation directly with the field of geo-poetics.

In its earliest definition geo-poetics began in the field of geology. Like theology, geology is identified for its prioritisation of reasoned investigation. Geo-poetics emerged as a channel within the discipline to correct the limitations of scientific exposition of knowledge. Michael McKimm in the geology journal, ‘Written on the Rocks’, quoting the geologist Harry Hess,¹²⁵ identifies geo-poetics as a rationally subversive paradigm of language, providing a mental space which is beyond ordinary analysis, ‘where conjecture and imaginative play are needed and legitimate, (...) a mental space shared with poets’. When geo-poetics drives the articulation of geology, it promotes, ‘a degree of astonishment as part of the acceptable perceptual frame.’ It, thereby, becomes ‘the place where materialism and mysticism, those ancient enemies, finally

¹²³ Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment*, p. 31.

¹²⁴ Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment*, p. 390.

¹²⁵ Harry Hess: (1906 – 1969).

come together, have a conversation in which each hearkens to the other'.¹²⁶ Hess seeks to integrate science, poetry and the mystical, through a poetics which places the planet Earth at the centre of experience. His endeavour seeks new and hybrid kinds of earth-knowledge. The focus on hybrid echoes a desire to dissolve polarisations. It reflects variously Ward's location of theology on a bridge between two opposing realities, O'Connor's crossroads where nature and grace confront one another and Hilkert's naming of grace and dis-grace.

Since this early definition, the field has expanded both in terms of academic engagement and creative expression. The establishment of centres of geo-poetics in France, Scotland and Canada is associated with the Scottish poet and academic, Kenneth White.¹²⁷ Building on the impetus of White's poetry, 'way books' and accompanying commentary, Rachel Bouvet outlines a geo-poetic approach to literature.¹²⁸ Like White she identifies geo-poetics as a stance against divisive ideological positions, and seeks instead to rebuild a broken relationship between people and earth.¹²⁹ Also influenced by White, Mohammed Hashas suggests that geo-poetics is a radical call for critique of the critique, in 'more opening up against various exclusive dogmatic, ideological, philosophical, or religious discourses'.¹³⁰ Further proponents of geo-poetics emphasise this attempt to dissolve barriers and provide meeting points between empirical science

¹²⁶ Written in the Rocks, 'What Is Geopoetry?', *Written in the Rocks*, 2012, <<https://writtenintherocks.wordpress.com/2012/03/13/hello-world/>> [accessed 04/12/2015].

¹²⁷ The Scottish Centre For Geopoetics, 'Kenneth White and Geopoetics', 2020 <<http://www.geopoetics.org.uk/what-is-geopoetics/kenneth-white/>> [accessed 01/03/2019].

¹²⁸ Rachel Bouvet, *Vers une approche géopoétique: Lectures de Kenneth White, de Victor Segalen et de J.-M. G. Le Clézio* (Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2015). White defines geo-poetics, by turning to the scholastic-Aristotelian term of '*nous poietikos*, the poetic intelligence' and suggests that poetics in this sense infers more than 'poetry concerned with the environment, more than literature with some kind of geographical content.' Rather, 'geopoetics is concerned, fundamentally, with a relationship to the earth and with the opening of a world'.

¹²⁹ Bouvet, p. 3. 'Geopoetics has nothing dogmatic about it: it is not a question of a school with a clear manifesto, but a channel for individuals who interrogate their relationship to the world and the corresponding significance of the written word used to express it.'

¹³⁰ Mohammed Hashas, *Intercultural Geopoetics in Kenneth White's Open World* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), p. 4 <<https://www.cambridgescholars.com/download/sample/64062>> [accessed 02/02/2020]. 'It is by bearing this context in mind that geopoetics can be read as a radical call for more critique, and more opening up, against various exclusive dogmatic, ideological, philosophical, or religious discourses, and for a better future for wo-man and nature.' He will continue: 'There is a palpable, growing need among scholars and students to call upon poetics to provide our experience of a shattered world with some cohesion and coherence.'

and metaphorical suggestion,¹³¹ or between phenomenology and hermeneutics.¹³² There is a dual concern to build bridges between embodied description and a recognition of the more intangible processes through which language communicates and becomes a locus of meaning.

Whilst emerging from this secular field, a growing body of geo-poeticians engage directly with theology, thus rejecting the rigidly secular stance of White, itself an example of closure. Alastair McIntosh in *Soil and Soul* defines his geo-poetic approach as ecology which ‘integrates the psychological and spiritual backdrop’ and is especially influenced by ‘liberation theology’ which he describes as ‘theology that liberates theology to do what it should do’.¹³³ With a dual purpose, he identifies a language focused in the environment and a theology freed up from unanalysed conventions. The process reflects both a rooting in and a loosening up. Related to such emphases, Catholic geo-poetician, Luke Devlin, looks to the embodied lives of saints as geo-poetic models of a way to be in the world. His works interrogate the very reality of the monks who in Merton’s early poetry emerge materially present but as if shipwrecked from mystical depths.¹³⁴ Devlin represents them as role-models of navigating the earth through ‘the ominous waters we inhabit today’ driven by ‘deep sources that inspired these unreasonable monks to set out on their mission with no strength or security other than their faith’.¹³⁵ He draws together familiar geographical realities with the mysterious calling to dialogue with an unconfined horizon. Geo-poetics thus gains a sharpened theological perspective. In similar fashion, Merton’s theological expression provides a rich source of geo-poetic reflection, with his

¹³¹ Eric Magrane, ‘Situating Geopoetics’, *Journal GeoHumanities*, 1, 2015.1 (2015) <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2373566X.2015.1071674>> [accessed 29/12/2019]. Magrane defines geopoetics as a means of connecting a ‘poetic orientation toward language, allusion, and metaphor’ with ‘an academic form that privileges analytic precision and structured thought’.

¹³² Mairi McFadyen, ‘Finding Radical Hope in Geopoetics – Bella Caledonia’, *Bella Caledonia*, 2018 <<https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2018/11/09/finding-radical-hope-in-geopoetics/>> [accessed 29 December 2019]. MacFadyen claims that this synthesizing potential between embodiment and linguistic process lies in the power of metaphor to reconnect ‘abstract thought with embodied experience, providing a *grounding* we often fail to see precisely because it is so pervasive and fundamental.’ Hence geo-poetics combines ‘the rigour of cerebral, analytic work with the experience of being a body in the world.’

¹³³ Alastair McIntosh, *Alastair McIntosh’s Homepage*, 2020 <<http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/>>, [accessed 13/06/2020].

¹³⁴ The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton, p. 74. Chapter Five, II.iii Man in a Divided Sea p.137.

¹³⁵ Luke Devlin, ‘In the Waterscape of St Columba: Radical Discipleship in Stormy Times’: <<http://lukedevl.in/>> [accessed 2 February 2020]. The lives of the saints are not simply pious stories to be admired, but blueprints of possible ways of being in the world. Columba’s time and place seem distant, but by drawing out startling and often hidden resonances- and connections between Iona and the Clyde- we can draw closer than we might expect.’

attentiveness, underpinned by creative fidelity to both language and place. Merton allows place to speak, whilst also allowing language to mould spaces of sanctuary and home.

Akin to geo-poetics in this dialogue between language and place is the creation of spatiality within text which these varied thinkers challenge theology to create. Two studies to which I have already referred: Philip Seal's thesis on Merton's theological poetics and Jennifer Reek's thesis, 'From Temple to Text' reflect the geo-poetic dual focus on locality or spatiality and a corresponding poetics. We can recall how Seal identifies a poetics of 'thereness' in which the quality of 'thereness' is defined as 'having, or being in, a place or position, rather than performing, executing, carrying out, or otherwise doing'.¹³⁶ The theological premise for this quality of being there, he locates in 'Merton's view that acts of simply seeing bring us closer to God by paring back various kinds of distraction'.¹³⁷ Enabling this kind of seeing is for Seal what a 'poetics of thereness' will be about.¹³⁸ Seal takes a perceptive slant however, by showing how Merton creates this kind of thereness not so much in the naming of detail as in the very forms of his writing. To help elucidate further his claim, Seal refers to Merton's depiction of a hermit's solitude which 'is neither an argument, an accusation, a reproach or a sermon. It is simply itself.'¹³⁹ Thereness becomes linguistically modelled.¹⁴⁰

In relation to an underlying aspiration of the witnesses in this chapter, to question the prioritisation of 'argument', 'accusation', 'reproach', 'sermon', within theology, this model of thereness is particularly significant. If the text excavates a palpable located presence, there is no need for a train of logic before or after.¹⁴¹ The widespread recognition of this sense of presence in Merton's account of the 'Louisville Revelation' provides a model. Merton's own arguments had foundered and a newfound integration, an answer to the longing for belonging inscribed into

¹³⁶ Seal, p. 148.

¹³⁷ Seal, p. 147.

¹³⁸ Seal, pp. 153-154.

¹³⁹ *Disputed Questions*, (San Diego: Harcourt Publishers Ltd, 1985), p. 184, cited Seal p. 152.

¹⁴⁰ Seal, p. 162. We can recall how Seal singles out autotelic forms and 'de-concatenation' which as enable the seeing of a thing in itself. Autotelic as it does not signal anything other than itself – de concatenation because – 'the form of Merton's texts dissociate themselves from semantic chains, and leave us with texts that are, at the level of form but not theory, autotelic'.

¹⁴¹ Seal, pp. 53-154.

place made the theology self-evident.¹⁴² Merton hence displays a creative apologetics showing how thereness in actual spatial reality meets thereness in language.

Jennifer Reek highlights a different play between the space of physical reality and the space of the text. This is not so much about particularities of form providing channels of theological perspective. Rather it is about language which irrespective of distinctive forms, has the potential to disclose the sacred by providing a construct in which faith can dwell. The trajectory of Reek's thesis moves from the physical reality of an ecclesial space which has ceased to feel like home, to a textual space which rebuilds a lost sense of home and belonging.¹⁴³ The texts which create sacred spaces of poetic dwelling are not always ostensibly theological for Reek.¹⁴⁴ For Reek, it is less a listening to place as in geo-poetics, as a listening to language in an acknowledgement of the dynamism within it, to disclose and mould the spaces we inhabit. Thus, whereas a Christian geo-poetics identifies the sacred nature of the material world, which sees all space as sacred in the light of the indwelling word, Reek identifies the creation of sacred space as a textual human construct, which both shelters the sacred and creates an alternative space in which to dwell.¹⁴⁵ It echoes Caputo's challenge to theology to offer hospitality to God,¹⁴⁶ and Certeau's identification of 'opening a place for beauty' as a function of textual creativity. Reek describes the way in which such texts act upon the reader by quoting Francis Lundy's commentary on Isaiah 43:19-21.¹⁴⁷ They provide a channel which 'brings the exiles and readers of the text out of the temple' and into 'an imaginary homeland, a homeland of the text' and toward 'an expansion, reconstitution and displacement of sacred space'.¹⁴⁸ As Seal shows theology displaced from solely content claims and given a parallel expression in the forms of the text, Reek displaces an understanding of sanctuary as physical sacred space into sanctuary as a linguistic construct.

¹⁴² Chapter Seven, III.ii 'A New-found Vision', pp. 224-227.

¹⁴³ Jennifer Lynn Reek, p. 12.

¹⁴⁴ Key authors include Ignatius of Loyola, Hélène Cixous, Yves Bonnefoy and Dennis Potter.

¹⁴⁵ Jennifer Lynn Reek, p. 9.

¹⁴⁶ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, p. 42.

¹⁴⁷ I am doing a new thing! (..) I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland'.

¹⁴⁸ Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin, *The Concept of Exile in Ancient Israel and Its Historical Contexts* (Walter de Gruyter, 2010), p. 168. Cited by Jennifer Lynn Reek, p. 98.

In her conclusion, Reek sums up the ability for words to enable a being at home in exile, by quoting Rahner on how words, at their most theologically fruitful, invite into a space:

If God's incomprehensibility does not grip us in a word, if it does not draw us into his superluminous darkness, if it does not call us out of the little house of our homely close-hugged truths into the strangeness of the night that is our real home, we have misunderstood or failed to understand the words of Christianity.¹⁴⁹

Language in this way enables that naming of the transcendent, clothed in temporal and material realities of *ressourcement* aspirations:

It is this nameless being that words try to speak when they speak of things that have a name; they try to conjure up the mystery when they indicate the intelligible, they try to summon up infinity when they describe and circumscribe the finite.

The dialogue between language and place, beginning ostensibly in a non-theological field, has returned to the *ressourcement* endeavour: to reclaim mystery by constructing a home for the strange and wild uncontainability of the infinite.

It is this hospitable call to a true home that drives the shaping of theology, in that understanding outlined in Chapter One of theology as a quest after words, rooted in the biblical understanding of God incarnate. Theology creates a textual space for divine indwelling whilst simultaneously identifying the material space in which the divine dwells. With hospitality as a defining feature, might it be necessary to demarcate a space beyond which the term theology can no longer be applied? The poetics of 'thereness' explored by Seal presents physical reality as if divulged through a God-given light. Might writing which delivered this immediacy and revelatory promise but which contained no overtly religious symbolic reference, be denied the name of theology? Similarly, is there a point in which the crafting of a sanctuary as in Reek's discussion, without ostensible theological reference, might equally be too diffuse to be named theology?

The overarching character of Merton's theological genre is its very capaciousness. We can recall its association with Gutiérrez's emphasis on a different kind of theological liberation, which claims that not only is every man, but all of history a living temple of God in which case,

¹⁴⁹ Karl Rahner, 'Poetry and the Christian', from *Theological Investigations IV*, Helicon 1966, p. 360, cited by Jennifer Lynn Reek, p. 147.

that which is *pro-fane*, no longer exists.¹⁵⁰ On this basis, to demarcate theology from non-theology seems unwarranted.

From the trajectory I have outlined, however, the context for an alternative expression is Catholic theology. The liberating stance is pitched between creative expression and faithful rendering of Christian revelation. It hearkens to early sources of theology, which reflect that exhortation by Pope Francis to be faithful and anchored.¹⁵¹ Equally, the association with fluidity and reconfiguring possibility in the understanding of source, highlights the inherent novelty of the Gospel and the likelihood that theology will be channelled through multiple and unexpected forms. We have seen how Merton's quest after words makes theology tangible in highstreets, in torn fabric on barbed wire, in juxtapositions of colour, texture and sound. It is also found in the forms the text adopts: the prepositions which seek to locate; the present continuous tense which draws the reader into looking alongside; the isolation of a word, cut away from its syntactic surroundings to strip away distraction; the sequences of synonyms to communicate mystery as a layered construct. Yet, recalling that for the 'creatively faithful' theologians within Catholic history with whom this thesis began, there is no theological text without context,¹⁵² there is correspondingly no theological context without the Christian text. Merton models the trajectory through which a text might be named theology. Through a poetics of place, he leaves behind a first-order language of abstractions, rational analysis and argument, a locus perhaps more aptly named theological philosophy. His alternative locus seeks out that integration of science, poetry, and mystery, prioritised by Hess, to create a theology of the material world, re-enchanted by incarnational, mystical, liturgical, and sacramental vision.

¹⁵⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (London: SCM Press, 1974), p. 194.

¹⁵¹ Although these statements emerge from a Catholic context, the thesis begins in a European centred Catholic context but will ultimately locate Merton's theological genre as a response to a wider Anglo-American Christian context. On this basis it is interesting to observe a parallel definition of theology as a process in an essay by Douglas Hall which answers the question: What is Theology? With reference to Tillich and Barthes. Theology as both creative and faithful underpins his definition: 'Theology is the intellectual spiritual capacity that helps the church to remain creatively and faithfully between its own worldly situation and its own particular sources of wisdom and hope, metaphorically speaking between context and text. As Pope Francis emphasises the perennial newness of the gospel of Christ, he emphasises an understanding of newness contained with the term 'good news'

¹⁵² Chapter One, I, 'Creative Fidelity in Catholic Thought'.

IV

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that Merton's theological genre models aspirations voiced by a host of witnesses from the late 20th century to contemporaneous reflection. The first dialogue explored opposition to an analytical mode. The requests made of theological form seem daunting. Theology is called upon to reclaim the drive to sing and to lament, to pray and to perform, to tell a story or write a letter which seduces. It is asked to capture the seeming miraculous and impossible and inject energy and vibrancy on a frequently unpromising canvas of temporal and material realities. Equally it is asked to be wholly mindful of biblical, liturgical, mystical, incarnational, and sacramental realities.

Merton's style of writing theology goes some way to modelling these aspirations. The unifying element within these emphases: biblical genre, liturgical enactment, incarnational and sacramental vision all demand a theology which is embodied and hence functions within place, but which is also linguistically mindful. My emphasis on the particular character of Merton's poetics underlines the tripartite exchange between theology, place and language and thereby becomes a locus for the wide-ranging debate concerning a more theologically fashioned medium.

The second dialogue challenged theology to take place more seriously. It thus frees place from being pigeon-holed as a marginalised concern. Jantzen seeks an embodied theology which signals beauty, the prime function of Merton's 'still-points'. Lane in asking theology to construct a landscape can find a response in the landscapes of desecration in *Emblems*, which are redeemed by an overall focus on the grace within brokenness. Inge asks theology to restore a sense of place. Merton's ardent engagement with his physical surroundings creates a model for human interaction with place, where place is elevated to become a companion to dialogue, rather than a mere background. Tuan asks theology to plant wonder as attention to place reveals the landscape's 'personality'. The close study of what I have named 'still-points' nurtures this attentiveness and a degree of enchantment. Lilburne demands a home and a horizon of reach.¹⁵³ Merton's depiction of ordinary reality as a space of divine indwelling, recreates the geography of

¹⁵³ Lilburne, p. 77.

immanent and transcendent of the kind, Lilburne advocates. Ward locates the postmodern God in the materiality of a particular kind of space, where theology provides a bridge. In Merton's work, this leaps across varied canvases, urban and rural, historical and modern, dystopic and mystical in which he builds bridges towards wholeness in brokenness. His achievement provides a response to Bergmann who in asking theology to enable a being at home in the world,¹⁵⁴ calls for a montage which constructs a 'being at home in the midst of turmoil'.¹⁵⁵

The process Bergmann outlines of shifting through the patterns of 'disorientation and delocalisation' to 'reorientation and relocalisation', is the very shift modelled repeatedly in Merton's work. Each revelation in his early prose began in a place of displacement. The poems written throughout the 1940s show a decade long struggle with his own disorientation and eventual reorientation. In *Emblems* and *Conjectures* a similar trajectory unfolds as fury merges into welcoming the stranger, as a skimming of headlines yields to contemplative quietude, as alienation resolves into the consciousness of a God in all, and an all in God. Merton's genre thus demonstrates and advocates an openness and an ability to re-locate, shifting through the intersections of materiality, verbal awareness, creativity, and a sense of the sacred. Through this interplay arises the prayer beyond the protest, the contemplative voice beyond the alienation, a lyricism breaking through automated response, and a still space within the noise of the world. The reader's humanity, language and locatedness are taken on board as they are invited simultaneously to look where Merton is looking.

Finally, the third dialogue highlighted the valuing of material place as a place of sacred disclosure and an equal acknowledgement of a parallel character within language. I showed how within Merton's genre, place ceases to be mere background and language ceases to be a mere channel of communication for theological truths. Merton thus creates that poetics identified by Hess in the field of geology, where materialism and mysticism, dialogue and hearken to the other and where 'a degree of astonishment' is 'part of the acceptable perceptual frame'.¹⁵⁶ On this basis, Seal and Reek challenge theology to create epiphany moments through its language, either

¹⁵⁴ Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment*, p. 27. 'All-embracing space is a gift, one needs to respond to it by creating lived spaces in and with it.'

¹⁵⁵ Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment*, p. 32.

¹⁵⁶ Michael McKimm, 'What Is Geopoetry?', *Written in the Rocks*, 2012

<<https://writtenintherocks.wordpress.com/2012/03/13/hello-world/>> [accessed J03/01/2019].

by offering a theological way of seeing in the very mode of the text or by beckoning to a space of hospitality.

The measure in which Merton's genre offers a channel for each of these rich fields of enquiry demonstrates the extent to which his idiom offers something new to theological expression. In summarising the demands upon the discipline of theology, Bergmann merges that nexus of theology, language and place:

Can space set theology free? How does the God of the here and now 'take place'? Could the new consciousness of being embedded in space, places, and movement encourage theologians to break from their conventional stereotype discussions about the identity of theology? Might the earthing of theology help to get theology to move?¹⁵⁷

My analysis in this thesis has shown how Merton signals how and where God 'takes place'. By siting his theology in the materiality of his physical surroundings, he shows how the event of creation and of incarnation is not fixed in time, but an ongoing process which invites into participation. The notion of a theological bulwark for the faith is hence demolished to become a capacious landscape in which matter, mystery and language are entangled. The mobility and malleability of Merton's idiom presents theology as non-static and expansive, demonstrating a vibrancy which offers numerous sites for future dialoguing. Thus, theology is offered a space and a text beyond the argument and the lament.

¹⁵⁷ Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment*, p. 391.

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I

Recapitulation

The aim of this thesis was to demonstrate how Merton creates a distinctive form for theological expression, shaped by the aspirations for language of the mid-century *ressourcement* theologians and by the particular quality of his engagement with place. I showed how emerging from *ressourcement* endeavours, Merton established a dialogue between use of language, sense of place and an incarnational perspective, which I named a poetics of place. I then demonstrated how this tripartite nexus underpins his theological expression. In selecting this focus, my intention was to address key gaps in Merton studies concerning the role of place, choice of genre and his relationship with contemporaneous theological endeavours, represented by the *ressourcement*.

This focus on Merton studies was also accompanied by a wider claim reflected in the title of the thesis: ‘Setting theology free’ and in the primary assertion that Merton creates a distinctive form for theology. Implicit in the title is the claim that Merton’s genre releases theology from a perceived confinement. A parallel aim of this thesis, therefore, was to enter into a discussion about theological genre and to question a compartmentalising tendency within the discipline of theology which marginalises writing that does not conform to the norms of rigorous analysis. This tendency, I suggested, is implicated in the reluctance to classify Merton as a theologian.¹ By establishing the theological underpinning of Merton’s genre, I sought to question not only the underrating of Merton by the academy, but more boldly, to question norms of theological expression.

Given these two aims and the ensuing need to liaise between Merton studies and the wider interrogation of the discipline of theology, it was necessary both to provide a close analysis of primary texts and to offer a contextualisation of Merton’s genre in relation to the discipline of theology. I, therefore, began my enquiry by identifying an approach defined by creative orthodoxy within the wide scope of Catholic theology. Reflective of this approach, the

¹ Pramuk, *Sophia*, p. 24.

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focus was then narrowed to the very specific context of the *ressourcement* theologians (Chapter One) and to the mid-20th century interrogation of theme of place (Chapter Two). The latter emphasis emerged directly from *ressourcement* concerns for theology to address the human context but is bolstered by the significance of place for Merton, and by my ensuing concern to explore this emphasis in his work. I defined the poetics arising from these dual preoccupations and explored biographical detail with reference to these emphases (Chapter Three). The following four chapters of analysis of primary texts (Chapters Four-Seven) proceeded to give close attention to the character of Merton's genre, balancing the writing of the 1940s (Chapters Four and Five) with that of the mid to late 1960s (Chapters Six and Seven). One significant challenge of this study was selecting texts from the enormity of Merton's output. I refer in the introduction to my reasons for not including the widely admired poetry of 1967 and 1968, his most mature period of poetry writing,² but there are over four hundred pages of further poems, which I have not explored even in summary.³ This selectivity was necessary given the vastness of Merton's poetic enterprise, and given my concern to give full attention to the early poetry due to its relative neglect or disparagement in secondary critique.

A key deduction from primary text analysis is the importance of paradox, which builds directly on *ressourcement* aspirations summarised at the end of Chapter One.⁴ This emphasis is also definitive in Merton's identification of Blake's 'whole new form of theological understanding' by a 'moving freely between dialectical poles in a wild chaos, integrating sacred vision'.⁵ Accompanying primary text analysis, therefore, I further investigated this field drawing

² To recall as outlined in further detail: Introduction, II 'Methodology: Wide Lens and Detail' p 5, note 22, I did not select these texts, firstly, as I am proposing a genre for theology which responds to *ressourcement* aspirations, one key element is accessibility and the more cryptic quality of these later texts limits a wide accessibility. My second reason is that I am seeking to address the neglect of Merton's poetry. These two works have in fact invited in a rich and varied critical commentary, albeit largely in chapter or article form.

³ *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* number 1,030 pages.

⁴ Chapter Seven, III 'Conclusion to Part Two: Primary Text Analysis, 'A Distinctive Form of Religious Expression'. In summary: the correcting of what Congar defined as an 'incarnation deficit': (Mettepingen, 14; Yves Congar 8 January 1935 'Déficit de la théologie'); Maritain's 'magical light' (Jacques Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, p. 10); depicting divine beauty in unpromising materiality (Jacques Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, p. 17); that sacred place identified by Rahner 'where the laboured, humble daily word dwells', (Karl Rahner *Theological Investigations, Volume III; Theology of the Spiritual Life*, London: Helicon Press, 1967, p. 314) which yet relays a 'captivating incomprehensibility' (Rahner and Lehmann, p. 126.); Balthasar's dialogue of created and uncreated, and the 'dark radiance' he identified in Maximus the Confessor. (Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor* Ignatius Press 2003, pp. 81, 97).

⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New Directions, 1985), p. 6.

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from related fields which reflect a similar highlighting of paradox. I refer in Chapter Six to Certeau's outlining the achievement of John of the Cross as 'opening a space for beauty' from a place of alienation.⁶ I associated this paradigm with the task of Merton to respond to the plea of Raïssa Maritain for a voice which can transform the darkness created by the holocaust,⁷ and to her aspiration shared with Jacques Maritain for a channel for contemplation 'on the roads of the world'.⁸ In each case theological writing is asked to negotiate the tension of paradox in order to create a transforming space.

The host of witnesses presented in Chapter Eight revisit the *ressourcement* question concerning theological expression posed by Congar in 1935: 'How does one write about the numinous?'⁹ In framing their proposals I began with Davies insistence in 2016 that in order to write theology, it is necessary to participate in a 'speech which is not to be of their own making, but which radically is to belong to another'.¹⁰ The extent to which Merton's genre provides a response to the rich endeavours provided by the *ressourcement* context, and continued into 21st century interrogation of theological genre, alerts us to the collectivity of voices within his achievement.

Merton listens to multiple realities to hear that speech which is not of his own making, 'but which radically belongs to another'. He hearkens to linguistic strategies which illuminate a way of seeing anew: the tumbling of prepositions which land on a boundaryless ever-expanding canvas; the varied means of bringing a flow of text to a puzzling halt, such as the 'de-concatenation' identified by Seal; the unpredictable dynamics which lead to sentences overflowing their contours, to resolve into a verbless placing of objects in the spotlight, without evaluative commentary. He listens to the speech of another and interweaves their voice with his own, creating a rich intertextuality. He listens to the speech of a place from church interiors and monastery grounds, to a local high street and the shrine of another faith. Observing with an ever-closer lens he listens to the creak of steps, notes the steam rising, the smell of the broken whisky

⁶ Certeau, p. 71.

⁷ Bercot and Mayaux, p. 65.

⁸ Chapter Six, II ii, 'From Prophecy to Contemplation'.

⁹ Yves Congar 8 January 1935 'Déficit de la théologie', cited Mettepenningen, p. 14.

¹⁰ Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2016), p. 168.

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casks, the incense on his clothes, the alertness of a dog, the comfort of hot tea. It is in the progressive intimacy of such observations and their distance from theology manuals which underlines the extent to which he creates a canvas for theology which is startlingly different.

Such listening reflects Merton's full participation in the holding of paradox. He is the guilty bystander, guilty because he stands complicit in the destructive processes of the world, a bystander, because he refuses to accept as inevitable its dehumanising structures. He thus stands politically inside and outside. Similarly, he reflects a spiritual standing inside and outside. He places high value on those practices which are archetypally rooted in spiritual living: the order of liturgy, withdrawal from the world, solitude, contemplative stillness, prayer, sacrament. In parallel, the spiritual is equally met in unpromising material reality, in the broken, in disorder, in the world outside monastic and ecclesial confines and specifically Christian practices. The point is to hold opposite things without allowing one to negate the other. The creak of the stairs is on the same canvas as the exaltation in the language of *The Exsultet*. It is by fully taking on board the reality of paradox that Merton is able to place a spotlight on the dirty bread left out for the birds as a theological statement.

When such clashing juxtapositions constitute the clarity which is seen, it means that thinking in a linear fashion, the thesis, antithesis, conclusion can be as unreal as expecting experience and material reality to reflect a neatly sequential pattern. Spirals, halting flow, and *non-sequiturs* more clearly reflect the challenge of such enmeshment. Closing my exploration of 21st century thinkers, this paradoxical nexus is central to Bergmann's exhortation for theology to build a home in the midst of turmoil and for Bergmann this constituted setting theology free.¹¹

As my thesis began referring to the image of a bulwark encasing the truths of a scholastic rendering of theology, this fixity as a fitting model for theology is dismantled. It is replaced by a model of contemplative readiness to show the world outside the bulwark in a God-given light. The underlying openness and creativity reflect the fluidity, vitality, and reconfiguring power present in the image of a spring, associated with the return to the sources of *ressourcement* endeavour. Theology is hence imagined differently. Rather than rigorously containing its truths, it is asked to adopt a method which reflects a readiness to participate in material reality, to

¹¹ Bergmann, *Religion, Space, and the Environment*, p. 391.

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display a greater linguistic freedom, to demonstrate its own transforming potential and to own with greater conviction the impossibility of confining the sacred. Theology's mandate becomes to express the boundaryless freedom of the truth to which it refers.

By exploring the ongoing critique of genre in theology, I have underlined how the challenge within the mandate has resulted in frequent gesturing by theologians as to how to respond. Papal encyclicals, pertinent to the Catholic focus within this thesis, also participate in such critique.¹² It is interesting that aspirations are voiced. It is rare to find a showing *how* such aspirations might be applied.

II

Towards Other Enquiries

It is in the confrontation with the *how*, that various channels of enquiry emerge from this study, which I shall outline in summary, then explore successively. One clear projection lies in the convergence between language and materiality within Merton's poetics, from which an exploration of Merton's calligraphic paintings provides a natural development. Another projection extending from this focus is a potential partnership between Merton's calligraphies and landscapes of words created by fellow Catholic artists, Eric Gill and David Jones. As these exchanges extend into the convergence of literary, socio-cultural, geographical and theological emphases, a third channel emerges which questions how the ensuing interdisciplinarity allows theology to be more truly itself. A fourth development relates to a possible dialogue between Merton's genre and papal documents which urge theology towards this greater interdisciplinarity.

II.i Worded Landscapes

Merton's calligraphies which were exhibited in Louisville in Autumn 1964 and continued on tour through to 1967 provide an obvious focus emerging from this study,¹³ as they provide in

¹² I justify this statement later in this chapter with reference to: *Via Pulchritudinis* (2006) by Pope Benedict XVI, and *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013); *Laudato Si* (2015); *Theology After Veritatis Gaudium* (2019) by Pope Francis.

¹³ Merton and Lipsey, p. 29.

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Paul Pearson's words a 'visual correlative to his mature works of spiritual writing'.¹⁴ Like Merton's poetry, his visual art is often overlooked,¹⁵ thus offering a parallel canvas through which to question the tendencies within Merton studies.¹⁶ It is however especially in the exchanges represented by Merton's poetics that a valuable frame for exploring Merton's calligraphic art emerges. Merton himself describes these works as 'concretized intuition',¹⁷ and 'summonses to awareness'.¹⁸ Such descriptions highlight that interplay of language, concrete terms of reference and a quality of presence. Moreover, whilst echoing the monastic practice of creating biblical calligraphy, his calligraphic brush paintings create a pluralistic canvas reflecting variously Zen Buddhist calligraphy and its accompanying role of inducing a meditative state of mind, the reification of letters within Jewish mysticism explored in Chapter Six and the recognition of sacred calligraphy as a means of bringing the Sufi Muslim closer to God, all of which connect a sense of divine with linguistic embodiment. Such connections nudge Christian theology towards a wider outreach.

This pushing the boundaries of Christian theology is met further in the elusive meaning of the calligraphic sign. Merton plays with the notion of mystery and superfluity upturning theological clarity. Roger Lipsey in his work assembling Merton's visual art suggests that the resulting theological communication is 'superbly free'.¹⁹ The underlying freedom allows Merton in his own words to 'open a way to obscure reconciliations and agreements that are not arbitrary (...) they may continue to awaken possibilities, consonances; they may dimly help to alter one's perceptions'.²⁰ Lipsey emphasises Merton's prioritising of an essential openness: 'Any moment, you can break through to the underlying unity which is God's gift in Christ. (...) Openness is all'.²¹ This focus could transpose the poetics I have identified, to an interplay between the

¹⁴ Merton and Lipsey, front cover.

¹⁵ Merton and Lipsey, p. xvi.

¹⁶ Merton and Lipsey, p. xv.

¹⁷ Merton and Lipsey, p. 40. From Thomas Merton, 'Theology of Creativity,' in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 364.

¹⁸ Merton and Lipsey, p. 61.

¹⁹ Merton and Lipsey, p. 20.

²⁰ Merton and Lipsey, p. 20.

²¹ Merton and Lipsey, p. 40. From David Steindl-Rast, 'Man of Prayer,' in *Thomas Merton, Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1974), p. 89.

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materiality of paint and paper, the pictorial nature of the letter and the associated function of signalling divine mystery. In addition, the calligraphies allow an exploration of an even greater liberation of theology from normative forms.

A corresponding interdisciplinarity invites a partnering of Merton's poetics with landscapes of words. Rowan Williams signals this possible partnership by exploring the relationship of Maritain's *Art and Poetry*, which we can recall is a key *ressourcement* focus explored in Chapter One, with what Williams names 'material words' in the work of Eric Gill and David Jones.²² It is clear from Merton's correspondence that he was keenly interested in both artists.²³ Monica Weiss²⁴ and Michael Higgins²⁵ draw especially strong parallels with David Jones. A recent publication on David Jones by Elizabeth Powell outlines a process towards crafting the sacred which reflects an ease with different medium, as especially fitting for the communication of theology.²⁶ Her reflections bear strong echoes of Merton own trajectory. Powell describes the imagination of Jones as 'a journey from the visible to the invisible' through 'the love of things unseen'. It is a journey echoed especially in the creation of still-points explored in Chapter Seven, where a pictorial vignette points in the direction of the invisible. Merton's calligraphies provide a parallel meeting of concrete and abstract where the sign invites reflection from its material presence of ink, paper, and shape towards a mysterious beyond. Powell, with Jones' stone landscapes of words in mind, claims that letters are 'deeply storied themes' having 'all kinds of unconscious connotation' 'dynamic, swirly, mystery and other'. As

²² Rowan Williams, 'Grace, Necessity and Imagination: Catholic Philosophy and the Twentieth Century Artist', Lecture 2: "David Jones: Material Words" (presented at the Clark Lectures, Trinity College Cambridge, 2005) <<http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/2110/grace-necessity-and-imagination-catholic-philosophy-and-the-twentieth-century-artist-lecture-2-david>> [accessed 9 January 2018].

²³ Eric Gill: Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy*, pp. 222 and 284. David Jones: Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy*, p. 257. 'A Welsh Catholic in whom the whole tradition is alive and fresh and real'. Sep 25, 1967. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (London: Collins Flame, 1990), Letter to A. L. Allchin Feb 1, 1968, 'I am entirely swept away by my discovery of David Jones. He is a real revelation. I like his work immensely', pp. 29 and 30. Writing to W. H. Ferry in Sept 14 1967, he claims he is trying to get *In Parenthesis* by David Jones. 'The David Jones Agenda is a real event and revelation. This has me felled. I am happy with the discovery and want to go into it much more, p. 234.

²⁴ Monica Weis, *Thomas Merton and the Celts* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2016), pp. 85–86.

²⁵ Michael Higgins directed a seminar on September 30, 2017 in which he placed Thomas Merton in dialogue with David Jones. *Celtic Visionaries for our Time and Why we Need to Attend to them* <<https://www.thomasmertonnyc.org/events-2017-18/thomas-merton-and-david-jones>>, [accessed 19/02/2020], 'mutual deep reverence for nature, and (...) profound personal commitment to the creation and fostering of peace.'

²⁶ Elizabeth Powell, *David Jones and the Craft of Theology: Becoming Beauty* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

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such, to attend to the physicality of Merton's lettering is to begin a process of teasing out the sighting of the incarnate word. As Merton creates a letter which only unfolds mystery, any recognised process passed through for deciphering the meaning of the letter is disrupted. Powell describes this reconfiguring of a way of reading as allowing 'language to become a mediatory place' (..) 'the reader is inducted into the meaning', (..) 'she is performed by it as much as she is performing it'. Hence, as the usual relationship with language is halted, 'reading becomes a form of meditation or a craft of making thoughts about God' as 'a love of things unseen'.²⁷ Both artist theologians in disrupting the conventional pathways into theological understanding emphasise a more compliant approach to the text. Their play on the meeting of form as mystery, and content as mystery, offers fertile ground for unfolding further the theology behind a poetics of place.

II.ii Interdisciplinarity and 'Becoming Beauty'

Beyond the obvious kinship with landscapes created by letters and words, a further dimension to the partnership with Jones is a shared appreciation of theology as a form of craftsmanship which necessarily invites an aesthetic focus. Powell describes the craft of theology as 'a form of loving attention to reality' which she argues is theology's most important task. Her reference to Jones as creating places of beauty in which to 'become beauty' offers a clear echo of my claim that Merton, in the words of Certeau, 'opens a place for beauty', in so far as he creates a transforming space. Furthermore, Jones' deployment of multiple genres: sculptured words, poetry, etchings encounters a parallel variety in Merton's photography, sketches, letters, journals, poetry, and essays. This shared ease of moving between disciplines shows, in the words of Janet Soskice, with reference to Powell's study, that such interdisciplinarity is, 'nothing other than finding ways for theology and humanity to be more richly itself'.²⁸

²⁷ All quotations taken from a paper presented at conference: Catholicism, Literature, and the Arts II: Legacies and Revivals, An International Conference: 8-10 July 2019, Durham UK. 'The Place and Poetics of David Jones', published to Spotify as 'Centre for Catholic Studies' podcast 23rd July 2019.

²⁸ Soskice Janet: Foreword. Review: Bloomsbury.com. <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/david-jones-and-the-craft-of-theology-9780567691637/> accessed 19/02/2020. 'Powell draws the reader into the participatory, performative and dialogical possibilities of the craft of theology. Harking back to an older style of theology framed in a distinctive and modern way, as a graced human practice, and a place of transforming relation with the divine; she argues that Jones's art works offer places of beauty in which to 'become beauty' along the way. Located at the cross-section of theology, literature and the arts, this volume shows how an interdisciplinary position is nothing other than finding ways for theology and humanity to be more richly itself.'

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It is in the light of this interdisciplinarity, and the tasking of theology to ‘become beauty’ in Powell’s words, that a further channel of enquiry emerges. Given this thesis began with a focus on the papal document describing a bulwark for the faith, it is pertinent to scan in brief selected papal proclamations concerning theology’s role. Whilst Popes recurrently make appeals for a new model, they entrust its creation to an indeterminate terrain. They exhort theology to transgress its own conventional boundaries but fail to show how. An outline of papal exhortation from Pope Benedict and Pope Francis highlights a clear desire for an alternative form to known parameters and for a greater interdisciplinarity within theology.

Identifying ‘a troubling loss of the sense of the sacred’ Pope Benedict appeals to theology to help combat this by creating a ‘way of beauty’²⁹ as a ‘privileged itinerary to get in touch with many of those who face great difficulties in receiving the Church's teachings’.³⁰ Pope Francis similarly referring to the *via pulchritudinis* claims that to articulate faith is not to simply convince that it is good and true, but that it is ‘something beautiful’ and ‘capable of filling life with new splendour and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties’.³¹ Both popes thus echo the variously framed paradoxes within Merton’s genre of ‘opening a place of beauty’ from a place of alienation. The way proposed is a mandate to disarm by inviting into an experience of beauty.

Seeking to clarify the role of theology, Pope Francis appeals for theology to avoid sidelining evangelisation, emphasising that this task is not uniquely the remit of pastoral theology. He appeals for all theology to reach beyond the confines of a ‘desk-bound theology’ and

²⁹ Pope Benedict XVI: ‘Plenary Assembly, (March 27-28, 2006) Concluding Document’ <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/cultr/documents/rc_pc_cultr_doc_20060327_plenary-assembly_final-document_en.html> [accessed 19 February 2020], par.129. *The Via Pulchritudinis: Privileged Pathway for Evangelisation and Dialogue*.

³⁰ *The Via Pulchritudinis*: par, II.I.

³¹ Francis, ‘Evangelii Gaudium : Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World’, 2013 <http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html> [accessed 19/02/2020] par.167. ‘Proclaiming Christ means showing that to believe in and to follow him is not only something right and true, but also something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendour and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties.’

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prioritise an interdisciplinary approach.³² To do so he advocates a ‘creative apologetics’.³³ This plea for creativity implicitly suggests that creativity is not theology’s norm. He offers further directives in a recent proclamation, following *Veritatis Gaudium*, in which theology is asked to possess an energetic creative outreach, identified as ‘a theology of hospitality’, and a ‘a theology of listening’. Referring specifically to the geographical context of the Mediterranean, he calls upon theology to listen to the geography and experience of a particular place in order ‘to capture their wounds along with their potential’.³⁴ This theology of dialogue demands:

theologians who know how to work together and in an interdisciplinary form, (..) who know how to escape the self-referential, competitive and, in fact, blinding logic that often also exists in our academic institutions and is very often hidden in theological schools.³⁵

His language urges escape from a normative hiddenness into a spirit of compassionate outreach.³⁶ Finally, he makes a plea for a spirit of devotion: ‘Theology can only be done ‘on one’s knees’, without which:

³² Francis, ‘*Evangelii Gaudium* : Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World’ par. 133 and 134. ‘A theology – and not simply a pastoral theology – which is in dialogue with other sciences and human experiences is most important for our discernment on how best to bring the Gospel message to different cultural contexts and groups.’ Par. 133. ‘The Church, in her commitment to evangelisation, appreciates and encourages the charism of theologians and their scholarly efforts to advance dialogue with the world of cultures and sciences. I call on theologians to carry out this service as part of the Church’s saving mission. In doing so, however, they must always remember that the Church and theology exist to evangelize, and not be content with a desk-bound theology.’ Par 133. ‘Universities are outstanding environments for articulating and developing this evangelizing commitment in an interdisciplinary and integrated way.’ Par. 134.

³³ Francis, ‘*Evangelii Gaudium* : Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World’, par.132.

³⁴ Pope Francis, ‘Pope Francis’ Full Remarks at ‘Theology After *Veritatis Gaudium*’ Encounter in Naples, Italy’, *ZENIT - English*, 2019 <<https://zenit.org/articles/popes-full-remarks-at-theology-after-veritatis-gaudium-encounter-in-naples-italy/>> [accessed 19/02/2020]. ‘This also means listening to the history and experiences of the peoples who face (their particular geography) the Mediterranean space in order to be able to decipher the events that connect the past to today and to be able to capture their wounds along with their potential. In particular, it is a matter of grasping the way in which Christian communities and individual prophetic existences have known – even recently – how to incarnate the Christian faith in contexts sometimes of conflict, minority and plural coexistence with other religious traditions.’

³⁵ Pope Francis, ‘Theology After *Veritatis Gaudium*’: Following the heading: ‘An Interdisciplinary Theology’: ‘A theology of acceptance which, as an interpretative method of reality, adopts discernment and sincere dialogue, needs theologians who know how to work together and in an interdisciplinary form, overcoming individualism in intellectual work. We need theologians – men and women, presbyters, lay people and religious – who are historically and ecclesially rooted and, at the same time, open to the inexhaustible novelties of the Spirit, who know how to escape the self-referential, competitive and, in fact, blinding logic that often also exists in our academic institutions and is very often hidden in theological schools.’ <http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/june/documents/papa-francesco_20190621_teologia-napoli.html>, [accessed 15/06/2020].

³⁶ Pope Francis, ‘Theology after *Veritatis Gaudium*’, following the heading: ‘An Interdisciplinary Theology’: ‘In this continuous journey of going out of oneself and meeting with the other, it is important that theologians are men and women of compassion – I highlight this: that they are men and women of compassion – touched by the oppressed life of many, by the slavery of today, by

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Theologians risk being swallowed up in the condition of the privilege of those who place themselves prudently outside the world and share nothing risky with the majority of humanity. Laboratory theology, pure and ‘distilled’ theology, distilled like water, distilled water, which knows nothing.

The bulwark image has in his words become a laboratory anaesthetised from risk of engagement with concrete and material realities. The image of a source is compromised as distilled water.

The final appeal of Pope Francis signposts towards a loosening of chains binding the discipline with a further call to interdisciplinarity and an invitation to question tradition: ‘Reconsider tradition! And question it again.’³⁷

Emerging from Pope Benedict’s aspiration for an itinerary of beauty and Pope Francis’s directives on listening, hospitality and a questioning of tradition is a paradigm of creative fidelity, resonant directly of that stance of key Catholic thinkers presented at the start of Chapter One. It is intent on standing in the gap, working in the clash of an ‘itinerary of beauty’ and the troubled face of temporal and material realities. It is equally intent on framing a language which facilitates a leap into mystery in order to give theological principles concerning incarnation and sacramentality their deepest meaning. I have shown how Merton stands in the gap and invites the reader to participate in his incarnational way of seeing, which performs both Pope Benedict’s ‘itinerary of beauty’ and Pope Francis’ theology of hospitality. In this way Merton’s theological genre can be placed directly in dialogue with papal aspirations.

II.iii Showing *How*

There are two studies to which I have referred in this thesis which take up the challenge of applying aspirations concerning the shape of theological expression. They could serve as

social wounds, violence, wars and the enormous injustices suffered by so many poor people who live on the shores of this ‘common sea’. Without communion and without compassion, constantly nourished by prayer – this is important: theology can only be done ‘on one’s knees’ – theology not only loses its soul but loses its intelligence and ability to interpret reality in a Christian way.’

³⁷ Pope Francis, ‘Theology after Veritatis Gaudium’, following the heading: ‘An Interdisciplinary Theology’: ‘Interdisciplinarity is at the core of theology finding a new voice: interdisciplinarity as a criterion for the renewal of theology and ecclesiastical studies involves a commitment to continually revisit and re-examine tradition. Revisit tradition! And question it again. In fact, listening as Christian theologians does not take place by starting from nothing, but from a theological heritage that – right inside the Mediterranean space – has its roots in the communities of the New Testament, in the rich reflection of the Fathers and in multiple generations of thinkers and witnesses. It is that living tradition that has come down to us that can help illuminate and decipher many contemporary issues.’

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possible partners to this thesis for future enquiry into the application of papal exhortations. The rare witness of these two works underlines all the more how theology is hesitant to show how.

The first is the thesis by Seal, which, in its very title emphasises the modelling of an approach: ‘Towards a Formalist Theological Poetics: Practising What You Preach in the Prose Writings of Thomas Merton’.³⁸ His argument is that ‘the literary forms of Thomas Merton’s prose writings embody theological claims he makes elsewhere at the level of content’.³⁹ He rightly claims that he offers ‘the first extended literary-critical account of his prose’,⁴⁰ and highlights the frequency with which theology, and specifically studies on Merton, regularly gesture towards a need to explore theology’s style of communication, yet rarely responds to its own directive. Seal in contrast offers a spotlight on form in an emphasis which moves away from ‘language that is about, that speaks of, that refers to, and towards language that does, shows, embodies.’⁴¹ Vague gesturing is replaced by a careful elucidation of the varying forms of Merton’s prose.

Within this thesis, I have brought my claims into conversation with Seal’s by referring to the forms he extracts as embodying specific theological concepts. The shared stance identifying Merton’s poetics as theologically shaped provides common ground for identifying a model for theological form. A question which emerges within this partnership which could be further explored is to what extent might Merton’s theological poetics embody the aspirations concerning the renewal of theology in papal pronouncements?

Whilst Seal draws literary theory into partnership with theology, Daniel O’Leary’s ‘Begin with the Heart’ not only makes the case for a sacramental theology but offers materials which bear witness to his vision. Although directed at catechists, O’Leary argues that Catholic theology’s failure generally to embody a sacramental theology leaves theology starved of its greatest ally. He thus concurs with Pope Francis in showing how this embodiment is not simply the prerogative of pastoral theology or catechesis. He insists that the modelling of incarnational

³⁸ Seal.

³⁹ Abstract: Seal.

⁴⁰ Seal, p. 2.

⁴¹ Seal, p. 287.

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vision demands further exploration in order to restore energy and vibrancy to the discipline.⁴² On the accompanying film, O’Leary provides first-hand accounts showing the sacramental imagination in practice. The film is launched by O’Leary quoting Merton: ‘We exist solely for this, to be the human place that God has chosen for his presence’. Once again, theology is tasked with ‘opening a space for beauty’, to ‘become beauty’, to be the human place where God is made manifest. The difference is that O’Leary’s study offers a strategy to try out.

In different ways these two studies together with my exploration of Merton’s poetics point in the direction of a method. By variously embodying theological concepts, the question of how to craft an itinerary of beauty, a theology of hospitality, and a ‘creative apologetics’ provides fertile ground for further study.

II.iv ‘Facilitate the leap towards the transcendent’⁴³

The eco-spiritual links touched upon in this thesis are reflected in the papal appeal for Catholic theology to engage with environmental education. In *Laudato Si* Pope Francis asks ‘environmental education’ to enable the leap into mystery in order to give ‘ecological ethics its deepest meaning’. Highlighting the enormity of the environmental crisis, a consortium of French and Swiss scientists is making a similar appeal. They identify evidence of grief concerning ecological meltdown and make a plea for a spiritual response which points beyond the grief. Their framing of the appeal resembles monastic practices: a turning inward in order to better turn outwards, a contemplative acceptance of brokenness, a way of looking at the world differently in order to better construct a relationship with the world.⁴⁴ They leave the request indeterminately directed.

⁴² O’Leary, p. 62.

⁴³ Pope Francis, ‘Laudato Si’’, 2015 <http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html> [accessed 19/02/2020] par.210. ‘Environmental education should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning’.

⁴⁴ Jean Chamel, ‘Faire le deuil d’un monde qui meurt. Quand la collapsologie rencontre l’écospiritualité’, *Terrain. Anthropologie & sciences humaines*, 71, 2019, 68–85 <<https://doi.org/10.4000/terrain.18101>>. Paragraph 11. My paraphrased and translated summary: ‘Climate scientists look towards a similar paradigm of building beauty in the midst of catastrophic change (..) to find the strength and courage to transform the situation. They seek with reference to Gandhi a spiritual response to better confront the future, seeking other ‘tools to arm against a changing world’ and to develop a means of ‘looking at the world in a different way’ in order to reconstruct a relationship with the earth. There is a strong resonance with the mystical and contemplative path which facilitates an understanding of integration and unity as a means of absorbing the shock of circumstances and bringing an answer.

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Monica Weiss has traced how Merton was prophetic in his environmental vision.⁴⁵ An enquiry into how Merton's genre might provide a language for these appeals would provide cutting edge material as to where this spiritual energy might emerge from and be shaped by. This thesis has shown how Merton frames a language which invites interiority, into listening to the self-disclosure of place, into reverent attention to what is other. His genre releases a readiness to be disarmed, to stand compassionate, to practise silence and to show glimpses of integration and wholeness. An engagement with Merton's genre, therefore, offers potentially fruitful terrain for a creative apologetics, both in the context of Catholic teaching and ecological concerns. His willingness to show how theology can name and make present mystery places theology directly into contact with the aspirations of this secular field. Theology is thus released further from the limitations of its own self-confinement. His invitation steps beyond and might also strengthen statistics, arguments, and analysis. If a language is found to facilitate a way of seeing the world as sacred, further ballast is granted for a fuller and more empathetic response to political, economic, and ecological issues. Hence, a theology so liberated becomes an uncommon ally to those disciplines where it is not usually invited into the dialogue.

III

Coda

'She smiles for though they have been bound her, she cannot be prisoner'
Thomas Merton

These varied suggested trajectories provide a counterpoint to the prioritisation of rigour, precision, investigation, and clarity in theology; a prioritisation illustrated by scholastic theology manuals of the mid-20th century. This thesis has shown an alternative style in Merton's theological expression, a style which bears witness in its form to the truths it communicates. The tripartite dialogue of Merton's poetics of place draws from historically bound interrogations of place, *ressourcement* aspirations and literary endeavours. The dialogue ultimately negotiates, however, those elements met in the Incarnation, the meeting of word and Word dwelling in the

<https://journals.openedition.org/terrain/18101>. The key authors of 'collapsologie' are Paolo Servigné, and Raphaël Stevens: *Comment tout peut s'effondrer. Petit manuel de collapsologie à l'usage des générations présentes* (Anthropocène) Servigne, Pablo; Stevens, Raphaël, published by SEUIL (2015) With Gauthier Chapelle: *Une autre fin du monde est possible. Vivre l'effondrement (et pas seulement y survivre)* Seuil, 2018.

⁴⁵ Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 2011).

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world. This thesis explored Merton's questioning of a genre which resembled normative theological conventions, a questioning which began with his criticism of his own early works as cold and cerebral. Merton's conviction that 'the Incarnation is not something that can be fitted into a system',⁴⁶ emerges from a journey towards clarity through which he himself has been disarmed.

In Chapter One, I recalled Lubac's lament against the placing of limitations on mystery in the interest of 'inventorying, ordering and labelling'⁴⁷ and Guardini's different ways of knowing: the one which 'sinks into a thing and its context' in order 'to penetrate, to move within, to live with', the other which 'unpacks, tears apart, arranges in compartments, takes over and rules'.⁴⁸ In this study Merton is shown to reject the compartmentalisation of mystery. Yielding instead to what he sees disclosed, he stands within an overflowing incommensurability. In the midst of his earnest quest to craft a naming of this truth, the image which rises powerfully and incongruously from his narrative is an unexpected familiarity encapsulated in a smile of recognition. It is the graced wonder at the dance in Cuba, the fond vignettes of his fellow monks emerging as if shipwrecked, his own delight at a visit from his Aunt Kit, it is the unexpected song of a bobwhite, the smile of the dog and Grace at her window, of Alfonso Cortes and the Buddhas at Polonnaruwa. Merton thus fully demonstrates his endeavour to show a theology which, in Congar's words, is 'vitaly connected to human reality'. It is this vitality which the thesis has sought to highlight in its exploration of primary texts, showing an intimacy through which Merton invites participation in the clarity of what he sees. It is not clarity which is jettisoned in Merton's alternative mode.

This sense of smiling recognition is encapsulated above all in *Hagia Sophia* where Wisdom, as 'invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness',⁴⁹ that overflowing incommensurability, is an attendant nurse who echoes Merton's insistence that such truth cannot be formulaic or dogmatic: 'She smiles, for though they have bound her, she cannot be a prisoner'.⁵⁰ The elusive capaciousness of this truth is communicated with astounding

⁴⁶ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 17.

⁴⁷ Henri de Lubac *Henri Causes internes de l'atténuation et de la disparition du sens du Sacré*, in *Théologie dans l'histoire: II Questions disputées et résistance au nazisme* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1990)13-30. (p.23) Komonchak, p. 583.

⁴⁸ Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como*, p. 43.

⁴⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 363.

⁵⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 365-366.

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clarity and compassion, as God, the focus of theology, is depicted as a destitute vagrant on the roads of the world.⁵¹

It is this deeply theological underpinning which has led this study to name Merton a theologian and his work as theology, unlimited by any of the qualifying adjectives: patristic, mystic, contemplative, sapiential, monastic, literary. The degree to which Merton would welcome this identity, without the accompanying classification, raises the question as to the willingness of theology to become a more hospitable non-compartmentalising space. By adopting a more capacious medium, theology, in the manner of Merton's unconventional alternative voice, might prioritise more readily its own kinship with mystery, find a creatively faithful mode of expression, and hence step beyond disciplinary confinement.

⁵¹ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 371.

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