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Thomas Merton and the mask of Dylan: how Thomas Merton passed over into Bob Dylan's art

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Thomas Merton and the Mask of Dylan:

How Thomas Merton *Passed Over* into Bob Dylan's Art

Thesis

Submitted to

The College of Arts and Sciences of the

University of Dayton

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree

Master of Arts in Theology

by

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UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

Dayton, Ohio

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Abstract

Thomas Merton and the Mask of Dylan: How Thomas Merton *Passed Over* into Bob Dylan's Art.

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This thesis presents a monk's Catholic approach to American culture and examines how that encounter enriched his personal life, his poetry and prose, and his Catholic identity. The Catholic monk considered is Thomas Merton and the American culture he encountered was in the form of the iconic figure Bob Dylan. Theologian John S. Dunne's work in *The Way of All the Earth* provides a valuable method for understanding how this encounter took place and why it bore fruit. After a brief introduction and detailed explanation of my methodology, this thesis unfolds in three simple chapters. The first chapter presents Thomas Merton complete with general biographical points as well as more specific observations that prepare the reader for a proper understanding of how Merton encountered Dylan. It also situates Merton within his historical context, paying particular attention to events of the middle 1960s like The Second Vatican Council. The second chapter presents Bob Dylan, offering both general and specific biographical points, like the change of direction his art took in the middle 1960s, while situating him within his own socio-cultural context as well. The final chapter relies largely on Merton's journal entries and correspondences, but also incorporates secondary sources, to examine the actual encounter between Merton and Dylan's art.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Dr. Joseph Kozar, S.M. who patiently encouraged me in this endeavor and, similar to Rilke's words, taught me to confront the many demons that stand between an academic and the pearl of a finished work.

Thanks to Dr. Cecilia Moore who, in 2002, as if by providence, led her M.A. students on a pilgrimage to the Kentucky holy land – where I prayed Vespers with the monks of Gethsemani and knelt at Thomas Merton's grave.

Thanks to Fr. Paul Marshall, S.M. who I was assigned to as a research assistant during my first semester in the M.A. program, for teaching me that, indeed, the academic life has soul.

Many, many thanks are also due to the current Chair of the department Dr. Sandra Yocum Mize, because while I consistently doubted my own ability to function in an academic setting, she never seemed to share those doubts and, in fact, only encouraged me.

I also want to thank Damian Costello and Emily Strand for reasons that only they can know – the three of us having lived together during the second year of our M.A. studies.

Finally, thanks to my mother and father, Thomas and Maria Albarran, for allowing me to listen to whatever music I so wished at an early age, and for raising me in the aesthetic practice that is the Catholic Tradition – thus preparing me for all of my “passing over” experiences.

Dedication:

To my “Grandma from Greeley” (1912-2001)

&

My “Gramasita” (1911-2002)

“Once the Christian has gained a hearing, what does he preach if not God, Christ and the Church? Well, there are perhaps other things he can do, while waiting for these subjects to become once again fashionable. He can play a guitar.”

- Thomas Merton, *Redeeming the Time*

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Introduction

In the fall of 2004, I had the distinct pleasure, along with fellow graduate student Damian Costello, and one of our professors, Dr. William Portier, of escorting Fr. Robert Barron from the Dayton International Airport to the University of Dayton where he was to give a lecture on his book *The Strangest Way*. I recalled that Fr. Barron began many of the chapters in his book with quotations from numerous Dylan songs and therefore made it a point to inform Barron that I myself was also a Dylan fan, ever since a high-school friend of mine sat me down one evening in his living room, after cross-country practice, and forced me to listen – and I mean really listen, to his father’s copy of “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” on vinyl. Then, I asked him quite simply: “so why all the Dylan quotes in your book?” Within a short time the four of us were discussing Bob Dylan, Christianity, and theology in general, as we headed south on I-75 toward campus. Then I made a reference to Thomas Merton, Jacques Maritain and Bob Dylan and that’s when the other theologian in the car, Dr. William Portier, stared off into the distance and proclaimed “Merton playing Dylan records in his hermitage for Jacques Maritain was a great moment in American Catholic history!” I agreed.

Yet, despite numerous allusions to Bob Dylan in Merton’s primary sources and Merton scholarship, most scholars often omit any serious consideration of Bob Dylan’s influence on Thomas Merton. They fail to ask “what was a Trappist monk doing listening to Dylan records in his hermitage anyway?” This thesis seeks to answer that question. It is my contention that Dylan’s art functioned for Merton in at least three ways: first, it served as a means for him to express tensions he encountered in his

personal life; second, it influenced some of Merton's later work (e.g. his poetry and prose); and third, it helped bolster Merton's Catholic monastic identity.

This placement of Bob Dylan's art in a Christian or even specifically Catholic context is not entirely new. For example, Michael J. Gilmour's book *Tangled Up in the Bible* in general addresses the relationship between Dylan's art and scripture. As for a more specifically Catholic context, one need only look to Fr. Barron's work. As mentioned earlier, his *The Strangest Way* cites verses from Dylan's catalog, but one will also find allusions to Dylan in a previous book by Barron, *And Now I See*. I mention this to show that Dylan's art is a legitimate area for Thomas Merton to, in the words of theologian John S. Dunne, "pass over" into and "come back" from with insights into his own Catholic location.

Methodology

In his book *The Way of All the Earth*, Dunne explains how it is possible for a person from one religious tradition to "pass over" into another way of life, culture, or religious tradition and then "come back" to one's own tradition enriched by the experience.

I will apply Dunne's understanding of passing over and coming back to Merton's experience with Dylan's art, but before doing so, I need to address those two key phrases. Additionally, I will incorporate historian Lawrence Cunningham's article "Crossing Over in the Late Writings of Thomas Merton" to help clarify Dunne's terminology, and the objectives and assumptions in this thesis.

First, By “passing over,” John Dunne means: “a shifting of standpoint, a going over to the standpoint of another culture, another way of life, another religion.”¹ Make no mistake, as Lawrence Cunningham warns, for Dunne “these transits are not exercises in information gathering as if one wanted to ‘store up’ knowledge or experiences to enrich the cultural and intellectual horizons of a person.”² Rather, something more meaningful occurs. Cunningham explains that, in Dunne’s sense of the term, passing over becomes “a way that one learns from, and experiences, [other] traditions in a genuinely empathetic manner, and then return[s] again to one’s tradition enriched and deepened by that experience.”³

Second, John Dunne states: “[Passing over] is followed by an equal and opposite process we might call ‘coming back,’ coming back with new insight to one’s own culture, one’s own way of life, one’s own religion.”⁴ However, this only happens when one first prepares for coming back. This means establishing a strong foundation before embarking on the passing over experience in the first place, or else risk jeopardizing the essence of the experience altogether. Cunningham clarifies this point as well. He writes: “...one cannot ‘pass over’ ... in Dunne’s sense of the term unless one has a deep experiential center that serves as an anchored *terminus a quo*. Otherwise ‘passing over’ loses the sense in which Dunne intends for it and becomes a kind of dabbling in religious experience(s); a kind of spiritual tourism.”⁵

¹ John S. Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth: Experiments in Truth and Religion*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), ix.

² Lawrence S. Cunningham, “Crossing Over in the Late Writings of Thomas Merton,” in *Toward an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton’s Journey*, ed. M. Basil Pennington (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercain Publications, 1988), 194.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth*, ix.

⁵ Cunningham, “Crossing Over in the Late Writings of Thomas Merton,” 194.

I argue that Thomas Merton followed a similar path to that articulated by Dunne. He passed over into Dylan's art and came back enriched by the experience.

The presentation of this information unfolds as follows: chapter 1 offers a biographical sketch of Merton and places him in his historical context; chapter 2 offers brief biographical notes on Bob Dylan and more importantly establishes the relevancy of Dylan's art for Thomas Merton; and chapter 3 covers Merton's encounter with Dylan's art and his subsequent passing over experience.

Chapter 1: Thomas Merton

Biographical Points

Thomas Merton, born the son of artists, saw plenty of changes in the 53 years between his birth on January 31, 1915 and his death on December 10, 1968. Through the course of his life he journeyed from Prades, France, the town of his birth, to England, the United States of America, and Bangkok, among other places. In the late 1930s, he converted to Catholicism, and became a monk during the early 1940s. By the 1960s he felt called to further solitude, so, in communication with his abbot, he began to discern the possibilities of continuing his monastic existence in a hermitage – a lifestyle that he maintained would also facilitate part of the renewal he felt monasticism needed. In the middle 1960s he finally made the vow to live a more secluded life in his hermitage – it was in this hermitage that he first listened to Bob Dylan.

He converted to Catholicism between 1937 and 1939 after his time at Cambridge, while attending Columbia University.⁶ At Columbia he interacted with various students and professors who brought him closer to the church as they exposed him to new ideas and books with an explicitly Christian orientation. During his first year at Columbia, in 1935, one of the main influences on Merton was an English professor by the name of Mark Van Doren; his name deserves mention because of the respect Merton had for Van Doren and because of the role he played in Merton's conversion. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton recalls two important characteristics of Van Doren. First, Merton credits Van Doren with preparing his mind to "receive the good seed of scholastic philosophy" by teaching as one who, in the words of Merton: "sought being and

⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1976), 204.

substance under the covering of accident and appearances.”⁷ While discussing this point, he notes that Van Doren was familiar with such modern scholastics as: Etienne Gilson, author of *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, and Mortimer Adler and Richard McKeon, both neo-Thomists. Second, Van Doren’s approach to poetry proved equally impressionable on Merton because “for [Van Doren] poetry was, indeed, a virtue of the practical intellect, and not simply a vague spilling of the emotions.”⁸ Scholasticism and poetry, among other factors discussed below, proved influential in Merton’s conversion as well as his vocation to the monastic life.

In the spring of 1937, three of Merton’s friends, one of them Robert Lax, who is now an author and poet, pondered becoming Catholic. Lax introduced Merton to the idea of asceticism a few months later by way of Aldous Huxley’s book *Ends and Means*. After reading *Ends and Means*, Merton’s conversion toward religious life took another step forward. He wrote: “my own personal misery in my particular situation and the general crisis of the world made me accept with my whole heart this revelation of the need for a spiritual life, an interior life, including some kind of mortification.”⁹

After graduation, Thomas Merton moved into an apartment behind the Columbia library. In this new apartment he began his M.A. thesis on the poet William Blake.¹⁰ This work also became instrumental in Merton’s conversion to Catholicism.¹¹

He especially looked at “Nature and Art in William Blake,” and through his work learned that Blake wrote contrary to the romantics who, as Merton said, glorified passion and natural energy for their own sake. As the argument revealed itself to Merton it also

⁷ Ibid., 140.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 186-187.

¹⁰ Victor A. Kramer, *Thomas Merton* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 6.

helped him recognize his own need to refine and purify himself. He writes: "I, who had always been anti-naturalistic in art, had been a pure naturalist in the moral order. No wonder my soul was sick and torn apart: but now the bleeding wound was drawn together by the notion of Christian virtue, ordered to the union of the soul with God."¹²

During the course of his conversion Merton read other more explicitly Catholic oriented poets. For example, he found himself absorbed in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins and set his sights on him as his proposed doctoral subject. Also, religious questions were becoming increasingly important, and he asked questions like: "what did Jesuits do? What did a priest do?"¹³

He decided to read a biography on Hopkins and soon found himself eager for baptism into the Catholic Church. Something inside him stirred when he read about Hopkins' dialogue with Cardinal Newman regarding his own conversion. So he headed to Corpus Christi Church at 525 West 121st Street in search of Father George B. Ford, the counselor for Catholic students at Columbia. They sat in the parlor by the door and Merton told him: "Father, I want to become a Catholic."¹⁴

On November 16, 1938, Thomas Merton received baptism into the Catholic Church, but he worried that his conversion remained primarily an intellectual one.¹⁵ So he began to consider religious orders to bridge the chasm between his beliefs and actions. He decided against the Jesuits, whom he previously considered, because he thought "what [he] needed was the solitude to expand in breadth and depth and to be

¹¹ Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 204.

¹² Jennifer Fisher Bryant, *Thomas Merton: Poet, Prophet, Priest* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 56-57. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 203.

¹³ Kramer, *Thomas Merton*, 6. *Seven Storey Mountain*, 211.

¹⁴ Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 215, 216. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), 105.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 231.

simplified out under the gaze of God more or less the way a plant spreads out its leaves in the sun. That meant that I needed a Rule that was almost entirely aimed at detaching me from the world and uniting me with God, not a Rule made to fit me to fight for God in the world.”¹⁶ So he considered the Benedictines, the Franciscans, and the Cistercians.

Meanwhile, he decided to take a job teaching college students and seminarians at St. Bonaventure. There “it amazed [him] how swiftly [his] life fell into a plan of fruitful and pleasant organization, [...] under the roof with these Friars, in this house dedicated to God.” Merton attributed the fruits of his situation to the community, the proximity of the chapel Tabernacle, and the Office he recited everyday, and last but not least his seclusion.¹⁷

In addition, he decided to make a retreat in a monastery for Holy Week and Easter. He immediately thought about the Cistercian Trappist monastery in Kentucky and, as he flipped through the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, he learned that the Trappists belonged to the Cistercian order of strict obedience, the order that once frightened Merton but now sounded pleasing to him.

To make the trip he took a series of trains to Louisville, and then caught another train on the way to Bardstown junction. The train dropped him off at a station in the middle of the Kentucky hills; there he met a man who drove him to the monastery. He entered the monastery shortly after eight o’clock, and the experiences that followed changed his life forever.

The community of monks mostly impressed Merton because “they were concerned with one thing only: doing the things they had to do.” This observation led him

¹⁶ Ibid., 260-261.

¹⁷ Ibid., 304, 305.

to write, "I don't think I had ever seen anything, anywhere, so unaffected, so un-self-conscious as these monks."¹⁸ So, before he left Gethsemani he prayed the Stations of the Cross, and at the fourteenth station, the same station that his Retreat Master suggested "no petition you ask... is ever refused," he prayed "for the grace of a vocation to the Trappists, if it were pleasing to God."¹⁹

Later, Merton and Mark Van Doren discussed the validity of Merton's vocation, and through the course of the conversation both Van Doren and Merton realized its legitimacy. So, on December 10, 1941, Thomas Merton entered Gethsemani, in Bardstown, Kentucky, again, but this time to remain as a novice.

"This time have you come to stay?" asked Brother Matthew. "Yes, Brother, if you'll pray for me" said Thomas Merton.²⁰ With that Thomas Merton turned his back on the world and eagerly entered the solitude promised by the walls of Gethsemani. The Medieval-monastic climate he found there, with its reigning neo-Thomism, and sclerotic Christology, supported his already negative view of the world, and further divided the holy from the secular in his mind, but it also prepared a solid foundation for his passing over experiences. Less than a decade into his monastic life, however, Merton would begin to struggle intellectually with Thomistic categories.

For a time he thought this complete renunciation of his worldly life, and the world itself, would also include abandoning his love of writing. As historian James T. Fisher notes, Merton expressed anxiety in a journal entry when he wrote: "I would have to renounce more in entering the Trappists. That would be one place where I would have to

¹⁸ Ibid., 329.

¹⁹ Ibid., 332.

²⁰ Ibid., 371.

give up *everything*.”²¹ It turned out that Merton continued his writing inside the monastery but only in a manner that he, and his authorities, deemed appropriate for a monk. With this criteria in mind he wrote primarily devotional and historical works that his order and abbot commissioned.

His writing from his early years in the monastery reflects his renunciation of the world as he implied a division between the Church and the world/ the holy and the secular. It also represents his zealous tendencies as he writes overly pious works rather than straight religious works. In many ways selections from Merton’s autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* exemplify his increasingly negative perception of the world. In one passage he writes: “And the emptiness and futility and nothingness of the world once more invaded me from every side. But now it could not disturb me or make me unhappy. It was sufficient to know that even if I might be in it, that did not compel me to have any part of it, or to belong to it, or even to be seriously begrimed by its sorry, unavoidable contact.”²²

Merton’s authorities also instructed him to write devotional and historical works. Three books from his first ten years at Gethsemani deserve mention: *Exile Ends in Glory*, *What Are These Wounds?* and *The Ascent to Truth*.

First, in *Exile Ends in Glory*, Merton offered a biographical account of the Trappistine Marie Piquet, also known as Mother Berchmans. He demonstrated his concentration on pious writing and pious figures when he quoted, with approval, Mother Berchmans’ “Canticle of Gratitude.”²³ Merton quoted: “Thank You, dearest Jesus, for

²¹ James T. Fisher, *The Catholic Counterculture in America, 1933-1962* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 219.

²² Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 352.

²³ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 220.

having raised my soul above all things of this earth and for having allowed me to find nothing but deception and boredom among creatures.”²⁴ Second, in *What Are These Wounds?*, he offered a pious hagiographical account of a thirteenth-century Cistercian nun and mystic, Saint Lurgarde of Aywieres, and focused primarily on her achievement of the stigmata.²⁵ Then, in 1951, Merton released his study of the Spanish contemplative St. John of the Cross: *The Ascent to Truth*. Merton actually began this book as early as 1947, when he was still in the midst of his early-convert-triumphalist period and comfortably situated within the remnants of Medieval-monasticism. In accordance with his context, he attempted to explain the mystic’s approach to God within the theological categories found in St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*. He did so with little success.²⁶

By the end of the 1940s, Thomas Merton became less satisfied with his writing for two main reasons. First, he repeatedly criticized his earlier thoughts and writings for being overly pious. An analysis of his journal entries, especially during January 1948, reveals this awareness and conscious change in his attitude towards his early writings. Second, his struggle to balance neo-Thomistic categories also hindered his writing. Biographer Michael Mott and U.S. Catholic historian James T. Fisher comment on this change in Merton based on their readings of primary sources from this era, especially *The Ascent to Truth*.

First, consider the journal entries. On January 4, 1948, in an entry titled “Day of Recollection,” Merton criticized some of his 1946 entries for being artificial and overly pious. He wrote: “I was trying to express what I thought I *ought* to think” and later he

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Fisher, *The Catholic Counterculture*, 223.

added, "I was trying so much to write it like every other pious diary that was ever written."²⁷ Then, on January 27th, 1948, Merton criticized his published material too. He specifically addressed *Exile Ends in Glory* and sincerely sought repentance for his pious writing. He actually wrote, "God defend me from the stuffy academic language and from the pious jargon I feel I got into in so many parts of *Exile Ends in Glory* on the theory that, since I was a monk, I *had* to write that way. NO! That is not the way to write! It does NO GOOD."²⁸ James T. Fisher, in his book *The Catholic Counterculture in America*, also criticizes Merton's pious writing, but he focuses on *What Are These Wounds?* He notes that books like this "had more in common with the type of pious literature Merton scorned than the elegant scholastic works which attracted him to the church."²⁹

Second, consider Mott and Fisher's comments on Merton's struggle with neo-Thomism. 1951's *The Ascent to Truth* serves as a sufficient example of Merton's struggle to outgrow neo-Thomism. For this book, he chose as his methodology the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, as found in the *Summa*. His plan was to explain the mystic's approach to God in Thomistic terms. Michael Mott argues that "the result is a work with some very tenuous connections in argument and a few fine passages."³⁰ James T. Fisher calls *The Ascent to Truth* Merton's "last fully triumphalist work," and notes that it demonstrates the "inadequacies of Catholic formalism" for Thomas Merton as he strains himself writing within neo-Thomistic categories.³¹

²⁶ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 237.

²⁷ *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*, ed. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo, (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 48.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁹ Fisher, *The Catholic Counterculture*, 226.

³⁰ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 237.

³¹ Fisher, *The Catholic Counterculture*, 226.

Around this time, historian Albert J. Raboteau writes, Merton “suddenly [began] turning out volumes of essays on civil rights, nuclear weapons, the Vietnam War, and expressing radical views on social and political issues.”³² This shift came as he rediscovered an alternative Christology, reclaimed from within his Cistercian tradition, that countered the dominant descending Christology and served as a catalyst reacting with a theological impulse already present in his own personality, and as a result helped reorient him with the world.

Merton found a balanced Christology in the work of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux – a Christology that encompassed both the divinity as well as the humanity of Jesus.³³ This balanced Christology minimized the dichotomy between the holy and the secular in Merton’s mind. Prior to this realization, in reference to Neo-Thomism’s descending Christology, Merton stated that he “was dealing in a crude theology that I had learned as a novice: a cleancut division between the natural and supernatural, God and the world, sacred and secular, with boundary lines that were supposed to be quite evident.”³⁴

Merton’s realization of the transparency of the boundaries separating the holy and the secular, and his rejection of the “notion that monasticism somehow entailed a vertical ascent to perfection,” allowed him to rekindle certain interests and concerns from his pre-

³² Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 170.

³³ George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 6. Another source shows that Merton revealed the optimism he found in St. Bernard of Clairvaux’s Christology as early as 1947, when he wrote a letter to Fr. Raymond Flanagan. In the letter, Merton sheepishly explained some of St. Bernard’s Christology to him, and then offered suggestions for further reading and cited pages from Etienne Gilson’s *The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*. He concluded with: “Forgive my talking like this to someone who knows all the theology you do when I don’t know any – but at least I have read St. Bernard a bit; and honestly, Father, you could do a tremendous amount in getting people interested in what is an essentially healthy and simple and powerful spirituality.” See *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), 233.

monastic years.³⁵ His new view of the world encouraged him to work at transcending denominational boundaries and religious boundaries, renew his interest in world literature, and discuss implications necessary for promoting world peace. He also opened himself to the influence of the counterculture of the time: the beat movement – in which Bob Dylan also located himself, and later the 1960s' counterculture.

Merton's contemporaries noticed the change in him. Brother Antoninus, a Dominican monk, correspondent of Merton's, and himself a poet highly favored in the San Francisco Beat scene, sensed in Merton what he called a "freeing from the religious superego" during this time. He encouraged Merton's gradual rejection of the "digested quality about so much theological writing today," and by that he specifically referred to neo-Thomism and even went so far as to call it "insufferable stuff."³⁶

After turning away from the convert triumphalism of his early years, the Merton of the 1960s openly embraced his new understanding of the world and all that followed with it.³⁷ His work and journals during this time demonstrate his new disposition and attitude. As Therese Lentfoehr summarizes: Merton "now found relevance in all that touches his fellow [humans], with whom he closely identified."³⁸

Historical Context

History remembers the 1960s as a complicated time of great social upheaval with too many events occurring in a short span of time. As the world grew more complicated Thomas Merton moved with it causing his own life to grow exponentially more complicated. The year 1962 alone saw Martin Luther King Jr. jailed in Albany, Georgia,

³⁵ Fisher, *The Catholic Counterculture*, 246.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 243.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, xv.

as the struggle for civil rights intensified; by September Soviet missiles were discovered in the communist controlled island of Cuba, and President John F. Kennedy vowed to take any and all necessary steps to temper Cuban aggression, while Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev vowed to defend Cuba against any aggression on the part of the United States. It was also the year that the United States sent its first advisors over to Vietnam, a conflict soon to become a devastating war. Further, as the middle 1960s unfolded, folk singer Bob Dylan forever changed American popular music and ushered in the next generation of the American counter-culture while the heightened tensions in the Civil Rights movement mounted and both President John F. Kennedy and then later the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. fell at the hands of assassins. Finally, by 1965, the Second Vatican Council concluded their four year meeting in Rome with a statement on the relationship between the Church and the modern world – all before Merton's death in 1968.

During this time Thomas Merton expanded his circle of dialogue to include everything, and everyone, from D.T. Suzuki and Zen Buddhism to a letter to a seventh grader concerning Kentucky music – in which Merton replied: "All I know is that I like Country Music when I hear it, which is rarely. I like Johnny Cash, but I guess he is not from Kentucky."³⁹ Along the way he also associated with Joan Baez, borrowed a record player, listened to his first Dylan records, read and wrote about LSD, referring to it as "something one has to know about,"⁴⁰ received invitations to attend and speak at peace

³⁸ Therese Lentfoehr, S.D.S., *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York, NY: New Directions, Publishing Corporation, 1979), 41.

³⁹ Robert E. Daggy, "The Road to Joy: Thomas Merton's Letters to and About Young People," in *Toward an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton's Journey*, ed. M. Basil Pennington (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988), 55.

⁴⁰ *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York, NY: Harper San Francisco, 1997), 94.

rallies, published two of Jack Kerouac's poems in his little magazine Monk's Pond, and even traveled to Bangkok for a monastic conference.

The Counterculture in America

During the 1960s Merton openly embraced the counterculture's art, and he found Bob Dylan's art particularly interesting. In fact, Eric J. Scheske argues, in his article "Three American Sophomores: The Restlessness of Thomas Merton, J. D. Salinger & Jack Kerouac," that "in general, [Merton] was caught up in the counterculture...."⁴¹

Some of the counterculture's influences even found their way into Merton's hermitage personally. For example, inside his hermitage he listened to Bob Dylan, whom he quickly considered "one of the most important voices in this country" because of his "infinite variety."⁴² Also, Joan Baez and her friend, both active members in the peace movement, once spent a full day and night at Merton's hermitage. They discussed an upcoming peace rally, Merton's monastic commitments, and Bob Dylan.⁴³

The Second Vatican Council

From 1962 to 1965, under the direction of Pope John Paul XXIII, the Second Vatican Council met to discuss renewal in the Church and her ability to develop with the modern world. *Gaudium et Spes*, the last of the various documents drafted by the council, helped to articulate the newly expanding boundaries of the theological landscape deemed appropriate for those inside the institutional church to cultivate.

According to Thomas Merton, *Gaudium et Spes* exemplified the Church's

⁴¹ Eric J. Scheske, "Three American Sophomores: The Restlessness of Thomas Merton, J. D. Salinger & Jack Kerouac," in *Touchstone* 13:8 (2000), 33.

⁴² Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*, 101.

⁴³ *Learning to Love*, 167.

recognition of the fact that by maintaining a purely inward language it inhibited itself by not allowing it to communicate with fellow humans in the world.⁴⁴

In *Message to Artists*, another document from the council, the church affirmed the value of literature and art and their role in a truly human life. Pope John Paul II referred to this document in a pamphlet he wrote in 1999 titled *To Artists*. In his pamphlet, he stated that the Council Fathers “laid the foundation for a renewed relationship between the Church and culture, with immediate implications for the world of art.”⁴⁵ He noted that this relationship drew from friendship, openness and dialogue “even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart...” because “art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, he stated that true art, whether specifically religious in theme or exploring “the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil... [gives] voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption.”⁴⁷ He argued that this occurs because artists “seek to probe the true nature of [humankind], [our] problems and experiences, as [we strive] to know and perfect [ourselves] and the world, to discover [our] place in history and the universe, to portray [our] miseries and joys, [our] needs and strengths.”⁴⁸

Most importantly, citing *Gaudium et Spes*, Pope John Paul II noted that thanks to literature and art sometimes “the knowledge of God can be better revealed and the preaching of the Gospel can become clearer to the human mind” even if it does not come

⁴⁴ Thomas Merton, *Redeeming the Time* (London, England: Burns & Oates, 1966), 36.

⁴⁵ Pope John Paul II, *To Artists* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 1999), 26.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

from a specifically religious source.⁴⁹ Merton's passing over into Bob Dylan's music exemplifies this point well.

Implementing Vatican II

So the middle 1960s found Thomas Merton armed with Rome's approval, further expanding his horizons in his quest to cultivate the Truth found in both God and humankind. For *Gaudium et Spes*, as Merton understood it, is "in reality a theological statement on [humankind's] capacity for good and evil." So it follows, as Merton acknowledged, and the Council too, that engaging the world presents advantages for the church itself. He understands, like the Council, that "unchurched" people "offer to the church an opportunity for dialogue in which she herself can discover new possibilities of growth towards a new maturity."⁵⁰ In other words, as John Dunne might say, the Catholic Church potentially benefits when its members pass over into the "secular" realm.

Merton's ever expanding field of dialogue and experiences throughout the 1960s should not come as a surprise. As early as 1958, Thomas Merton argued for the worth of poets outside the company of traditionally pious Christian poets: poets such as T.S. Eliot, Rainer Rilke, Dylan Thomas (from whom Robert Zimmerman, better known as Bob Dylan, derived his stage name), and Rimbaud (whom Bob Dylan widely read). Merton based his perception of these poets on "his growing conviction that he who arrogates the total truth to his own understanding of it has lost it."⁵¹ In fact, John Albert, a Cistercian monk from Georgia, argues that for a 'fully integrated vision of our time and of its spirit'

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Merton, *Redeeming the Time*, 9, 12, 40.

⁵¹ John Albert, "The Christ-filled Decadence of Thomas Merton," in *Toward an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton's Journey*, ed. M. Basil Pennington (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988), 77.

Merton looked to both the 'contra-religious' as well as the 'contra-secular' poets of the past and present....⁵² In a 1966 letter, Merton himself wrote: "I do feel that if I am not in some way able to identify myself with my contemporaries and if I isolate myself so entirely from them that I imagine that I am a different kind of being, I am simply perpetrating a kind of religious fraud." He added, "I quite simply believe that I have to hear the voice of God mostly in the Bible and other writings, but [also] in the crisis of this age."⁵³ Thus, Merton became a paradigmatic example of the Second Vatican Council in the matter of engaging the secular.

For as much as he expanded his thought, however, Thomas Merton never completely stepped outside his Christian context. As Therese Lentfoehr, a poet and friend of Merton's, states: "each poet has [his/her] individual vision which closes in on the *mythos* in which [s/he] works. Merton's central vision was the Christian context in which [humankind's] ultimate calling is to contemplation." She adds, "this it was that shaped and controlled his performance as a poet."⁵⁴

Thus, when Thomas Merton read poetry or listened to music, including Bob Dylan's, he did so as a Catholic monk.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *Witness to Freedom*, 318.

Chapter 2: Bob Dylan

Of all the various exploratory avenues available for Thomas Merton to take in his lifetime, the 1960s counter-cultural icon Bob Dylan hardly seems appropriate, especially given Merton's identity as a Catholic monk and, furthermore, one who committed himself to life in a hermitage. Nevertheless, this chapter offers information on Bob Dylan with the hopes of establishing his art as a valid conversation partner for Merton's passing over experience. I will begin by identifying Dylan's socio-historical context and then move to three important discussions: first, influences on Dylan's writing; second, dominant themes in the majority of Dylan's lyrics; and finally, how his art functions.

History

Dylan's characteristics and tendencies predominately emerged from an American culture of previous generations that developed while Thomas Merton was a devout monk inside the monastery. I am referring to the Beat Generation. For the "hippies" of the 1960's counterculture really resembled and owed much of their influence to the "Beats" of the of the late 1940s and 1950s.

The Beat movement, beginning in the 1940s, started as a literary movement and gathered momentum in New York City's underground culture with such writers and poets as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Basically, the members of the Beat generation reacted against the values of materialism and conformity established by their parents during the anxious time that surrounded World War II. For example, they rejected the notion that conformity bred prosperity, and chose instead to champion the autonomous individual and his/her artistic expression. They in turn owed their influence to counter-

⁵⁴ Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*, 139.

cultural writers of the “lost generation” like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald from the 1920s and 30s.

During the post-beat scene (starting in the late 1950s) and before the term “hippy” became a national phenomenon (1966, 1967), the legacy of the counter-culture in America continued in the form of Bob Dylan. Through music Bob Dylan addressed the fear and loathing prevalent in America’s consciousness at the time and became the voice for a whole new generation. His music captured the changing face of America so precisely that American journalist Dr. Hunter S. Thompson wrote “anyone curious about the style and tone of the ‘younger generation’s’ thinking in the early 1960s has only to play [Dylan’s] albums in chronological order.”⁵⁵ He added, “this focus on Dylan is no accident,” because “any culture – and especially any sub-culture – can be at least tentatively defined by its heroes ... and of all the hippy heroes, Bob Dylan was first and foremost.”⁵⁶

Biographical Points

Dylan entered New York City in January of 1961, and by Thanksgiving had already recorded material for his debut album *Bob Dylan*, released in March 1962. This album mainly contained old Folk and Folk Blues standards, but his following albums, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* and *The Times They Are A’Changin’*, marked a visible transition as he wrote topical songs that drew from that year’s various sources of inspiration.

⁵⁵ *Fear and Loathing in America: The Brutal Odyssey of an Outlaw Journalist, 1968-1976*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* It is also interesting to note that in a letter dated December 11, 1970, Dr. Thompson wrote *Rolling Stone* editor John Lombardi and stated that “music is the New Literature, that Dylan is the 1960s’ answer to Hemingway, and that the main voice of the ‘70s will be on records & Videotape instead of books.” (343)

The album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, his second, was released in May of 1963, and it gave the world songs like "Blowin' in the Wind" which became "one of the most famous songs of the postwar era."⁵⁷ In addition, it offered "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," "Masters of War," and "Oxford Town" – all songs that prophesied the rising tensions in racial relations and war within the United States and the world. Dylan wrote these songs and released them as America entered a period of enormous upheaval and social change.⁵⁸

By 1964, the struggle for African Americans to attain their civil rights quickened and the Mississippi summer protests were underway. Dylan again addressed these concerns in the form of music, and the songs that resulted from these concerns appeared on his third album *The Times They Are A'Changin'*. Two songs in particular deserve mention: "Only a Pawn in Their Game" and "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll." Equally important was the title song of the album, a song that served as an anthem for the next generation in the counter-culture, "The Times They Are A-Changin'."

According to Thompson, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy serves as a benchmark that allows an observer to gauge the change in the general style and lyrical content that marked Dylan's next four albums. Thompson wrote: "in the months after the death of President Kennedy, Dylan switched from the hard commitments of social realism to the more abstract 'realities' of neo-protest and disengagement."⁵⁹

The "switch" in Dylan's style appears intentional and withstands the assumption that he abandoned social concern in his writing. Said more precisely, as Anthony Varesi claims in his book *The Bob Dylan Albums*, Dylan "began to experiment more with

⁵⁷ Howard Sounes, *Down the Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan* (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 114.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

language.”⁶⁰ As he experimented with and expanded his understanding of language he gained a critical distance from the particulars. A distance that allowed his view to encompass not only the African-American plight for civil rights but to extend beyond that “to include political prisoners, those who would practice civil disobedience, rebels, outcasts and ‘every hung-up person in the whole wide universe.’”⁶¹ In short, Varesi maintains that in his next four albums “Dylan isn’t disavowing his earlier songs, he’s just viewing the situation from a different angle.”⁶² This abstractness in Dylan’s new songs allowed room for Merton to pass over into Dylan’s art and come back with insights into his own life and work.

In *The Art of Bob Dylan*, Michael Gray maintains the argument in favor of Dylan’s move away from the realism and topical songs associated with his first three albums: *Bob Dylan*, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, and *The Times They Are A’Changin’*. He argues that Dylan’s move toward the nonlinear lyrics and surrealism of his next four albums: *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde on Blonde*, ought to actually help his audience achieve a broader perspective of the problems in the world rather than dismiss them.

What Gray actually does is reverse the argument against Dylan’s switch and criticizes the earlier Dylan albums with their “protest” songs because of the over reliance on cliché in the lyrics which only results in a basic rehashing of messages or arguments. The later songs from *Another Side of Bob Dylan* to *Blonde on Blonde*, Gray argues, are

⁵⁹ *Fear and Loathing*, 5.

⁶⁰ Anthony Varesi, *The Bob Dylan Albums: A Critical Study* (Toronto: Guernica, 2002), 42.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶² *Ibid.*

actually the more artful, valuable and potent.⁶³ On this issue, both Gray and Varesi, as well as other prominent Dylan scholars like Mike Marqusee and Michael J. Gilmour, and still others, cite Bob Dylan's use of language as the vital thrust to this characteristic of his art.

Here we turn to a discussion of the main sources for Dylan's new language, then a brief appreciation of two dominant themes addressed in Dylan's lyrics, and finally, the effects of that new language on his audience.

Sources for Dylan's Language

Bob Dylan drew from various sources to achieve his new language and many of them would have appealed to Thomas Merton. The following addresses two of the main components that influenced Dylan's language during the middle 1960s. Although Dylan drew from other sources, as well, they are beyond the scope of this thesis. Arguably, the list of influences on Dylan's lyrics could go on forever, but I focus on these two if only because of their frequent repetition and their relevance for Thomas Merton. First, one needs to consider the Bible's influence on Dylan's lyrics, and second, the influence of several key poets on Dylan's lyrics – poets that Merton himself also enjoyed.

First, the Bible is constantly heard in Bob Dylan's lyrics.⁶⁴ Perhaps the recurrence of biblical images and symbols comes from Dylan's Jewish heritage. Although his family was not Orthodox and nor was his hometown Jewish community, Dylan biographer Howard Sounes notes that when it came time for Bob Dylan to have his bar mitzvah the community in Hibbing, Minnesota, brought in a rabbi from New York.

⁶³ Michael Gray, *The Art of Bob Dylan: Song and Dance Man* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 23. Based on Merton's journal entries, it was these latter songs that seem to have captured his imagination the most.

Every day after school Bob went downtown to study under the rabbi. After the bar mitzvah, the rabbi returned to New York. Sounes adds that although “Bob was not brought up in an Orthodox home, he did receive a grounding in the Bible,” and he maintains that this foundation provided “an important source of imagery for his song lyrics long before his Christian conversion of the 1970s.”⁶⁵

In addition to the Bible, several key poets also influenced Bob Dylan’s language. This became the second component to his language. And although he drew his inspiration from many poets, the following addresses three prominent ones: Arthur Rimbaud, William Blake, and T.S. Eliot. Their influence appears in staggering flashes on Dylan’s work from the middle 1960s: beginning with the album *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964); *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965); *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965); and *Blonde on Blonde* (1966) – interestingly enough, the last three albums also seemed to peek Merton’s interest the most.

Anthony Varesi points to *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (the fourth album) as the album where Dylan began to experiment most obviously with complex poetic language.⁶⁶ He notes that Dylan’s reliance on Arthur Rimbaud deserves much of the credit for this change and cites Anthony Scaduto’s work: *Bob Dylan: An Intimate Biography*, and Robert Shelton’s *No Direction Home*, to support this claim. In Scaduto’s book, he maintains that “bombarded by visionaries such as Rimbaud... and the anonymous authors of the Bible, among others, the songs that were beginning to flow from [Dylan] were growing more transcendent, less concretely objective, increasingly filled with the shapes

⁶⁴ Michael J Gilmour, *Tangled Up in The Bible: Bob Dylan and Scripture* (New York, London: Continuum, 2004), 11.

⁶⁵ Sounes, *Down the Highway*, 21. Also see Bert Cartwright’s *The Bible in the Lyrics of Bob Dylan* (Bury, Lancashire: Wanted Man, 1985).

of vivid fantasy, with the motifs out of the collective unconscious.”⁶⁷ In Shelton’s book, he cites Dave Van Ronk, one of the many folk revival artists in Greenwich Village, as stating: “on [Dylan’s] shelf I discovered a book of translations of French symbolist poets that has obviously been thumbed through over a period of years! I think he probably knew Rimbaud backward and forward.”⁶⁸

Michael Gray best examines the second poets’ influence, William Blake, on Dylan’s lyrics by discussing his fifth, sixth, and seventh albums: *Bringing It All Back Home*, and *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde on Blonde*, and comparing elements within them to Blake’s poetry. Gray argues that Dylan’s language clearly mirrors Blakeian poetry in one particular song from *Bringing It All Back Home*, “Gates of Eden. He writes: “When you consider in relation to Blake what is a difficult and central work of Dylan’s, you come inevitably to ‘Gates of Eden’. The purposive force of what is palpably Blakeian impinges in every verse. It is the major Dylan song prior to ‘Every Grain of Sand’ that is most like Blake, and like the most characteristic Blake at that.”⁶⁹

He concentrates part of his argument on Dylan’s Blakeian balance of opposites. He states: “the general themes of ‘Gates of Eden’ could not be more Blakeian and nor could their treatment.” The balance of opposites that Dylan treats are: “of material wealth and spiritual; of earthly reality and the imaginatively real; of the body and soul; of false gods and true vision; of self-gratification and salvation; of moral ambitions and the celestial city; of sins and forgiveness; of evil and good.”⁷⁰ He adds: “not only are these

⁶⁶ Varesi, *The Bob Dylan Albums*, 42.

⁶⁷ Anthony Scaduto, *Bob Dylan: An Intimate Biography* (New York: New American Library, 1973), 177-178.

⁶⁸ Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: the Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986), 99.

⁶⁹ Gray, *The Art of Bob Dylan*, 61.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

Blake's themes, but they receive directly comparable handling..." and "this evocation of balance is very neatly enforced by the contrasts completed in every verse of the song."⁷¹

The balance of opposites that Gray alludes to are as follows:

On their promises of paradise
You will not hear a laugh...

The kingdoms of Experience
In the precious wind they rot
While paupers change possessions
Each one wishing for what the other has got
And the princess and the prince
Discuss what's real and what is not...

As friends and other strangers
From their fates try to resign
Leaving men wholly, totally free
To do anything they wish to do but die...

At times I think there are no words
But these to tell what's true
And there are not truths outside the Gates of Eden.⁷²

Also, while considering the Blakeian technique above, notice, as Michael Marqusee observes, Dylan's "apt reference to Blake" in the line "the kingdoms of Experience."⁷³

A juxtaposed reading of Blake's poetry with the liner-notes from Bob Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited*, also supports the argument for Blake's influence. Following is a lengthy excerpt from Blake's "Island In The Moon," but the extended quotation is necessary to do justice to the comparisons found in Dylan's piece. In "Island," Blake wrote:

In a great hurry, Inflammable Gass the Wind-finder enter'd. They seem'd to rise & salute each other. Etruscan Column & Inflammable Gass fix'd their eyes on each other; their tongues went in question and answer, but their thoughts were otherwise employ'd. 'I don't like his eyes,' said Etruscan Column. 'He's a foolish puppy,' said Inflammable Gass, smiling on him. The 3 Philosophers – the Cynic smiling, the Epicurean seeming studying the flame of the candle, & the Pythagorean playing with the cat – listen'd with open mouths ... Then Quid call'd upon Obtuse Angle for a song, & he, wiping his face &

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Bob Dylan, *Lyrics, 1962-1985* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1994), 174-175.

⁷³ Michael Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom: the Politics of Bob Dylan's Art* (New York: New Press, 2003), 166.

looking on the corner of the ceiling, sang: To be or not to be/Of great capacity/Like Sir Isaac Newton,/Or Locke, or Doctor South...⁷⁴

Now consider an even larger excerpt from the sleeve notes of Dylan's *Highway 61* to demonstrate the similarities in language. Here Dylan writes:

Savage Rose & Openly are bravely blowing kisses to the Jade Hexagram – Carnaby Street & To all of the mysterious juveniles & the Cream judge is writing a book on the true meaning of a pear – last year, he wrote one on famous dogs of the Civil War & now he has false teeth and no children ... when the Cream met Savage Rose & Openly, he was introduced to them by none other than Lifelessness – Lifelessness is the Great Enemy & always wears a hipguard – he is very hipguard ... Lifelessness said when introducing everybody 'go save the world' & 'involvement! that's the issue' & things like that & Savage Rose winked at Openly & the Cream went off with his arm in a sling singing 'so much for yesterday' ... the clown appears – puts a gag over Autumn's mouth & says 'there are two kinds of people – simple people & normal people' this usually gets a big laugh from the sandpit & White Heap sneezes – passes out & wakes up & rips open Autumn's gag & says 'What do you mean you're Autumn and without you there'd be no Spring! you fool! without Spring, there'd be no you! what do you think of that???' then Savage Rose & Openly come by & kick him in the brains & colour him pink for being a phony philosopher – then the clown comes by ... & some college kid who's read all about Nietzsche come by & says 'Nietzsche never wore an umpire's suit' & Paul says 'you wanna buy some clothes, kid?' & then Rose & John come out of the bar & they're going up to Harlem...⁷⁵

At times, like in *Blonde on Blonde*'s "Visions of Johanna," Dylan even uses "Blake's very favourite words" to twist as much energy and vision out of his lyrics as possible.⁷⁶ Gray lists three of these words/phrases: 'howl', 'golden loon', and 'the rolling thunder'. He also argues that "Dylan's most Blakeian lines are of the long visionary kind that Blake would punctuate with scattered capital letters and might end with an exclamation mark," he suggests the following Blakeian line: "*the Ghost of Electricity howls in the Bones of her Face.*"⁷⁷ However, though those are Dylan's words, in his own published book of lyrics, *Lyrics, 1962-1985*, 'ghost,' 'electricity,' and 'bones' are lower case – Gray is only suggesting that one imagine Dylan writing lyrics this way because the language resembles Blake's. But look two verses down and Dylan himself pulls off the

⁷⁴ Gray, *The Art of Bob Dylan*, 61.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 417.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 416-417.

Blakeian-grammatical move Gray mentions by writing: "Inside the museums, Infinity goes up on trial."⁷⁸ Furthermore, beyond the specific, though unorthodox capitalization, the interplay between the various characters and settings in this song returns to Gray's argument comparing Dylan's writing to Blake's poem "Island In The Moon."

For our third poet: Bob Dylan also drew on T.S. Eliot's work, especially on his sixth album *Highway 61 Revisited* – at times only obvious to the learned listener and at other times more transparently. More transparently when Eliot makes his guest appearance in "Desolation Row," where Dylan sings:

And Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot
Fighting in the Captain's tower
While calypso singers laugh at them
And fishermen hold flowers
Between the windows of the sea
Where lovely mermaids flow
And nobody has to think too much
About Desolation Row.⁷⁹

Familiarity with Eliot's work allows the listener to hear the other more subtle influences.

Gray maintains that Dylan's verse "does more than simply mention Eliot specifically."⁸⁰ The verse also parallels the ending of T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Here are Eliot's words:

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.⁸¹

In the words of Michael Gray, Dylan uses the "same imagery, same contrast, same argument" in Desolation Row.⁸² Finally, as sort of a side-note, the very name of the song

⁷⁸ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 223

⁷⁹ Ibid., 206.

⁸⁰ Gray, *The Art of Bob Dylan*, 74.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

under question, “Desolation Row”, bears a striking resemblance to T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land.”

Two Prominent Themes in Dylan’s Art

Whether he used complex or simplified language, two underlining themes emerged from Dylan’s art: the quest for salvation and the ‘outlaw’ metaphor.

First, Dylan’s quest for salvation: contrary to popular belief, Dylan’s concern with salvation came long before his conversion to Christianity (1979), even if he does not refer to it in a theological sense. Nevertheless, “the quest for salvation might well be called the central theme of Bob Dylan’s entire output.”⁸³ According to Gray, in Dylan’s art the point is to “get rescued from the chaos and purgatory and find some spiritual home.” He makes such claims in light of lyrics like:

And me, I sit so patiently
Waiting to find out what price
You have to pay to get out of
Going through all these things twice.⁸⁴

Those lyrics belong to “Stuck Inside of Mobile, With the Memphis Blues Again”, from Dylan’s 1966 album *Blonde on Blonde*. They, along with the chorus, help the listener pinpoint the basics of Dylan’s understanding of salvation. Gray suggests that Dylan understood salvation as: “[a passing] from one place to another – from one quality of life to another.”⁸⁵ The chorus also supports Gray’s observation as Dylan sings: “Oh, Mama, can this really be the end, to be stuck inside of Mobile with the Memphis blues again!”⁸⁶ The question is: ‘what will it take to move Dylan from purgatory to salvation?’

⁸³ Ibid., 208.

⁸⁴ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 229.

⁸⁵ Gray, *The Art of Bob Dylan*, 208.

⁸⁶ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 229.

On his early records Dylan sought his salvation in the arms of a woman, yet, at the same time, viewed a woman's love as "part of what must be discarded in the self-denial process necessary to his salvation."⁸⁷ He clearly voiced this tension as early as his second album on "Don't Think Twice It's Alright," when he sang:

I'm a-thinkin' and a-wond'rin' all the way down the road
I once loved a woman, a child I'm told
I give her my heart but she wanted my soul
But don't think twice, it's all right.⁸⁸

Another theme that emerged from Dylan's art was the 'outlaw' metaphor. As Marqusee observes: "Dylan played and wrote songs about outlaws of all kinds, and frequently imagined himself as one."⁸⁹

He drew on the outlaw metaphor in his own material as early as his second album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, the first album consisting of predominantly original material, and immediately began to expand his understanding of 'outlaw' to include all outcasts/marginalized. He continued this practice on succeeding albums until 1969's *Nashville Skyline*.

Some examples of the outlaw/outcast songs from Dylan's first seven albums include: "Bob Dylan's Blues," "Oxford Town," "Ballad of Hollis Brown," "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," "Chimes of Freedom," "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "Outlaw Blues," "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream," "Like a Rolling Stone," "Desolation Row," and "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35" – and those are only the obvious songs, not including the ones from *John Wesley Harding*, his eighth album, which is predominantly filled with outlaw references.

⁸⁷ Gray, *The Art of Bob Dylan*, 209.

⁸⁸ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 61.

⁸⁹ Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom*, 59.

Apparently, Dylan aligned his art with the marginalized so well that it even appealed to Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, and Bobby Seale. Marqusee recalls Dylan's influence on them during the summer of 1967 and on the creation of their new newspaper, *The Black Panther*. He quotes Seale referring to "Ballad of a Thin Man," a song not usually associated with Dylan's outcast repertoire:

This song Bobby Dylan was singing became a very big part of that whole publishing operation of the Black Panther paper.... This record became so related to us, even to the brothers who had held down most of the security for the set. The brothers had some big earphones... that would sit on your ears and had a kind of direct stereo atmosphere and when you got loaded it was something else!... they would sit down and play the record over and over and over, especially after they began to hear Huey P. Newton interpret that record.⁹⁰

One example of Newton interpreting the third verse ought to suffice. First the verse:

You hand in your ticket
And you go watch the geek
Who immediately walks up to you
When he hears you speak
And says, "How does it feel
To be such a freak?"
And you say, "Impossible"
As he hands you a bone...⁹¹

Newton interprets the verse as follows, after explaining that a geek was a circus performer who ate live chickens:

[The geek] doesn't like eating raw meat or feathers but he does it to survive. But these people who are coming in to see him are coming in for entertainment, so they are the real freaks. And the geek knows this so during his performance, he eats the live chicken and he hands one of the members of the audience a bone, because he realizes that they are the real freaks...

Newton then explains it all in terms of race and class:

What Dylan is putting across is middle-class people or upper class people who sometimes take the afternoon off and put their whole family into a limousine and they go down to the black ghettos to watch the prostitutes and watch the decaying community. They do this for pleasure... people who are disadvantaged... they're not interested in them coming down for entertainment. But if they'll pay them for a trick, then they'll tolerate

⁹⁰ Ibid., 208.

⁹¹ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 198.

them, or else they'll drive them out of the ghettos. This song is hell. You've got to understand that this song is saying a hell of a lot about society.⁹²

The Black Panthers' response to "Ballad of a Thin Man" is truly a testimony to Dylan's art and its affinity with the marginalized.⁹³

Finally, in December of 1967, Bob Dylan released *John Wesley Harding*. On this album his use of the 'outlaw' metaphor reached a full, clear, and concise expression. All the main characters on this album are either outlaws or outcasts.⁹⁴ That is because, as Howard Sounes maintains, "gunman and saint, though seemingly disparate, in the landscape of Bob's imagination became identical outcasts from society, dealing in truths and lies, life and death."⁹⁵

Art as an Event

Authorities on Bob Dylan maintain that his use of complex language created a new world and/or reality for his listeners. As mentioned above, Dylan first reached this achievement on his fourth album, *Another Side of Bob Dylan*.⁹⁶ This album marked the turning point where Dylan really came into his own as a complex artist, because, as Michael Gray argues: 'the more important task of the artist is to create a world rather than only argue about one.'⁹⁷ Dylan achieved the former on *Another Side*, *Bringing It, Highway 61*, and *Blonde on Blonde*. And, arguably, he fell short of the criteria on his first three albums, *Bob Dylan*, *The Free Wheelin' Bob Dylan*, and *The Times They Are A'Changin'*.

⁹² Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom*, 208-209.

⁹³ Ibid., 209.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 229.

⁹⁵ Sounes, *Down the Highway*, 227.

⁹⁶ Varesi, *The Bob Dylan Albums*, 42. Gray, *The Art of Bob Dylan*, 129.

⁹⁷ Gray, *The Art of Bob Dylan*, 247.

On each new album Dylan's language increasingly tended toward a more complex structure. He eventually achieved such a complexity of language that his art became what John Albert calls, in his article "The Christ-Filled Decadence of Thomas Merton," a "word event," a notion which supports the argument for understanding Dylan's art as fertile ground for Merton's passing over experience.

To understand Dylan's art as a "word event," one must first consider two subtleties to Dylan's art. It is then easier to return to and appreciate Albert's argument.

On the one hand, Gray argues, Dylan "rendered things that were real in a genuinely new way."⁹⁸ On the other hand, as Marqusee argues, "Dylan aimed to make the unreal world seem real."⁹⁹ Consider first Gray's explanation and then Marqusee's.

Gray argues that in Dylan's songs, especially the ones from the middle 1960s, "the language flashes and sculpts, takes a hundred different photographs, captures a human possibility that comes across as always having been there, recurring and recurring, but never detected or seen in focus before." Said another way, "Dylan bequeaths us a part of reality we could not otherwise have received."¹⁰⁰

Michael Marqusee argues that the early Dylan, who wrote topical songs, tried to match his lyrics to events in the real world, but the maturing Dylan turned this approach on its head. During the middle 1960s, he argues, Dylan switched his aim "to make an unreal world sound as if it's real and vice versa."¹⁰¹ Marqusee notes that he succeeded in making the unreal seem real through the profusion of proper nouns – historical, legendary, literary, and invented – a Dylan trademark.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 140.

⁹⁹ Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom*, 133.

¹⁰⁰ Gray, *The Art of Bob Dylan*, 140.

¹⁰¹ Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom*, 133.

Both approaches succeeded in breaking people away from their own reality, and as a result allowed the listener to better view the world.¹⁰² According to Gray, the effect was so real that "an entire generation ... only recognized what world they were living in when Dylan illuminated it so corrosively."¹⁰³

It is important to keep both observations in mind when considering the rest of Albert's argument. According to Albert, once inside Dylan's created world(s), "sense dissolves into being..." and "the hearer [is] drawn into a new temporal dimension, both in self-awareness and apprehension of external reality." He adds, "the external continuum is a theoretically unlimited series of historical events [hence Gray's reference], or events believed to be historical [Marqusee's reference], from which society takes a relevant number of happenings."¹⁰⁴ At some point, perhaps where Dylan's lyrics 'ring true,' a 'parabolic event' takes place and the continua overlap.¹⁰⁵ At precisely this point, "there is an inversion of the relationship between sender (Dylan) and the receiver (Merton)." When this overlap occurs, the receiver, or listener, "[discovers] himself signified by the message of the former with the song/poem 'living' in the hearer who hears himself through it."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Ibid., 204.

¹⁰³ Gray, *The Art of Bob Dylan*, 12.

¹⁰⁴ Albert, "The Christ-filled Decadence of Thomas Merton," 101.

¹⁰⁵ The use of the word *parable* here is similar to Tilley's use. Tilley argues that a parable "is a story which is set within a world created by myth and which functions to subvert the world in which it is set." He adds Dominic Crossan's understanding that "You can usually recognize a parable because your immediate reaction will be self-contradictory: 'I don't know what you mean by that story but I'm certain I don't like it.'" Put another way, Tilley states: "For a story to work as a parable, its hearer has to 'get' it – much like 'getting a joke.'" He concludes his technical explanation of parables with: "If hearers are rigid, they will either reject the parable or be so startled as to have to reject their own myth because they are so unsettled. They will then have to set up a new one by discovering or creating a countermyth. A countermyth is proposed as an alternative to the old myth. A parable proposes o alternatives, but leaves room either to see life in the old or to construct something new." This thesis argues that Merton opts to construct "something new." See Terrence W. Tilley's, *Story Theology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 46-50.

¹⁰⁶ Albert, "The Christ-filled Decadence of Thomas Merton," 102.

In short, John Albert argues that Dylan's art, with its complex language, allows a listener to enter into it, take leave of himself/herself, and penetrate aspects of the self possibly unknown until that moment.¹⁰⁷ Gray would agree, for he writes: "the possibilities of our inner lives have been expanded by the impingement of Dylan's art – by the impact of his consciousness on ours."¹⁰⁸ In the next chapter, this understanding of a "word event" will help the reader better understand what happened to Merton when he listened to Bob Dylan.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 103.

¹⁰⁸ Gray, *The Art of Bob Dylan*, 7.

Chapter 3: Merton and Dylan

In *Tangled Up in the Bible: Bob Dylan and Scripture*, Michael Gilmour argues that “artists cannot escape the continuous barrage of new influences brought to them by each new life experience they encounter.” He adds: “an ongoing conversation with these influences occurs as a result, and writers inevitably draw from that growing pool of experience.”¹⁰⁹ This thesis assumes that Gilmour’s argument not only applies to Bob Dylan but too all artists, including Thomas Merton. In accordance with this starting point, bearing in mind John Dunne’s methodology for passing over, I argue that Thomas Merton, himself an artist, used Bob Dylan’s art three ways: first, Dylan’s lyrics provided a means for Merton to express tensions he encountered in his personal life; second, it influenced some of his later work (prose and poetry); and third, it helped bolster Merton’s identity as a monk.

Complicated Biographical Points

Before considering Merton’s specific use of Dylan, we need to consider a few biographical points: his monastic vocation, the origins of his romantic relationship with a certain student nurse, and just how he became interested in Bob Dylan – all three coincide. First, it was the summer of 1966 when Thomas Merton prepared to make his profession as a hermit but, and this is the second biographical point, he had recently begun a romance with a student nurse, who is commonly referred to as simply S. or M. in Merton’s biographical sources, and that situation desperately needed resolution.¹¹⁰ Thirdly, Merton also agreed to write an article on Bob Dylan for *Jubilee*, the magazine founded, owned, and published by his lay Catholic friend Ed Rice, for Catholic

¹⁰⁹ Gilmour, *Tangled Up in the Bible*, 16.

intellectuals, including the laity, before he made his vow for the hermitage. These subjects – Merton’s monastic vocation, his romantic relationship, and his love for Dylan, – although seemingly separate, are actually interrelated for Merton and better understood, at times, through his use of Bob Dylan’s art as a mode of interpretation.

Because the areas of concern mentioned above occurred so close together in Merton’s life – in a nonlinear fashion, it becomes a messy job for anyone to try and separate the components of this chapter. Therefore, for the sake of analysis, the argument shall unfold in the following order: first, a discussion of Thomas Merton’s encounter with Bob Dylan’s art, and the surrounding circumstances in Merton’s life during that time; second, his passing over into Dylan’s art; and third, Merton’s coming back from Dylan’s art.

Specific Events at the Time of Merton’s Encounter with Dylan

On March 25, 1966, Merton underwent back surgery and six days later had a new student nurse assigned to him. The two talked and laughed about *Mad Magazine*, the *Peanuts* comic strip, and Merton’s own writing. This was M., whom Merton fell in love with and who came to occupy his thoughts and writing.

Upon his return to Gethsemani he tried to forget about M. and to regain his footing in solitude. However, he failed in this attempt and soon found himself behaving quite irrationally as he repeatedly and carelessly sought ways to communicate with M. As biographer Michael Mott noted, Merton “had been like a drunken driver, taking one red light after another.”¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ It is common practice for Merton scholars to refer to this woman by initial only, so as to protect her anonymity – this thesis will certainly adhere to that practice.

¹¹¹ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 439.

His preoccupation with M. lasted at least as long as that difficult summer, 1966. He chronicled much of his emotions and thoughts during this time in various journal entries spanning from April through September. For one week in June he gave special attention to M. in something he called "A Midsummer Diary for M."

It was also during this time that Merton became interested in the art of Bob Dylan. Although that is an understatement at best, because according to Merton "one does not get 'curious' about Dylan. You are either all in it or all out of it." And, he added, "I am *in* his new stuff."¹¹²

Basically, two people deserve credit for exposing Merton to Bob Dylan's art: Fr. Chrysogonus Waddell and Ed Rice. Rice and Merton met in their time at Columbia; later Rice would sponsor Merton for baptism. Fr. Chrysogonus was an applicant to Gethsemani in 1950. When he entered he was already a scholar and a musician.¹¹³

Fr. Chrysogonus was the one who first introduced Merton to Dylan's art when he loaned him a record player and Dylan's album *Highway 61 Revisited*. Merton recorded his initial impressions of this Dylan record in a June 14, 1966 journal entry. He wrote:

Lately borrowed from Fr. Chrysogonus records of Joan Baez ... and Bob Dylan, which I liked a lot ("Tombstone Blues" and "There is something happening here and you don't know what it i-i-s, Do you, Mister Jones?"). Very pointed and articulate.¹¹⁴

Ed Rice furthered Merton's interest in Dylan when he supplied him with selections from Dylan's larger corpus for the purpose of writing an article on him. Merton documented this proposal on July 20, 1966 when he wrote: "Ed Rice is anxious to

¹¹² *Learning to Love*, 129.

¹¹³ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 261.

¹¹⁴ *Learning to Love*, 83.

have me do a piece on Bobby Dylan. Will send records if I ask.”¹¹⁵ He accepted in a letter written the same day:

Business about [Bob] Dylan piece. I would like some of his discs to work on. Can you get for free? He has 3 on Columbia I need:
Bringing it all back home

Another side of B Dylan
The times they are a changing

(I have Highway 61)...

I will get his book from New Directions, and other stuff is supposed to be on the way. If you see anything good or new about him tear it out and send it down.¹¹⁶

Thomas Merton intended to write his piece on Dylan and then leave the subject behind, however, as is suggested by Gilmour’s quote at the top of this chapter, for artists, like Merton, that is easier said than done.

He made known these intentions in an August 29 letter to Rice:

... what I was writing about was the records. I have formal permission to receive these if they come, but they will be returned to you. hence they will be your records. So do not hesitate at once to procure these gems instantly and at no matter what personal sacrifice.¹¹⁷

Merton received the Dylan albums on September 8, 1966 – the same day he made his commitment to the hermit life. Earlier that morning, he read his profession in front of Abbot Dom M. James Fox: “I brother M. Louis Merton, solemnly professed monk of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, having completed a year of trial in the solitary life, hereby make my commitment to spend the rest of my life in solitude in so far as my health may permit.”¹¹⁸

That evening he returned to his hermitage and played his newly acquired Dylan records to the forest. Here is a description of that scene:

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 98.

¹¹⁶ *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy, (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 289.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 290.

¹¹⁸ John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years 1965-1968* (Fort Worth, Texas: Latitudes Press, 1983), 119.

Using a phonograph borrowed from the abbey for research purposes, he began playing the records. From the hermitage's open windows at dusk, "The Gates of Eden" and other Dylan songs sent brash new sounds into the silent forest. Such seeming incongruities amused the hermit. He found the songs fascinating as poetry, full of prophetic ardor and irony and power.¹¹⁹

Merton continued his study of Dylan's art each evening, knowing that he would soon have to return the phonograph and records – he never reached this final stage.¹²⁰

Nearly a half year after accepting the Dylan project from Rice and making his profession to the hermit life, Merton wrote Rice a letter stating his progress on the project: "haven't done anything on Dylan either. Want to get that off my chest first and I guess it is useless waiting for his book. Besides I'll soon have to return the Abbot's record player."¹²¹ Sadly, Merton never completed his Dylan article, but he also never returned the phonograph. Instead, he continued listening to Dylan's albums and made repeated attempts to get others to acknowledge the importance of Dylan's art.

In light of observations made by Dylan scholars, Merton's attraction to Dylan's art is not so peculiar. Perhaps Merton was eager for Dylan's art because of his own experiences with poetry, especially his familiarity with the very poets that influenced Dylan. For example, in *Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal*, Merton wrote:

the Christian contemplative need not confine himself to religious, still less to the professionally 'pious' models. He will, of course, read Scripture and above all the contemplative saints: John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, John Ruysbroek, Bonaventure, Bernard. But no one can be a poet without reading the good poets of his own time – T. S. Eliot, Auden, Spender, Rilke, Pasternak, Dylan Thomas, Garcia Lorca. One might add that a fully integrated vision of our time and of its spirit presupposes some contact with the genius of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, who are Christians inside out.¹²²

It seems plausible, then, that if Merton saw Dylan as an extension of these poets, the very ones he himself argued for, then he would want his contemporaries to recognize

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 120.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ *The Road to Joy*, 291.

¹²² *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, edited by Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), 346.

his worth also. As Ron Seitz, a friend of Merton's, writes in *Song for Nobody*: "at that time Tom was very enthusiastic about the songs and music of Dylan and the Beatles, and many others, including Joan Baez – for a special reason. Now that he had some of their records, he insisted on playing them for me – all the time pointing out the importance of their work as an 'expression of American art for our time.'"¹²³

At times, Merton enthusiasm seemed to bother his contemporaries, or at least distract them. Our concern, however, is not whether or not Merton convinced his contemporaries, but with the effects Dylan's art had on Thomas Merton when he passed over into it.

Passing Over into Bob Dylan

Dylan's art affected Merton in at least three ways. First, Dylan's art helped Merton express and analyze his relationship with M., as is evidenced by, but is not limited to, the fact that Dylan was, at times, a main topic in their conversations. Also, Dylan's art even entered into Merton's own love poems to M., and, as recorded in some of Merton's journals, Dylan's lyrics rang through Merton's ears while he walked the forest around his hermitage. Second, Dylan began to permeate the greater body of Merton's poetry, beyond his love poems to M. Thirdly, Dylan's art served as a means for Merton to express his own identity, as Dylan's art provided him with language, if one will, that not only allowed him to examine his relationship with M, but also his identity as a writer/artist, who happened to be a contemplative monk. First, then, let us consider how Thomas Merton passed over into Dylan's art and used it to express his romance with M.

¹²³ Ron Seitz, *Song for Nobody: A Memory Vision of Thomas Merton* (Liguori, Missouri: Triumph Books, 1993), 103.

Dylan and Romance

John Howard Griffin notes that Merton's "preoccupation with [M.] led to a preoccupation with universal aspects of human love,"¹²⁴ and, Michael Gray argues, as perhaps Merton recognized, "Dylan showed that a rock song could provide an appropriate form for universal statements."¹²⁵ In a sense, then, because Merton encountered Dylan's art shortly after he met M., and then continued listening to Dylan throughout their relationship, it seems entirely plausible that Dylan, given his capacity for addressing universals, affected how Merton handled that relationship from the confines of his hermitage.

First, Dylan found his way into the conversations between Merton and M. through letters and phone calls. The lyrics cited in these conversations bear strong implications. For example, in a journal entry on September 10, 1966, Merton noted his trip to Louisville to see a Dr. Mitchell for his back. He mentioned two details regarding Dylan. He wrote that Dylan's song "I Want You" rang through his head all that day.¹²⁶ He also mentioned that on the way back home he called M. from a phone both near Bardstown station. They discussed his vow from the 8th, which committed him to the hermitage, and another Dylan song, "Just Like a Woman." Here is an excerpt from that conversation from Merton's journals:

(She was by that time home from work.) It was a happy call. She is much more Buoyant since her letter got through and her hard work in the hospital is a help. "I am very tired." – "I think of you constantly!" "Especially when I wake up." She was a little worried about the commitment but I told her everything went well. "I was thinking about that all day –" (the 8th, seriously). She was a little piqued that I liked Dylan's song "Just Like a Woman." "Well, it's pretty." (Sort of distant tone.) ... She said I ought to write a poem about freight trains going by (she was delighted at the strange place I was calling from –

¹²⁴ Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy*, 120.

¹²⁵ Gray, *The Art of Bob Dylan*, 117.

¹²⁶ *The Intimate Merton*, 301.

always wants to know exactly where I am). I said I could guarantee nothing, but I wrote a poem this morning.¹²⁷

In addition to the two Dylan songs already mentioned in this journal entry, Merton's "freight train" poem also contains possible allusions to another Dylan song, "Gates of Eden," not only for its final line, but also because of its verse structure. Here is an excerpt from that poem, he titled it "A Long Call Is Made Out of Wheels":

... Love is a scared gamble
of quick seasons, and rain
Dryness and recovery
There is no time
Table for the unforeseen
connection ...

All the little buildings
Come and go
And do they criticize
While I buy time
To hear the sun set
In Cincinnati? ...

And the tune of my train
Changes nothing
The edge of this last town
Is still the edge of Eden.¹²⁸

That makes a total of three references to Dylan in one journal entry, and each in the context of his relationship with M.

A better understanding of why Merton cites these three songs requires an investigation of the lyrics. Consider some of the verses and especially the refrain to the first song mentioned, "I Want You." Admittedly, though, the verse is a bit abstract:

The guilty undertaker sighs,
The lonesome organ grinder cries,
The silver saxophones say I should refuse you.
The cracked bells and washed-out horns
Blow into my face with scorn,
But it's not that way,
I wasn't born to lose you.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 301-302.

¹²⁸ *Learning to Love*, 131-133.

Then the refrain enters and repeats after each of the next three verses. Listen to the refrain: "I want you, I want you, I want you so bad, Honey, I want you." Imagine it, four verses each with that already repetitive refrain ringing through Merton's head while he is so close to one of their meeting places. One wonders how Merton heard the bridge knowing full well that this sort of behavior was unacceptable for a monk:

Now all my fathers, they've gone down,
True love they've been without it.
But all their daughters put me down
'Cause I don't think about it.¹²⁹

And whether or not he associated it with his Trappist heritage.

The second song, "Just Like a Woman," contains more interesting lyrics regarding Merton's and M's relationship, and the realization, at least on Merton's part, that the relationship, simply put, could not continue. Notice how Dylan sings the remorseful bridge and then immediately moves into the final verse:

It was raining from the first
And I was dying there of thirst
So I came in here
And your long-time curse hurts
But what's worse
Is this pain in here
I can't stay in here
Ain't it clear that –

I just can't fit
Yes, I believe it's time for us to quit
When we meet again
Introduced as friends
Please don't let on that you knew me when
I was hungry and it was your world.¹³⁰

A collection of Merton's journals from 1966-1967, titled *Learning to Love*, contains additional information for the same September 10th entry. In one paragraph, Merton wrote:

¹²⁹ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 226.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 231.

The Bob Dylan records Ed Rice sent finally reached me Thursday and Thursday night I played some of them. Rich variety of things. I like best the "middle" (so far) protest songs like "Gates of Eden" which is full of a real prophetic ardor and irony. And power! But the newest baroque obscenities, the dead voice, the noise of rock, the crowding in of new fashion, this is very intriguing too. Intriguing is an extremely bad word. One does not get "curious" about Dylan. You are either all in it or all out of it. I am *in* his new stuff.¹³¹

In *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, biographer Michael Mott notes that "Merton's poems to S. were falling into Dylan's style at times...."¹³² The poem "A Long Call Is Made Out of Wheels" is one example of Dylan's influence on Merton's love poems, but a month prior, Merton wrote a piece titled "Blues for Margie," and explicitly referenced Dylan's influence on his writing when he described it as "a sort of Bob Dylan thing."¹³³ He wrote the poem in response to his frightening grief; in his own words: "these metaphysical howls."¹³⁴ The tension arose in response to his scheduled meeting with M. on August 12th, in Louisville. They were to meet on the 12th because Merton had a doctor's appointment and it was the day before M's graduation from nursing school. In an attempt to be responsible Merton deliberately set his doctor's appointment for an earlier date, thereby canceling his date with M. Feeling horrible from this move, he wrote his "Blues for Margie." Then he sent a letter to M. that called off the date and, in effect, told her good-bye. It was this curt manner of calling it off that troubled Merton so.

Dylan's art also affected Merton's thoughts and daily actions during this time. Writer Ron Seitz, a close personal friend of Thomas Merton, and an instrumental figure in the founding of the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College, narrates what may very well be a typical day for Thomas Merton in his memoirs of Merton book *Song for Nobody*. He recalls one of his visits to Merton's hermitage to take him into

¹³¹ *Learning to Love*, 129.

¹³² Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 451.

¹³³ Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy*, 115.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

Louisville for his doctor appointments. Upon reaching the hermitage he heard Dylan blaring on the phonograph. Seitz interrupts the narrative to state: “at that time Tom was very enthusiastic about the songs and music of Dylan ... now that he had some of [his] records, he insisted on playing them for me – all the time pointing out the importance of their work as an ‘authentic expression of American art for our time.’”¹³⁵ He continues:

I was about to pound my fist on the outside screen door just as the solid inner door swung open with Tom singing, “They’ll stone ya when you’re there all alone” – laughing, grabbing my hand and pulling me inside with, “Everybody must get stoned!” “Hey, how come you’re not up, raring to go? Why so sleepy?” ... my words mouthed mute into the wall of music. “Sounds great, eh? Had anything to eat yet? ‘They’ll stone ya at the breakfast table’ Come on, sit down a minute and listen. This is the new American poetry! – No kidding, it’s that important!”¹³⁶

So Merton spoke of and sang Dylan’s songs throughout the day, appropriated them to fit his own context, whether to contextualize something as serious as an affair with a nurse or breakfast with a friend – as when he sang “They’ll stone ya at the breakfast table,” from Dylan’s “Rainy Day Women # 12 & 35,” for Seitz that morning, and sought to bring others to a higher appreciation of Dylan’s art.

Merton also appropriated and applied Dylan’s lyrics during his private contemplation. Two examples follow. First, on June 14, 1966, Merton journaled his discovery that brother G. had listened to one of his phone conversations with M. and furthermore reported the matter to Dom James. In the journal entry he stated: “I called her once more (she was desolate and so was I). She said, ‘I had the most terrible feeling something was wrong when I was waiting for your call.... Will we ever see each other again?... What will I do without you?... how unfair it is, even inhuman....’” Merton was obviously distraught over the matter, and not just by brother G’s actions but his own as well. He wrote: “I certainly realize the real spiritual danger I have got into. Things have

¹³⁵ Seitz, *Song for Nobody*, 103.

really got close to going wrong and it is providential that everything has been blocked at the moment. Perhaps it is saving me from a real wreck.”¹³⁷

Later, in the afternoon, Merton said vespers and went for two walks. On the first walk he pondered the essence of his love amidst the “silent grass” while looking at the clouds and observed “all the essence of his love for M. was there....” Later, during his second walk, he “looked at the tall woods and thought of M., perhaps out waking by the grotto after work, thinking of m thinking of her lonely. How miserably life can treat people.”¹³⁸

At this point the flow of the journal entry is interrupted by:

lately borrowed from Fr. Chrysogonus records of Joan Baez (especially “Silver Dagger”!!) and Bob Dylan, which I liked a lot (“Tombstone Blues” and “There is something happening here and you don’t know what it i-i-s, Do you, Mister Jones?”). Very pointed and articulate.¹³⁹

This interruption is really more of a juxtaposition. Though unclear at first, the meaning becomes more coherent when Merton returns to his thoughts of M, because before concluding his journal entry he wrote what appears to be an overt reference to Dylan’s “Like A Rolling Stone,” the first song from the same Dylan album just referenced in Merton’s journal entry. He wrote:

I am better and freer in solitude, total and accepted, including loneliness and sorrow for M. – I am much separated from everyone else, alien to the community. Very alone in the field. *Invisible*. “Like a rolling stone.” M., my darling, where are you? the abbot’s secretary averts his eyes in embarrassment when we meet. The gatehouse brothers smile much too politely. I am known as a monk in love with a woman.¹⁴⁰

Could it be Merton used Dylan’s “Like A Rolling Stone” to express and analyze his own complex emotions for M. and the alienation and tension he felt with the other brothers?

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ *Learning to Love*, 82.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 83.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

It seems entirely plausible when one considers Dylan's concluding lyrics before and including the final chorus. He sings:

When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose
You're invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal.

How does it feel
How does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?¹⁴¹

In addition to journal entries and conversations with M., both by telephone and in person, Merton referenced Dylan in his correspondences and conversations with various visitors to his hermitage, like friend and fellow writer Ron Seitz, or Joan Baez, the famous folk singer, and one time girlfriend of Bob Dylan, and even the French Philosopher Jacques Maritain, among others.

Dylan and Writing

In a September 13, 1966 letter to Robert Miller, former editor of *Fellowship* and then managing editor of *United Church Herald*, Merton quoted Dylan's "Rainy Day Woman # 12 & 35." Previously the two men discussed topics like the Second Vatican Council, and more controversial topics like the Vietnam War and the Abbey censoring Merton's writing, the latter point being the most upsetting to Miller. So in that September letter Merton wrote:

The church has spoken in the Vatican Council, but in such a general way that the whole thing can easily evaporate and Catholics can, as usual, go their way without realizing that something momentous has been said. Obviously anyone who has any sense of the real issues will find himself isolated. The thinking of the majority is shaped by mass media dominated by one line of thought; oriented to war and money and with no real concern

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 84. The italicized emphasis is mine because it helps to highlight Merton's reference to Dylan's song.

¹⁴¹ Dylan, *Lyrics*, 192.

for man – still less for God, though much lip service is paid to Him when it appears profitable to do so. Or makes people feel that they are very good guys.

So the problem is great. As to non-violence, there ought to be a Catholic training center for this. Someday maybe it will be built up. Hildegard Goss-Mayr, of the FOR in Austria, would be the one to really do something with it. She is my candidate for sainthood in this day (along with Dorothy Day and a few others like that).

Can't write more now, but these lines are at least a token, and an assurance that I am with you and that I keep you in my prayers. Keep me in yours too.¹⁴²

Then, Merton concluded his letter by citing "Rainy Day Woman # 12 & 35"'s infamous refrain. He wrote: "As Bob Dylan says, 'Everybody must get stoned'"¹⁴³

Now, in some circles that refrain connotes a reference to drugs like marijuana, but probably not for Merton. Dylan scholar Mike Marqusee offers an alternative interpretation for the refrain and one that is more in keeping with the general correspondence between Merton and Miller. In *Chimes of Freedom: The Politics of Bob Dylan's Art*, Marqusee writes: "Of course, 'getting stoned' carries a double meaning. The use of the active voice – the verb *to stone* – invokes the biblical punishment. It's what happens to the woman taken in adultery and the heretic alike, the turning of the community against a nominated outcast."¹⁴⁴ This interpretation also seems applicable to Merton's being censored, and it appears, given the tone and content of his letter, that that is what he meant by quoting Dylan. In other words, Merton applied Dylan's lyrics to himself.

He also referenced Dylan in his correspondence with Miguel Grinberg, a poet from Buenos Aires. In 1961, Grinberg began editing *Eco Contemporaneo*, a literary magazine published in Buenos Aires to contribute to, as he told Merton in a May 5, 1963 letter: "knowledge between people interested in the same subjects and troubled by the

¹⁴² *Witness to Freedom*, 252.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom*, 189.

same problems.”¹⁴⁵ In addition, he once invited Merton to a meeting of poets in Mexico City in 1964. In lieu of attending, Merton wrote and sent a piece titled “Message to Poets” to Grinberg. It expressed his solidarity with the young poets who were meeting in “a spontaneous explosion of hope.”¹⁴⁶

In two October letters to Grinberg, from 1966, Merton alluded to the dismal state of affairs and sickness in the world, especially Vietnam, calling it “a big bucket of sickness,” but while he spoke so pessimistically, he also looked forward with hope to a new consciousness.¹⁴⁷ Included in this vision of the new consciousness, this new hope, was Bob Dylan, and Merton made sure to call explicit attention to this young artist. For example, on October 28, 1966, Merton wrote:

Sun rises in mist with thousands of very soft explosions and I am entirely splashed with designs coming through the holes in the lace wall of trees. Everything in the world is transparent. The ferocities of mankind mean nothing to the hope of light. You are right, preserve your hopes. For this one must keep eyes open always and see. The new consciousness will keep awakening. I know it. Poets, designers, musicians, singers. Do you know Bob Dylan’s songs? Wonderful poet. But he almost broke his neck on his motorcycle. Still he is getting better. He will bring out a book. But his records are the best thing.¹⁴⁸

So, not only did Merton insist on hope in the emergence of a new consciousness, he explicitly singled out Bob Dylan as an integral part of this new vision.

Merton also mentioned his love of Dylan in a letter to a California high-school student named Suzanne Butorovich who wrote him seeking contributions for her “underground” newspaper. He sent her his poem “Prayer to the Computer” from his forthcoming book: *Cables to the Ace*. In the accompanying letter, on June 22, 1967, he described the piece as “a mosaic of prose and poetry, experimental,” and added “take

¹⁴⁵ *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen, (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1993), 195.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 203.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 204.

what you want: don't take all of this selection unless you like it all. Maybe you won't like any, but if you listen to it right you probably will. It is a bit Dylan-like in spots because I love Bobby D. I have lots of his stuff here...."¹⁴⁹ Then the letter moves into a discussion on contemporary popular music, and Merton admits that he knows something about it but not much. He did, however, state: "on one of the latest Dylan records I like 'Obviously Five Believers' for instance (that's in the album 'blonde on bl.'). That strikes me as inspired, shamanic, and everything."¹⁵⁰

In "The Christ-filled Decadence of Thomas Merton," John Albert argues that "[Merton] drew meanings from Dylan and set them into motion in his own mythic compositions, such as *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*."¹⁵¹ Merton himself admitted as much in letters like the one he sent to Suzanne Butorovich. Perhaps the influence in this case is due to the proximity of Merton's first experience of Dylan's art to the initial notes he penned for *Cables to the Ace*. For, as mentioned above, we know that Merton began critically listening to Dylan by June 14, 1966,¹⁵² and in *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Mott informs the reader that during that summer, Merton began work on at least sixteen secret poems and the preliminary drafts of "Edifying Cables," later published as *Cables to the Ace* (1968).

An important event occurred on October 7, 1966, that testifies to Merton's love for Dylan and his belief that here was an artist who deserved the appreciation of many. Early that Fall morning, Merton welcomed his guests Jacques Maritain, John Howard Griffin, and others, at the monastery and invited them up to the hermitage. At the

¹⁴⁹ *The Road to Joy*, 308.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹⁵¹ Albert, "The Christ-Filled Decadence of Thomas Merton," 103-104.

¹⁵² *Learning to Love*, 82-83.

hermitage, he stoked his fire, brewed plenty of coffee, and played his Dylan records: Merton hoped to convince his guests that Bob Dylan was an important poet but he apparently failed in this endeavor. Picture the scene: Merton, wrapping the French philosopher Maritain's legs with a blanket by the fire, the same Maritain whose work played an integral role in Merton's intellectual conversion to Catholicism, and then insisting that that same Maritain, on only their second meeting, listen to Bob Dylan's records. Sadly, Maritain "obviously thought good time was being taken up listening to a record when they could have been talking."¹⁵³ They did however enjoy Merton reading the poems from his forthcoming "Edifying Cables," which became *Cables to the Ace*.¹⁵⁴

Perhaps Maritain and company were unaware of the connection between Merton's "Edifying Cables"/*Cables to the Ace* and a previous letter he wrote to Ed Rice, on July 20, 1966, that expressed his hope for Dylan to set to music Merton's own "The Prospects of Nostradamus," a poem he drafted in April upon his release from St. Joseph's hospital, later published as poem no. 68 in *Cables to the Ace*.¹⁵⁵

Dylan and Identity

When Thomas Merton passed over into Bob Dylan's art he found a familiar metaphor for his own Christian identity: he understood his status in the world as that of an 'outlaw.' At first, Merton was apprehensive about accepting anything in his writing that might equate him to strongly with such a controversial identity. On July 23, 1961, he wrote a letter to Dorothy Day and expressed concern about "his own writing as representative of the Catholic position." More specifically, he worried that his writing signaled a shift toward "a sort of Christian anarchist." The assumptions of other

¹⁵³ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 461.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

Christians compounded this anxiety. In a letter to Ernesto Cardenal, December 24, 1961, he wrote: "...there are many who insist that one is not a good Christian unless he offers a blind and unresisting obedience to every behest of Caesar. This is to me a complete nightmare. And I realize that I have to be very careful how I protest because otherwise I will be silenced. And no doubt sooner or later I will be silenced." In spite of his apprehensions, as the 1960s unfolded, Merton's writing became increasingly controversial.¹⁵⁶

If Merton "worried that poems he had written did not seem fitting as the work of a Catholic and a priest...", as Mott notes in his biography, then, by the middle 1960s, he no longer entertained those worries, at least not to the same extent.¹⁵⁷ John Albert notes how Merton began to link "himself with Saint Paul and Philoxenos and Christ as Outlaw in 'Rain and the Rhinoceros.'"¹⁵⁸ Merton then used "Rain and the Rhinoceros" as the first chapter in his book *Raids on the Unspeakable* (1965). The use of this piece set a counter-cultural tone for the entire book as he drew from the outlaw theme throughout to express a message of dissent.¹⁵⁹

In *Raids on the Unspeakable*, Merton associated the notion of 'outlaw' with his vocation as a contemplative monk, and then used this understanding to interpret himself. So then, when Merton passed over into Dylan's art, he did not discover a new identity, but, rather, the presence of the outlaw theme there would have bolstered his own

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 451.

¹⁵⁶ *The Courage for Truth*, 130.

¹⁵⁷ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 460.

¹⁵⁸ Albert, "The Christ-Filled Decadence of Thomas Merton," 104.

¹⁵⁹ Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 3, 5, 6, 18-19, 91-106, 158, 170, 173.

identification with the outlaw theme back in the monastery. For Merton maintained that "to be a contemplative is therefore to be an outlaw."¹⁶⁰

The fact that Merton afforded the contemplative life outlaw status in his later writing increases the validity of John Albert's argument in the "The Christ-Filled Decadence of Thomas Merton." As Albert maintains, "it was Bob Dylan who ... linked the hermit monk Thomas Merton in the 1960s with the anti-materialistic poetic heritage of America's past and its contemporary expression in the folk-rock idiom."¹⁶¹ I want to be sure to nuance Albert's argument here, and emphasize that Merton exhibited these tenancies at the start of the decade and Dylan only bolstered them.

Albert further clarifies the issue of Merton's identity and what it meant for him to listen to Bob Dylan. He claims that "each, in his respective realm was (and Dylan still is) an artist and social critic caught in a tension with his times and expected identities..." and notes that "both sacrificed their reputations for new identities, consistency for openness and truth."¹⁶² As a mode to express this new understanding of his identity, Merton appropriated the 'mask of Dylan.' John Albert best explains this point:

As an artist himself, the 'mask of Dylan' was a new synthetic self, created by Merton's vision of his own reality. Though not actualized – he was a Roman Catholic, a contemplative monk, priest and hermit – it was superior to ordinary life as a means of revealing inner feelings, of bringing into consciousness and mastery his inner conflicts. Wearing the 'mask of Dylan' harmonized his faculties, energized him to complement not only his moral but also his psychological opposite, his deficiencies and his idealized self.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 14.

¹⁶¹ Albert, "The Christ-Filled Decadence of Thomas Merton," 99.

¹⁶² Ibid., 99-100.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 104.

Conclusion

The Importance of the Mask of Dylan

This thesis began with the assumption that, based on the work of John S. Dunne, it is possible for someone to pass over from their own location into another tradition, culture, or way of life and then come back enriched by the experience.

While Dunne's notion of passing over does not require that one map out all relevant points before discussing the passing over experience, I, nevertheless, presented the material in such a form. I did so because I felt that while Dunne's argument in *The Way of All the Earth* focuses on the likes of a religious figure such as Ghandi passing over into another religious tradition, arguing that a Catholic monk benefited from passing over into a 1960s-countercultural-icon's art such as Bob Dylan would require more convincing.

I propose that Dunne's notion of passing over is exactly what Thomas Merton accomplished by listening to Bob Dylan, and it affected him in at least three ways. First, Dylan's art provided Merton with the language to assess his relationship with M. and his personal experiences at the time. Second, Dylan's art affected Merton stylistically and in his understanding of the direction his own poetry and prose should take. Finally, Dylan's art bolstered Merton's convictions in his understanding of his identity as a Catholic monk.

Therefore, I maintain that by wearing the 'mask of Dylan' Thomas Merton listened to and used Bob Dylan's art not to interpret Dylan but himself. So in the end, wearing the 'mask of Dylan' actually provided Merton with the means, or more

specifically the language, to express a truer more authentic self – a self he may not have fully discovered, or at least expressed, had he not listened to those Dylan records.

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