

Towards a Formalist Theological Poetics:
Practising What You Preach in the
Prose Writings of Thomas Merton

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Short Abstract of the thesis entitled 'Towards a Formalist Theological Poetics: Practising What You Preach in the Prose writings of Thomas Merton', by Philip Seal of Balliol College, Oxford, and submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theology in Trinity Term 2015

The argument of the thesis is that the literary forms of Thomas Merton's prose writings embody theological claims he makes elsewhere at the level of content. Specifically, the five chapters of the thesis show that Merton not only writes about the themes of self-denial, simplification, observing the 'thereness' of the world, and (in two distinct ways) apprehending God in darkness and obscurity, but that he also enacts those themes in the way he writes prose.

The thesis offers an original and significant contribution to three main fields of enquiry. Firstly, when analysing Merton's prose I employ methods espoused by New Formalist literary critics, but I apply their reading strategies to the theological dimensions of literary form. Secondly, my work builds upon claims made by theologians of form about the link between literary genres or forms and issues surrounding, for instance, the character of God, but it does so in a novel way, by employing New Formalist close reading strategies. Thirdly, the thesis offers a new method of enquiry for Thomas Merton Studies, by performing the first extended literary-critical account of his prose. In sum, the thesis opens up new theoretical territory for Formalism, new specific material for the theology of form, and a new methodology for Merton Studies.

Besides the introductory and concluding chapters, all of the chapters of the thesis are structured in the same way. Each includes an expositional section in which I quote from Merton's thoughts on, for example, self-denial, and a literary-critical section, in which I read the forms of Merton's prose in terms of the content-claims already outlined. The goal of this methodology is, at every stage, to show that Merton enacts his own theologically-rooted content claims in the forms of his prose.

Long Abstract of the thesis entitled 'Towards a Formalist Theological Poetics: Practising What You Preach in the Prose writings of Thomas Merton', by Philip Seal of Balliol College, Oxford, and Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theology in Trinity Term 2015

The aim of the thesis is to show that the literary forms of Thomas Merton's prose writing embody theological claims he makes elsewhere at the level of content. For example, the aim of chapter one is to map a correlation between, on the one hand, Merton's content-based exhortation, to himself and to his readers, to perform acts of self-denial, and, on the other hand, the poetic enactment of self-denial in the literary modes of his prose writing. The four subsequent chapters are each concerned with a similar correlation between content and form. Chapter two analyses the literary embodiment of Merton's recommendation that we simplify our lives; chapter three focuses upon forms of language that lead the reader to a perception, commended repeatedly in Merton's writings, of the 'thereness' of things rather than their function; and chapters four and five revolve around two distinct types of form that embody Merton's belief that God's presence can be apprehended obscurely, in darkness and blindness. The unified purpose of each chapter remains the task of arguing that Merton's prose is a site through which he lives out, through literary strategies, aspects of the spiritual life that he also commends and describes at the level of content. The result of this task is the development of what I will be calling, for reasons outlined in the opening chapter of the thesis, a 'theological poetics'.

In pursuing its goal, the thesis draws upon and contributes to four overlapping areas of academic enquiry. These are, firstly, the discipline known as New Formalism, which espouses the mode of textual analysis that will be used throughout the main chapters of the thesis; secondly, studies of the relationship between literature and theology, and specifically those studies that pay close attention to the theological dimensions of literary form; thirdly, the emerging field of 'performative language readings' of mystical texts, as pioneered by Michael Sells and Denys Turner; and fourthly, the field of Merton Studies, which seeks to bring to light previously unstudied aspects of the thought of the 20th Century Trappist. By bringing together the concerns of these four fields, the thesis will offer a significant and original contribution to each of them. I share the concern of New Formalists such as Susan Wolfson and Robert Kaufman with using the close analysis of modes of literary presentation in order to develop arguments about, for example, the political and cultural dimensions of form; but my distinctive aim is to apply New Formalist analysis to the realm of *theological* enquiry. Similarly, I share the concern of theologians of form such as Amos Wilder and Nathan Scott, who suggest that literary form has a theological dimension; but my further aim is to substantiate claims of this kind with a New Formalist method of close reading that creates highly specific links between particular instances of literary form and particular claims from Merton's theological writings. With respect to the literary-theological work on the form of mystical writings done by Turner and Sells, I will also alter the trajectory of enquiry. Both the literary forms on which I focus and the content-claims to which I argue they bear a relationship differ from Sells's concern with apophatic discourse and Turner's with erotic; and the methodology through which I track the descriptive correlation between theological content and literary form also develops and refines the work done by these two thinkers by describing specific instances of form in terms of specific content-claims. Finally, the thesis will contribute to Merton studies a

theologically-oriented, New Formalist account of the coherence between what the Trappist claims at the level of content and how he writes at the level of form, and in doing so will offer a new prism through which to look at Merton's work.

In order to reach its conclusions, each chapter is structured according to a five-part methodology. In section one of each chapter I define an overarching term, for example 'self-denial', and outline key related work already done on that theme within New Formalism, the theology of form, and performative language readings of mystical texts. In section two I perform an exposition of Merton's key writings on the same theme, drawing on the nine books he wrote on the topic of contemplative theology (*What is Contemplation?*, *Seeds of Contemplation*, *The Ascent to Truth*, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude' (from *Disputed Questions*), *The Inner Experience*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Contemplative Prayer*, and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*). In section three I gather two or three key literary-critical terms that relate to the overarching theme; in the case of self-denial these terms are, in a qualified sense, 'caesura', 'hiatus', and 'volta'. In section four, which constitutes the core of each chapter, I perform a close textual analysis of short passages from Merton's prose (each is between one and six sentences long), using the literary terms gathered in section three as an analytical aid, and the content-claims from section two in order to read Merton's prose forms in terms of his theological content-claims. It is through this process of reading Merton's prose forms in terms of his content-claims that each chapter will be led to the concluding remarks of section five, which describe in concise terms the modes of theologically-rooted action that have been found in the literary analysis in the preceding pages.

Summary of Chapters

Introduction:

Section One: Overall Aim: Introduces the central argument of the thesis and outlines in summary form the main fields of enquiry to which it will contribute.

Section Two: Key Terms: 'Poetics and Form': Argues that key works on 'theological poetics' have failed to define the term 'poetics'; defines 'poetics' as the analysis of the workings of texts; further defines the 'poetics' of the present thesis as the analysis of 'form', which in turn is defined as the compositional principles (such as grammar and syntax) that make up a text.

Section Three: First Key Related Field: New Formalism: Outlines the turn to form within recent literary-critical circles, and the specific application of form to wider contextual concerns; explains that the present thesis will apply New Formalist study to theological enquiry.

Section four: Second Key Related Field: Theologies of Form: Outlines major trends in the theology of form, beginning with philosophies of form *in toto* and proceeding to works that argue for correlations between specific forms and specific theologies; argues that theologies of form almost always function at a theoretical level rather

than substantiating their claims with close textual evidence; suggests that the merging of New Formalist methodologies with theologies of form will be a fruitful avenue.

Section Five: Third Key Related Field: Performative Language Readings of Mystical Discourse: Outlines the close textual work Denys Turner and Michael Sells have done on the literary form of mystical writings; shows that the field pioneered by these two thinkers remains relatively unexplored, both in terms of the kinds of form on which it has focused and the theological content-claims to which those forms have been argued to correlate.

Section Six: Merton Studies: Shows that work done on Merton to date has not attempted anything resembling the present thesis.

Chapter One: Denial

Section One: Aims, Definition of ‘Denial’, Field of Enquiry: Defines ‘denial’ as ‘the act of saying “no”’; distinguishes ‘denial’ taken in this sense from traditional *apophasis* (and therefore from the work of Michael Sells); distinguishes the chapter from work on denial by Derrida and Kermode; suggests a similarity between the chapter and, for example, an essay on Beckett by Wolosky; outlines the five-part methodology of the chapter, which will apply throughout the thesis.

Section Two: Exposition: Merton’s Language About Denial: Gathers claims from the nine books on contemplation with which Merton’s poetics of denial will be described in section four, for example Merton’s language about renunciation, stripping away obstacles to the spiritual life, and turning away from distractions.

Section Three: Literary Terminology: Outlines the terms ‘caesura’, ‘volta’, and ‘hiatus’ and explains that the modes of cutting and turning away described by the former two, and the gap left in instances of the latter one, will be useful when describing Merton’s poetics of denial.

Section Four: Literary Analysis: Merton’s Poetics of Denial: Performs extended close analysis of nine short quotations from Merton’s prose writings; argues that the nine examples each embody claims quoted earlier in section two; progresses from examples where the mode of denial (such as the cutting of caesura or the turning away of volta) are prominent, and proceeds to examples where the result of the denial (such as the gap left by hiatus) are prominent.

Section Five: Concluding Remarks: Outlines the contribution of the chapter to the main fields of enquiry outlined in the introductory chapter, namely New Formalism, the theology of form, and Merton studies.

Chapter Two: Simplification

Section One: Aims, Definition of 'Simplification', Field of Enquiry: Defines 'simplification' as the movement from complex processes composed of multiple elements to a simple process composed of a single element; outlines the tangential relevance of the numerous studies of simplification by critics of mystical theology; outlines the closer (if still limited) relevance of work by Pranger, Sells and Jenkins within the realm of literary-theological analysis.

Section Two: Exposition: Merton's Language About Simplification: Gathers the claims from Merton's nine books on contemplation with which Merton's poetics of denial will be described in section four, for example Merton's language about focussing upon God alone and rising above distractions in order to be aware of God's presence.

Section Three: Literary Terminology: Re-outlines the terms 'caesura' and 'volta', and claims that the modes of cutting off and turning away described by these words will retain relevance in the study of simplification; shows that the gap left by 'hiatus' is less relevant to processes of simplification; outlines the term 'catharsis', making clear that the three senses with which it is normally associated (purgation, purification and catharsis) will each be relevant in section four.

Section four: Literary Analysis: Merton's Poetics of Simplification: Performs extended close analysis of six short quotations from Merton's prose writings; argues that the six examples each embody claims already quoted in section two; progresses towards examples that are particularly emphatic in their embodiment of Merton's content-claims from section two.

Section Five: Concluding Remarks: Briefly restates the now well-established link between the thesis and the major fields of enquiry to which it contributes; shows that the benefit of the approach of the thesis is not only the exemplification of theologically-rooted actions in prose forms, but the deepening and broadening of them.

Chapter Three: Thereeness:

Section One: Aims, Definition of 'Thereeness', Field of Enquiry: Defines 'thereeness' as the prioritisation of a thing's being in place rather than its performance of a particular function; outlines related work in, for example, the literary criticism of Wolosky and Cavell; outlines McGinn's suggestion that a literary analysis of forms that embody thereeness would be fruitful.

Section Two: Exposition: Merton's Language About Thereeness: Gathers the claims from Merton's nine books on contemplation with which Merton's poetics of

thereness will be described in section four, for example Merton's language about observing the world without manipulating it with interpretations or theories.

Section Three: Literary Terminology: Outlines the terms 'autotelic' and 'concatenation', arguing that the sense in which the former will be used is distinct from the ideologies associated with the New Criticism, and that the latter of the two terms will be used in order to describe the precise opposite of the literary phenomenon under discussion (i.e. *de*-concatenation).

Section four: Literary Analysis: Merton's Poetics of Thereness: Performs extended close analysis of six short quotations from Merton's prose writings, and argues that the six examples each embody claims already quoted in section two.

Section Five: Concluding Remarks: Building on the conclusion to chapter two, outlines in condensed forms the ways in which the chapter has not only exemplified Merton's theologically-rooted actions, but provided new information about them.

Chapter four: Obscurity Part One

Section One: Aims, Definition of 'Obscurity', Field of Enquiry: Defines 'obscurity' as lack of clarity of expression, uncertainty of meaning, and unintelligibility; makes clear that the work on this kind of literary mode is vast, and includes numerous studies by Merton scholars; distinguishes the task of developing a New Formalist theological poetics of obscurity from the existing work; outlines the difference between Sells's work on the correlation between textual forms and experiences of mystical union and the present thesis's concern with a correlation between textual forms and everyday perceptions of God's obscurity (as distinct from apophatic experiences such as infused contemplation).

Section Two: Exposition: Merton's Language About Obscurity: Gathers the claims from Merton's nine books on contemplation with which Merton's poetics of obscurity will be described in section four, for example Merton's language about God's hiddenness, and His presence as a ray of darkness.

Section Three: Literary Terminology: Defines the term 'aporia'.

Section four: Literary Analysis: Merton's Poetics of Obscurity: Performs extended close analysis of six short quotations from Merton's prose writings, and argues that the six examples each embody claims already quoted in section two through literary modes that can be described in terms of aporia.

Section Five: Concluding Remarks: As chapter three section five.

Chapter Five: Obscurity Part Two

Section One: Aims, Definition of ‘Obscurity’, Field of Enquiry: Makes clear that the sense in which ‘obscurity’ will be used in the chapter and the content-claims to which the quotations in section four will be argued to correlate are identical to those in chapter four; explains that the key difference between the two chapters is the literary mode through which Merton’s prose embodies obscurity; makes clear that the two literary modes are significantly different from one another.

Section Two: Exposition: Merton’s Language About Obscurity: Briefly re-caps the content-claims gathered in chapter four section two.

Section Three: Literary Terminology: Outlines the term ‘hermeticism’ and its difference from aporia.

Section Four: Literary Analysis: Merton’s Poetics of Obscurity: Performs extended close analysis of seven short quotations from Merton’s prose writings, and argues that the seven examples each embody claims already quoted in section two through literary modes that can be described in terms of hermeticism.

Section Five: Conclusion: As chapter four section five.

Conclusion: Form and Action

Briefly restates the tasks that have been undertaken in the thesis; briefly outlines the breadth of the applicability of the work done in the thesis; shows that the thesis offers a new way in which to approach the centrality of ‘lived experience’, or theologically-rooted actions, in the work of Thomas Merton; restates the contribution of the thesis to Formalism and the theology of form in terms of the relationship between form and action.

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Introduction

1. Overall Aim

The aim of this thesis is to show that the literary forms of Thomas Merton's prose writings are a key site through which his theology is enacted and expressed. For example, the aim of chapter one is to map a correlation between, on the one hand, Merton's content-based exhortations, to himself and to his readers, to perform acts of self-denial that issue from the repeated strand of *kenotic* theology throughout his writings, and, on the other hand, the poetic enactment of self-denial in the literary modes of his prose writing. The four subsequent chapters are each concerned with a similar correlation between content and form. Chapter two analyses the literary embodiment of Merton's recommendation that we simplify our lives, which can be traced back to Merton's theology of the simplicity of God; chapter three focuses upon forms of language that lead the reader to a perception, commended repeatedly in Merton's writings, of the 'thereness' of things rather than their function, which relates back to Merton's theological reflections on the knowledge of God that can be found by letting go of analysis and explanation; and chapters four and five revolve around two distinct types of form that embody Merton's belief that, for the contemplative, God is known obscurely, in a darkness and blindness that we shall connect to Merton's repeated theological claims about the paradox of God's present-hiddenness or hidden-presentness. The unified purpose of each chapter remains the task of arguing that Merton's prose is a site through which he lives out, through literary strategies, aspects of the spiritual life that he also commends and describes at the level of content. As we shall see, the result of this task is the development of what we shall be calling a 'Formalist theological poetics'.

In pursuing its goal, the thesis will draw upon and contribute to four overlapping areas of academic enquiry. These are, firstly, the discipline known as Formalism, which espouses

the mode of textual analysis that will be used throughout the main chapters of the thesis; secondly, studies of the relationship between literature and theology, and specifically those studies that pay close attention to the theological dimensions of literary form; thirdly, the emerging field of ‘performative language readings’ of mystical texts, as pioneered by thinkers such as Denys Turner and Michael Sells;¹ and fourthly, the field of Merton studies, which seeks to bring to light previously unstudied aspects of the thought of the 20th Century Trappist spiritual writer. The aim of this introductory chapter is to outline material from each of these four fields in order both to clarify the research question to be answered by the thesis as a whole, and to make clear the originality of its contribution to the existing literature. More specifically, the central point to be made in the following pages is that a recent resurgence of interest in form within literary, theological, and literary-theological studies is yet to apply its findings to a clearly defined notion of ‘theological poetics’, and specifically a theological poetics grounded in the close textual analysis espoused by Formalists. The present thesis will address this critical lacuna, beginning with a definition of its key terms.

2. Key Terms: ‘Poetics’ and ‘Form’

The entry for ‘poetics’ in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* opens: ‘What *poetics* may refer to is often elaborated and debated.’² This being so, it must be made especially clear in which sense the term is to be used when seeking to contribute to the discipline it designates. Such clarity of definition has been absent, however, from key works

¹ Louise Nelstrop, Kevin Magill and Bradley B. Onishi, *Christian Mysticism: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 4. Hereafter *Contemporary Theoretical Approaches*.

² Roland Greene & Stephen Cushman (eds.), fourth edn., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 803. Hereafter *Princeton Encyclopedia*.

in the field in recent decades. Michael Edwards's *Towards a Christian Poetics*,³ which continues to inspire debate,⁴ offers no foundational definition for the word, although as his book unfolds it becomes clear that his 'poetics' concerns a theory of language, and specifically the proposal that 'language, by hints of its own renewal, adumbrates no less than the renewal of reality.'⁵ Edwards's account of the renewals of reality brought about by, for example, 'The Dialectic of Tragedy', serves the purpose of substantiating this basic stance, as does his account of the grammatical dynamics of the classical 'figures of rhetoric', each of which presupposes, Edwards argues, the act of renewal that language *in toto* generates.⁶ Such an enterprise does not, as we shall see, cohere with the traditional designation of the word 'poetics', but rather to a discipline that would be more appropriately named 'the philosophy of language', or, as Edwards himself puts it when describing the task of his book, 'the theology of language'.⁷

In a comparative vein, Andrew Shanks's "*What is Truth*": *Towards a Theological Poetics* does not clarify the use to which it puts the word 'poetics', and can be subject to a similarly radical renaming.⁸ Shanks's aim is to discuss a particular stance with respect to organised religion, namely the 'calling into question of establishment-mindedness', and to show that the Book of Amos and Deutero-Isaiah express the same questioning.⁹ The renaming in this instance might change 'theological poetics' to 'exegesis'—and again, as we shall see, this is not what is normally understood, or what we shall understand here, by the

³ Michael Edwards, *Towards a Christian Poetics* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984). Hereafter *Towards a Christian Poetics*.

⁴ See, for instance, Jean Ward's recent engagement with 'Geoffrey Hill, Little Gidding, and the "Christian Poetics" of Michael Edwards', in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 24, No. 3, September 2010, pp. 256-270.

⁵ *Towards a Christian Poetics*, pp. 11-12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-42 & 152. With regard to the figures of rhetoric, Edwards discusses, amongst others, 'metaphasis', 'hyperbaton', 'zeugma', and 'catachresis' (see pp. 152-156).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸ Andrew Shanks, "*What is Truth*": *Towards a Theological Poetics* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

discipline known as ‘poetics’. Again, the landmark collection edited by Nathan Scott in the 1960s entitled *The New Orpheus: Essays Towards a Christian Poetic* gathers seminal essays by, amongst others, Dorothy Sayers, W. H. Auden, and Amos Wilder, for the purpose of developing what Scott himself variously calls ‘a Christian theory of literature’ and a ‘Christian aesthetics’.¹⁰ As with Edwards’s study the renaming in this case has been done by the author himself, and the diverse concerns of *The New Orpheus* cannot be regarded as a contribution to a clearly defined ‘poetics’ or, as in Scott’s title, ‘poetic’. And finally, Oliver Davies’s essay ‘Soundings: Towards a Christian Poetics of Silence’ also offers no foundational definition for ‘poetics’ (the word is present nowhere in the essay except the title). Davies’s essay is a ‘[reflection] upon silence as a distinctively religious sign’, an analysis of different Judeo-Christian ‘ideas on silence’, and an analysis of those ideas in writings by Jacques Derrida, Girard’s Dostoevsky, and Paul Celan—but it is never clear how this analysis formulates a ‘poetics’ specifically, rather than a literary-critical account of how certain prominent writers ‘[draw] extensively on the thematics of silence in earlier Judeo-Christian tradition’, as Davies himself puts it.¹¹ The point being made with regard to each of these thinkers is the same: though they define their work as contributing to a ‘theological poetics’ or ‘Christian poetics’, their use of the term in question remains undefined and, at times, even ill-specified.

Re-titling these works does not call their standpoints into question, but it does reinforce the need for a clear definition of our first key term. As a starting point, then, and drawing upon the definition given in the *Princeton Encyclopedia*, we shall define ‘poetics’ as

¹⁰ Nathan A. Scott, ‘Introduction’, in Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (ed.), *The New Orpheus: Essays Towards a Christian Poetic* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), pp. ix-xiv, pp. ix & x. Hereafter *The New Orpheus*.

¹¹ Oliver Davies, ‘Soundings: Toward a Theological Poetics of Silence’, in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 201-222, pp. 201-202, 208, & 222.

the discipline whereby one explains ‘how something works, not what it means’, as opposed to hermeneutics, where one does the converse.¹² Further, we shall take ‘poetics’, with Aristotle, to mean the mode of study that takes both prose and verse as its data,¹³ and on that basis we discard, for the purposes of our own concern with Merton’s prose, the definition of poetics as ‘the branch of literary criticism devoted to poetry.’¹⁴ Our justification for adopting such a definition has its roots in the generally accepted use to which the term is currently put: ‘poetics’ in recent decades has come increasingly to denote a field of study that branches beyond not only poetry, but also written texts as a whole, to the point where ‘poetics’ has come to denote the analysis of ‘systems of meaning’ as a whole, whether they be prose, poetry, culture, and so on.¹⁵ As such our own development of a poetics that takes prose as its subject-matter coheres with an ancient as well as a modern usage.

The specific branch of ‘poetics’ to which the present thesis proposes a contribution is also in need of definition. The particular textual workings on which we shall focus in the five literary-critical chapters of this thesis will analyse (as the *Princeton Encyclopedia* puts it in an entry on poetics) the ‘compositional principles’ of Thomas Merton’s text, or in other words their ‘characteristic techniques, conventions, and strategies’, and their ‘structures, devices, and norms.’¹⁶ To put this more concisely: the branch of ‘poetics’ with which we are concerned here is the study of how texts works via an analysis of what might rather vaguely be called the various strategies through which they are composed. For this reason the present thesis confirms in the most part to Paul Ricoeur’s claim that

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1059.

¹³ *Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 803.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1058. The definition is taken from the entry for ‘Western Poetics’ (for which, see pp. 1058-1064).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 803.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 1058, 1058, & 1059.

We can term *poetics*—after Aristotle—that discipline which deals with the laws of composition that are added to discourse as such in order to form of it a text that can stand as a narrative, a poem, or an essay.’¹⁷

A qualification, however, should be added to Ricoeur’s words in the case of our own enterprise. With Ricoeur, the present thesis is concerned with the ‘laws of composition’ of Thomas Merton’s prose, but, in distinction, we are concerned with developing a reading of those laws whereby the text comes to ‘stand’ (as Ricoeur put it) as the enactment of Merton’s own recommendation of actions such as denial and simplification, rather than with the broader categories that preoccupied Ricoeur, such as ‘a narrative, a poem, or an essay’. This distinction, and therefore the originality of our approach to poetics, will become clearer later on.

The character of the compositional principles with which our theological poetics will be concerned can also be refined, with reference to the aspect of textual composition known as ‘form’. This term we define, with the Russian Formalists, as the ‘style of the work, the grammar, syntax, verb modes and tenses, and rhetoric’,¹⁸ and, with more recent Formalists, as the ‘patterns of syntax, rhythm and sound, image and figure’.¹⁹ Our basic aim in this thesis will be to argue that features of form such as these embody claims that Thomas Merton makes elsewhere at the level of content, and that each of the claims in question relate closely to a particular theology. How, for instance, can a particular sequence of grammatical structures embody simplification of life, and therefore be seen to relate to a theology of God’s simplicity? How can verb modes invite a perception that can be described in terms of ‘thereness’, and therefore also in terms of Merton’s view that things are holy in themselves?

¹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics*, Vol. 2, trans. by Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (London: The Athlone Press, 1991), p. 3. Hereafter *Text to Action*.

¹⁸ *Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 233.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 497. This quotation is taken from the entry on ‘Form’ (for which, see pp. 497-499), p. 497.

Preliminary questions such as these make clear a further basic starting point on which the present thesis will be founded, also in relation to what we will take the term ‘form’ to mean, namely the view, also espoused by the Formalists, that form can be ‘constitutive’, or an ‘active producer’, of meaning,²⁰ and that ‘a work’s form cannot finally be separated from its meaning because form itself, when interpreted, is an essential source of meaning.’²¹ This might seem to subvert the distinction made earlier between poetics and hermeneutics, and call for the renaming of our own task as a hermeneutics (or analysis of meaning) that takes form as its site of analysis. There is a difference, however, between developing a hermeneutics of form, whereby the aim is to explain what meanings a form constitutes, and developing a poetics that takes form as its data, whereby the aim is to show that the form of a text works in a particular way, and so can be read in a particular way. As we shall see in chapters one to five below, it is not our aim here to show that the forms of Thomas Merton’s prose ‘mean’ particular things, but that the way in which they work can be read as the enactment of Merton’s own content claims about denial, simplification, thereness, and God’s obscurity. For this reason, the field of study to which we shall contribute can be situated within the field of ‘poetics’ as just defined.

3. First Key Related Field: Formalism

We have now provided a definition of, and an account of our approach to, ‘poetics’. The next task is to outline two fields of study that relate closely to our titular ‘Formalist theological poetics’, as a way to further clarify the background, and also the originality, of our contribution to the existing literature. The two fields in question are, firstly, the branch of

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 500.

Formalist criticism (also sometimes known as neoformalist criticism)²² that asserts that the methodology espoused by the American intellectual movement known as New Criticism, which was developed in the middle decades of the twentieth century, remains useful to contemporary discussion despite the flawed ideologies with which it has come to be associated;²³ and secondly, those scholars working within a field that might be labelled the ‘theology of form’ who have asserted the need for a reappraisal of the central importance of literary modes within theological discussion.²⁴ As we shall see, whilst Formalism substantiates its claims through sustained close-textual analysis of the kind pioneered by figures such as William Empson,²⁵ its concerns have not primarily been with theological issues; and conversely, whilst contributors to the theology of form have made claims about

²² The precise meaning of ‘neoformalism’ is elusive. The *Princeton Encyclopedia*, for example, has no entry for the term, but does mention it in its entry for ‘Formalism’ (see p. 500): Recent neoformalists, it says, include Levinson, Štekauer, and Bogel, each of whom has published Formalist works since 2000 (see p. 502); the claim thus seems simply to be that ‘neoformalism’ refers to Formalist study conducted in the last fifteen years. Given this lack of distinctive reading practices that might be labelled ‘neoformalism’ other than when they were conducted, the present essay refers to ‘Formalism’ instead, and takes the term to designate the movement as a whole, including work done since 2000.

²³ The key Formalist texts to be analysed in the present thesis are the articles that comprise the edition of *Modern Languages Quarterly* devoted to Formalism (*Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 1, March 2000). For a broader discussion of key works in the movement see also Marjorie Levinson’s ‘What is New Formalism’ (*PMLA*, Vol. 122, No. 2, March 2007, pp. 558-569), which offers a review of some of the ‘post-2000 scholarship’ (p. 558). It should also be noted that Levinson’s use of the phrase ‘New Formalism’ is perhaps not all that helpful because the same can be used to describe ‘the school of American poetry from the 1950s associated with ‘political and cultural conservatism’. See Susan Wolfson, ‘Reading for Form’, in *Modern Languages Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 1, March 2000, pp. 1-16, p. 8. Levinson’s article will be cited hereafter as ‘What is New Formalism?’ and Wolfson’s as ‘Reading for Form’.

²⁴ No equivalent to Levinson’s survey of Formalism (see note 21 above) has been done for the theology of form; indeed the designation ‘theology of form’ has been coined for the purposes of the present essay as a heading under which to discuss diverse thinkers such as Amos Wilder, Paul Ricoeur’s work on poetics, the philosophy (or, arguably, theology) of language developed by George Steiner, the close-textual approach to mystical writings developed by Michael Sells, and some of the genres of analysis developed in *Literature and Theology* since its inception in 1987. Each of these thinkers and forums of thought are discussed and cited below.

²⁵ See William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Pimlico, 2004). Hereafter *Seven Types*.

the centrality of literary form to theological enquiry, they have not, for the most-part, made use of the Empsonian mode of textual analysis that would provide a detailed exemplification of their claims.

The reader familiar with Empson's views on Christianity will immediately see one of the significant roots of this disjunction between theology and Formalism in its Empsonian incarnation. For Empson, famously, the Christian God was 'the wickedest thing yet invented by the black heart of man.'²⁶ But Empson's animosity for religion need not obstruct our progress. What about the Formalist who does not share Empson's disdain for the Christian God? Is the way open for her or him to apply close textual analysis to theological reflection, or is Formalism somehow more inherently anti-theological? The aim of the present section is to show that, in opposition to Empson's disdain, recent incarnations of Formalism have opened the way for a conversation between close textual analysis and theological enquiry, and that a 'Formalist theological poetics' is indeed a potentially fruitful genre of study. Having outlined in more detail what we mean by 'Formalism' and the 'theology of form', we will discuss the merits and limitations of Michael Sells's work on the communication of theological claims in mystical writings.

The return of Formalism to the academic stage has been well documented. For example, the *Princeton Encyclopedia* claims that, 'starting in the last decades of the 20th Century, Formalist criticism has seen a resurgence',²⁷ and Rhian Williams has suggested that the reappearance of Formalism within literary studies has occurred since 2000.²⁸ Whichever is more accurate, the publication in 2000 of an edition of *Modern Languages Quarterly*

²⁶ William Empson, *Milton's God* (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1978), p. 251.

²⁷ *Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 803.

²⁸ See Rhiann Williams, "'Divine Liquidness of Diction... Divine Fluidity of Movement': Reading Poetry After Matthew Arnold and the Higher Biblical Criticism", in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 27, No. 3, September 2013, pp. 313-329, p. 313.

devoted to Formalism was an important step in the movement.²⁹ Susan Wolfson's introductory essay to that volume made the claim that the rehabilitation of Formalist criticism was underway, and that each of the essays gathered in *MLQ* March 2000 shared the belief that the movement had been the subject of a 'reductive critique' resulting in 'a dulling of critical instruments and a loss of sensitivity to the complexity of literary form'.³⁰ Robert Kaufman's essay in the volume locates the critique in question in a particular view of the relationship between studies of form and Kant's third *Critique*: "Kantian aesthetics," he says, 'has been mapped onto, been seen to generate, or simply been made coterminous with that baleful phenomenon, *Formalism*', with the result that Formalism has been seen to '[deform] material, sociohistorical reality, turning it first into art and then into art theory' on the basis of Kant's 'essentialist or transcendental theory of cultural value, a theory based in literary or aesthetic form.'³¹ The precise reading of Kant's third *Critique* with which Formalism has come to be associated is not at issue here; suffice it to say that the themes against which anti-Formalists have reacted include, as Kaufman summarises it, 'disinterest, virtuality, internal coherence, and correspondence to presumptions about the world's empirical or phenomenologically available wholeness and harmony'³²—or in other words, a philosophical standpoint directly opposed to the indeterminacies and deferrals of the poststructuralisms and deconstructionisms of the later twentieth century. The *Princeton Encyclopedia*'s more recently published account of the rise of Formalism confirms that Kaufman's view has endured since it was written: Formalists continue to argue, says the *Encyclopedia*, against the view that their field 'ignores social and historical reality'.³³

²⁹ See *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 1, March 2000.

³⁰ 'Reading for Form', pp. 7 & 9.

³¹ Robert Kaufman, 'Everybody Hates Kant: Blakean Formalism and the Symmetries of Laura Moriarty', in *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 1, March 2000, pp. 131-154, pp. 131, 131, & 130.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³³ *Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 500.

The roots of the critique to which Wolfson points and on which Kaufman expands lie in the ideological roots of the New Criticism. Pioneered by W. K. Wimsatt, Cleanth Brookes, Robert Penn Warren and I. A. Richards in the middle decades of the twentieth century,³⁴ the movement was primarily concerned with what is now called ‘practical criticism’, or the study of ‘the words on the page’,³⁵ and shares the more recent concerns of Formalism with what is often simply called ‘close reading’.³⁶ The most damning response to New Criticism did not focus upon its methods of literary analysis, however, but on the theory of art with which it came to be associated, namely the view that works of art are autonomous units of meaning with an organic unity independent of the various contextual concerns in which they are produced and received. Thus in his essay, gathered in Nathan Scott’s seminal *The New Orpheus*, G. Ingle James detects a Sartrean background to New Criticism, which understands art in terms analogical to ‘the radically solitary man who can communicate only with himself’;³⁷ Frank Lentricchia, writing in *After The New Criticism*, similarly claims that the movement made poetry into ‘a vast, enclosed textual and semantic preserve’;³⁸ and Terry Eagleton describes New Criticism’s view of the poem as ‘a self-enclosed object, mysteriously intact in its own unique being.’³⁹ Each of these accounts of New Criticism can be connected back to Kaufman’s regarding the deformation, via a particular view of Kantian aesthetics, of the sociohistorical reality in which art is situated. Without needing to outline the politico-philosophical moves that led the New Critics to make their claim about the autonomy of art

³⁴ For a brief account of the major proponents of the movement, see the entry for ‘New Criticism’ in M. H. Abrams & Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2012), pp. 241-263.

³⁵ G. Ingle James, ‘The Autonomy of the Work of Art: Modern Criticism and the Christian Tradition’, in *The New Orpheus*, pp. 187-209, p. 189. Hereafter ‘The Autonomy of the Work of Art’.

³⁶ See the entry for ‘Formalism’ in the *Princeton Encyclopedia*, pp. 499-502, p. 500.

³⁷ ‘The Autonomy of the Work of Art’, p. 198.

³⁸ Frank Lentricchia, *After The New Criticism* (London: The Athlone Press, 1980), p. xiii. Hereafter *After The New Criticism*.

³⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 40.

(and as commentators have shown, it was an inherently political movement),⁴⁰ it is clear that New Criticism was largely rejected on an ideological rather than a methodological basis.

One of the major aims of recent Formalist thinkers has been to reclaim the methodologies of New Criticism without subscribing to its ideology.⁴¹ Their objective has been, for example, to ‘pursue close reading without the assumption of organic form’,⁴² to develop ‘an historically informed Formalist criticism’,⁴³ and to discuss ‘the meeting of ethics and form’⁴⁴—or, in other words, to place form in relation to the contextual and wider theoretical dimensions dismissed by the New Critics. Further, and with a philosophical emphasis that opposes New Criticism directly, Formalists have begun to make claims for the *centrality* of Formalist analysis to the understanding of the contextual matrixes within which works of art are situated. For Marjorie Levinson, it is ‘the formal means that establish the conditions of possibility for experience: textual, aesthetic, and every other kind’, and it is the form of the individual work, taken as the object of study in its own right, that ‘gives us unique access to the dynamic historical formation that inhabits the still form of form itself’.⁴⁵ Ellen Rooney similarly suggests that ‘the renewal of form as an operation intrinsic to reading enables literary and cultural studies fully to take the pressure of [the] interventions’ that

⁴⁰ For such an account, see *Ibid.*, for example pp. 40-42, and also *After The New Criticism*. For Eagleton, New Criticism in America ‘had its roots in the economically backward south’, and specifically in the reaction of the south to the ‘scientific rationalism’ that underpinned the expansion of capitalist monopolies from the north. The ideology of New Criticism, Eagleton argues, sprang from this reaction: poetry, unlike science, ‘respected the sensuous integrity of its object’. (All p. 40.) As already noted, however, the aim here is not to dwell upon the background to the New Criticism, but to note the ideological grounds of its rejection by a subsequent generation of Formalist critics.

⁴¹ There are, however, notable exceptions. Nemeianu, for instance, asks: ‘Why is a movement like “New Criticism” (as serene, quiet, and centrist as one could imagine) perceived as a dangerous foe by so many critical communities?’ Virgil Nemeianu, ‘Hating and Loving Aesthetic Formalism: Some Reasons’, in *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 1, March 2000, pp. 41-57, pp. 41-42.

⁴² *Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 500.

⁴³ Susan J. Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 1. Hereafter *Formal Charges*.

⁴⁴ ‘Reading for Form’, p. 13.

⁴⁵ ‘What is New Formalism?’, pp. 564 & 566.

critical theory has faced in the concerns of ‘New Historicism, poststructuralism, cultural materialism, feminism, semiotics, [and] postcolonialism.’⁴⁶ Each of these claims represents an especially radical re-writing of the interpretation of Kantian aesthetics with which Formalism had previously come to be associated.

Amongst this resurgence, the claim of the present thesis goes so far as to perform a contextually-informed close analysis of form, and specifically an analysis of Thomas Merton’s prose forms read in the context of his theological standpoints, but not so far as to argue, with Levinson and Rooney, for the necessary centrality of form to an understanding of the contextual matrix within which a text is situated—whether theological or otherwise. Our aim in studying Merton’s prose forms will not be, that is, to claim anything about form *in toto* but to make claims about particular instances of form, as a literary critic might make a specific claim about the form of a poem without seeking to contribute to the philosophy of language. Another way to define this trajectory is with reference to what Graham Ward calls ‘the distinction between critical theory and literary theory’,⁴⁷ where the former is exemplified by, for example, the theoretically-driven work of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, and the latter by the work of Nathan Scott and Amos Wilder, which centres on developing a literary appreciation of specific texts, or, as we shall see, modes of text such as narrative and parable. Our development of a theological poetics, which will find counterparts in Scott, Wilder, and other literary-theological textual analysts as we go on, might thus be labelled the development of a theological poetics via an analysis inspired by the branch of literary theory concerned with Formalist analysis. In the same way that Formalists employ the methodologies of New Criticism without ascribing to its ideology of textual autonomy, the development here of a theological poetics will employ the methodology of Formalism (and

⁴⁶ Ellen Rooney, ‘Form and Contentment’, in *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 1, March 2000, pp. 17-40, p. 17.

⁴⁷ Graham Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), p. xviii.

therefore New Criticism) without ascribing to the broader claims about the philosophy of form for which some proponents of the movement have argued.

In sum: the way lies open for the application of Formalism, as it has come to understand itself since the year 2000, to literary-theological enquiry. If the New Criticism reduced textual analysis to the act of commentating on self-enclosed textual spheres, recent Formalisms contrastingly invite scholars from various disciplines to appropriate a Formalist methodology on the basis that the close analysis of form is integral to the study of, not only poetry, but also history, culture, and indeed theology. And to develop a Formalist account of the theological dimensions of literary form would, in turn, contribute to Formalism by furthering the argument that the study of form can influence areas of enquiry that the New Critics would have deemed external to a text's self-enclosed autonomy. The next question to be asked is: will theology be as hospitable to Formalism as Formalism is to theology?

4. Second Key Related Field: Theologies of Form

We have now outlined the first field of enquiry to which this thesis will relate closely. We can now also note that the way in which the methods of Formalism could be applied to our own poetics is relatively straightforward to describe: it would involve acts of close-textual analysis including, for instance, an account of the grammar, syntax, rhythm, timbre, and the many other principles that compose Thomas Merton's literary texts. Our next task is to discuss how a Formalist poetics of that kind might also be called *theological*, and therefore become the 'Formalist theological poetics' promised in the title of this thesis. How, that is, can literary modes inform and be informed by the claims of theology? What kind of 'theological claims' (whatever that might mean) can be embodied by literary form?

The answer to these questions will become clearer as we outline our second related field, which we here label the 'theology of form'. Work done already in this field has

identified three main accounts of how works of art, and specifically the form of works of art, might inform and be informed by some kind of ‘theological dimension’ (we shall return to this ambiguous phrase later on). The three fields in question are, firstly, the view that artistic activity *in toto* is a wager on the transcendent, or in some other way evokes the transcendent; secondly, the view that literary forms such as narrative and parable embody theological ideas about, for example, the character of God; and thirdly, the view that more localized forms such as negation and polyvalence of meaning can evoke a particular experience or understanding of God.⁴⁸ In each case an attempt has been made to identify a theological dimension within works of art that functions at a level other than content—and this will also be our contention as we develop a Formalist theological poetics. The aim of the present section is to outline the three mentioned accounts of the relationship between artistic form and a theological dimension, and, as a way to bring the theology of form into conversation with Formalism, to show that the way lies open for an account of the relationship between specific, localized examples of form can be read as embodying something ‘theological’. In other words, we shall now begin to show that a ‘Formalist theological poetics’ is a feasible (and indeed largely unexplored) field of enquiry.

The broadest claims about the relationship between art and theology concern the relation between art *in toto* and the transcendent. George Steiner’s thesis, in *Real Presences*, that ‘the wager on the meaning of meaning’, which is at least implicitly located in the act of creating art of any kind, ‘is a wager on transcendence’,⁴⁹ has been an influential model for

⁴⁸ For a broader overview of the major proponents of the centrality of form in theology, philosophy, and history of education, see David Tracy, ‘Traditions of Spiritual Practice and the Practice of Theology’, in *Theology Today*, Vol. 44, No. 2, July 1998, pp. 235-241. Tracy describes Hans Von Balthasar, Louis Dupré, and Henri Marrou as the central figures in the continuing attempt, to which Tracy offers his own contribution, of the reunion of ‘theory and exercises’, or theory and practice (p. 240). The aim of our own thesis is to look at the more specific field of thinkers who have mapped a correlation between types of artistic activity and particular theologies, rather than this broader theoretical territory.

⁴⁹ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 4.

recent work in the theology of art, for instance Graham Ward's thesis that 'literature can never be entirely secular'.⁵⁰ Ward contends that 'literature, like religion, operates in accordance with the existential horizons of anticipation and expectation, fear and hope', and that all attempts to 'tell it as it is' in works of art are 'wagers on value; and value is a wager on the transcendent and universal.'⁵¹ The breadth of the applicability of this claim is matched by George Pattison's argument that 'even in its ultimate expressiveness art is bound by the constraints of finitude which for Tillich are already and in themselves eloquent of the tragic aspect of human life.'⁵² Ward and Pattison both construct theologies of art, then, and specifically theologies whereby art itself communicates or embodies categories that can and often do belong to the remit of theology. The dynamics of art are, in these two instances, associated with diverse categories – transcendence and finitude – but in both cases the field of enquiry extends to artistic activity *in toto*.

This first category of relationship between art and the claims of theology leaves open the question of how one might recognise the wager on transcendence in localized examples of literary form. A Formalist critic might want to ask Steiner: 'But can specific modes of syntax and grammar, rhythm and style, exemplify the thesis that art evokes the transcendent?' 'How might particular instances of literary form embody or show forth the tragic finitude of human life?' In response to a thinker like Karl-Josef Kuschel, who draws upon Steiner and Tillich when making his argument that 'the dimension of the religious could shine through the style and form of a work of art',⁵³ a Formalist might ask: 'But *how* does this 'shining forth' happen in a line, a phrase, a word?' To answer these questions is to assume, with theories of art *in*

⁵⁰ Graham Ward, 'How Literature Resists Secularity', in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 24, No. 1, March 2010, pp. 73-88, p. 73. Hereafter 'How Literature Resists Secularity'.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁵² George Pattison, 'Idol or Icon? Some Principles of an Aesthetic Christology', in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 3, No. 1, March 1989, pp. 1-15, p. 7.

⁵³ Karl-Josef Kuschel, trans. by Andrew Haus, 'Presence of God? Towards the Possibility of a Theological Aesthetic in an Analysis of George Steiner', in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 10, No. 1, March 1996, pp. 1-19, p. 15.

toto, that a relationship exists between artistic endeavour and a theological or religious dimension; but it is also to change the nature of the enterprise. The emphasis comes to be upon exemplification rather than theorization, and on demonstrating rather than proposing the theory. The objective becomes the analysis of the compositional principles of specific texts, such as their grammatical structures, syntaxes, and rhythms, rather than a general theology of grammar, syntax, or rhythm.

The second category of relationship between art and the transcendent takes the theology of form a step (although a limited step) towards the more localized exemplification that might interest a Formalist. Ricoeur famously proposes what he calls a ‘method of correlation’, whereby his view of ‘the affinity between a form of discourse and a certain manner of professing one’s faith’⁵⁴ is made concrete in a discussion of the relationship between, amongst other things, ‘the narrative dimension and the kerygmatic dimension’.⁵⁵ Amos Wilder (to whom Ricoeur expresses his debt)⁵⁶ similarly claims not only that ‘in [Jesus’s] modes of speech we may recognize yet another clue to the mystery of his being’, but also that the dynamics of ‘the dialogue, the story, and the poem’ are the particular vehicles through which such clues are to be found.⁵⁷ Wilder goes on to argue that ‘the very nature of God as Judaism and Christianity understand it comes to expression in a story’,⁵⁸ and in this, as well as in Ricoeur’s method of correlation, the theologies of art discussed earlier on are taken a step towards particularization. The same is true of a number of the essays published in *Literature and Theology* over the past twenty-five years, for example Wesley A.

⁵⁴ *Text to Action*, both p. 91.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Amos Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1964), pp. 86 & 51. Hereafter *Christian Rhetoric*.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Kort's account of 'narrative's primacy, complexity, and relation to belief';⁵⁹ James Champion's work on the 'existential bent' of the 'parabolic narrative';⁶⁰ and Donald Davie's essay on 'Nonconformist Poetics', in which he explores 'the aesthetic orderings which may seem to correspond to' a Nonconformist ecclesiology.⁶¹ None of these studies performs what might be called a Formalist analysis, unless briefly, as an interlude to the main argument,⁶² and none of them seeks to outline a correlation between instances of literary form and the claims of a particular theology; but each does represent a clear gesture towards identifying particular forms through which literature embodies or invites something theological. They thus represent the second category of relationship between art and the claims of theology: we are no longer dealing with art *in toto*, as we were with Steiner, Ward and Pattison, but with specific forms of art.

5. Third Key Related Field: Performative Language Readings of Mystical Discourse

The move towards a mode of analysis resembling Formalism within the theology of form, and therefore towards a more localized account of the correlation between form and a theological dimension, has been taken another step forward in studies of mystical discourse. These studies, as we will now show, bear the closest relation to the present thesis of any work that has been done in the theology of form. Specifically, scholars of mysticism in recent years have regularly gestured towards the central importance of performing close literary analyses of their source texts without actually performing the task they commend, with the notable

⁵⁹ Wesley A. Kort, 'Narrative and Theology', in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1987, pp. 27-38, p. 27.

⁶⁰ James Champion, 'The Parable as an Ancient and a Modern Form', in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 3, No. 1, March 1989, pp. 16-39. Hereafter 'The Parable'.

⁶¹ Donald Davie, 'Nonconformist Poetics: A Response to Daniel Jenkins', in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 2, No. 2, September 1998, pp. 164-173, p. 170.

⁶² See, for example, Champion's 'The Parable', pp. 30-37, for a close (if brief) literary analysis of Dostoevsky's parable of the Good Samaritan.

exception of an emerging field, labelled ‘performative language readings’ by Nelstrop *et al.*,⁶³ and pioneered by Michael Sells in his *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*,⁶⁴ which has initiated the performance of the much-mentioned task. Our aim now is to outline some of the key gestures that have been made towards performative language readings of mystical writings. We will then outline the methodology employed by Michael Sells, and make clear both its significance with respect to the present thesis, and also the ways in which we shall develop and rethink it as we create a Formalist theological poetics.

Bernard McGinn’s multi-volume *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* is perhaps the most celebrated example of an unsubstantiated gesture towards the centrality of form to the study of mystical discourse. The majority of McGinn’s project consists of an exposition of the content claims of the canonical mystics of the Christian West, yet his theoretical understanding of the study of mysticism revolves around the forms through which his source texts are written. In Volume One of the *History* McGinn emphasises the ‘textually and theologically mediated nature of all Christian mysticism’, and consequently ‘the necessity for exploring forms of language’,⁶⁵ and in Volume Three he reflects that ‘throughout this history of mysticism I have insisted that the immediate object of study is not mystical experience as such but the mystical text’, as well as discussing the ‘linguistic foundation of mysticism’.⁶⁶ Each of these claims is placed, however, as though in parentheses (the claims just quoted can each be found in the introductory sections to their

⁶³ *Contemporary Theoretical Approaches*, p. 4. Nelstrop also notes that performative language readings of mystical discourse represent ‘a general approach to Christian mysticism for which no adequate terminology currently exists’ (p. 3).

⁶⁴ Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994). Hereafter *Unsayings*.

⁶⁵ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, Vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (London: SCM Press, 1992), pp. xi & xviii. Hereafter *Foundations*.

⁶⁶ McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200-1350)*, Vol. 3 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), both p. 18. Hereafter *Flowering*.

respective volumes), without noticeably affecting the methodology of his expositional work. McGinn's comment in Volume 4, in the midst a lengthy account of the content of Eckhart's theology, that 'just a few of Eckhart's strategies [that is, linguistic strategies] can be mentioned here by way of illustration',⁶⁷ is typical of the extent to which he focuses upon form: McGinn mentions Eckhart's use of repetition and negative participles in passing, without quotation, and without suggesting what their particular effect might be.⁶⁸ McGinn gestures, then, towards a level of localization not reached by Ricoeur or Wilder, who focus on the broader categories of parable and narrative; but unlike Ricoeur and Wilder, McGinn does not carry out the task to which he gestures.

In the case of Sells's *Languages of Unsayings*, however, a decisive move was made from commentary to direct engagement. Sells's source material is apophatic literature, and his aim is to make a move from 'apophatic theory' (talking *about* apophatic theology) and towards 'apophatic discourse' (engaging with the mode in which apophatic texts *perform*)⁶⁹—or again, he is concerned with 'the position that is not stated but performed through apophatic discourse'.⁷⁰ Following this distinction, Sells seeks to assess the 'performative intensity'⁷¹ of apophatic discourses by analysing their literary form, and to argue that the 'meaning event' brought about by a reader's engagement with the apophatic text forms the 'semantic analogue to an experience of mystical union'.⁷² Analysing a text from Meister Eckhart, for instance, Sells argues that 'the continual shift from predication to realization prevents the mind from fixating upon any single "object", from reifying the real

⁶⁷ Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300-1500)*, Vol. 4 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005), p. 116. Hereafter *Harvest*.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, see p. 116.

⁶⁹ See, for instance, p. 3 of *Unsayings*.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷² *Ibid.*, all p. 9.

into a single form', and generates an experience of 'realization' akin to mystical union.⁷³ The apophatic text evokes, for Sells, an event which is 'structurally analogous to the event of mystical union'.⁷⁴ From this summary account it should be clear that we are dealing with a kind of 'Formalist theological poetics'. Sells has developed a 'poetics' because he is concerned with how apophatic texts work (or, in his own words, how they *perform*); he espouses a Formalist methodology because he conducts close analysis of specific forms such as shifting predicative patterns (we shall say more about this in a moment); and he is a theologian of form because he seeks to argue that his source texts have a theological dimension, namely that they can be read as the analogue to an experiences of God.

To our knowledge, Sells's *Unsayings* bears a closer resemblance to the Formalist theological poetics that will be developed in chapters one to five below than any other existing study. At the same time, however, we can immediately distinguish the aims of the present thesis from Sells's, in three ways. To do so will both further clarify Sells's purposes in *Unsayings*, and also introduce three of the key aspects of what will become our Formalist theological poetics. Firstly, then, the language with which Sells describes the literary form of Eckhart's writing (i.e. the language about mystical union) is not taken from Eckhart's own theology; it is, rather, taken from a general vocabulary about 'mystical union' that Sells does not ascribe to anyone in particular. The content claims with which we will describe the form of Merton's prose in chapters one to five, on the other hand, will all be taken directly from the Merton *corpus*. At every juncture we will be concerned with reading the forms of Merton's prose in terms of his own claims, from elsewhere in his own writings. As such our descriptions of Merton's literary forms will track not only a structural analogy (as Sells put it above) or a mode of correlation (as Ricoeur put it above) between form and content, but the coherence between the form and content of Merton's work, and indeed the deepening and

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

broadening of Merton's content by his forms. In Sells's account of Eckhart, form generates a semantic analogue to an experience of union; in our account of Merton, as we shall see, form generates an analogue to Merton's own claims about denial, simplification, and so on.

Secondly, Sells seeks to argue that Eckhart's writings bring the reader to an experience of 'mystical union', or at least to an experience structurally analogous to union, whereas our aim, as we noted at the opening of this thesis, is to read Merton's prose as embodying content claims about (in the order we will discuss them) acts of denial, simplification, perceiving the world in its thereness, and perceiving the God's presence in an obscure way. We will return in detail to what we shall be taking each of these actions to mean—for now suffice it to say that none of them is the same thing as 'mystical union', which was Sells's primary concern. The present thesis will expand the Sellsian project, then, by introducing new content-based themes with which to describe the performative dimensions of literary form. We shall return to some of the problems with Sells's description of form in terms of union in chapters four and five below; for now our purpose is to note that one of the key differences between the two works is our introduction of new theological categories (such as acts of self-denial) with which to describe the performative dimension of literary texts.

Thirdly and finally, the present thesis will analyse a range of literary forms not discussed by Sells in *Languages of Unsayings*. Sells's words from earlier about literary shift, or the prevention of fixation, are representative of Sells's concerns more generally—and it will be our aim to introduce a large number of new literary forms to the conversation. For Sells, the apophatic text leads the reader to the knowledge of God as 'a non-object and no thing',⁷⁵ and consistently argues that such experience is generated when, in various ways,

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

‘conventional semantic structures... are broken down.’⁷⁶ Indeed, *Languages of Unsayings* is preoccupied with texts that bring about a non-objectifying experience of God through a small number of highly specific literary forms—namely, texts that break down conventional semantic structures

by fusing the various antecedents of the pronoun, or the perfect and imperfect tenses, or by transforming the spatial and temporal structures of language at the level of article, pronoun, and preposition.⁷⁷

The broad gestures towards the importance of form made by thinkers such as McGinn are narrowed down in Sells’s work, then, to an extreme level of particularization. It will be our aim in chapters one to five to provide similarly particularized analyses of aspects of literary form not discussed by Sells—that is, literary forms that do not involve the fusion of the antecedents of a pronoun or the imperfect and perfect tenses.

With respect to the second and third ways in which the present thesis will alter and expand the field of Formalist theological poetics (that is, the introduction of new content claims and new literary forms), a small amount of commentary already exists. For example, Mark McIntosh has pointed out in his response to *Languages of Unsayings* that the performativity of mystical writings is by no means limited to the relationship between apophatic deconstructions and experiences of mystical union.⁷⁸ Taking McIntosh’s view a step further, Denys Turner has argued that the forms of erotic dialogue and paradoxical statements in mystical literature are determined by a particular theological understanding,

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷⁸ McIntosh states his point clearly: ‘I would not necessarily agree with Sells that the event of meaning in reading mystical texts is always limited to the constitution of “mystical union”’. For McIntosh, ‘the shock of paradox, leaps of logic, and provocative imagery in an Eckhart sermon’ each lead to ‘transformed practices and perceptions of the reader’ that cannot be defined solely in terms of mystical experience. M. A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 147, 131, & 131. Hereafter *Mystical Theology*.

rather than by a particular experience of God—or, in Sellsian language, that mystical texts form a semantic analogue to a way of understanding the nature of God rather than an experience of God.⁷⁹ For Turner ‘the naming and unaming of God’ does not embody a moment of realisation, but ‘a deliberate epistemological strategy’;⁸⁰ or again, he is concerned with ‘the relationship between a metaphorical discourse and the ontological and epistemological conditions of its employment.’⁸¹ The basic aim of these claims is, with Sells, to discuss the performative character of mystical writings; but unlike Sells the thing performed has changed from an experience of God to the representation of what God is like. Our aim will be to add a new argument to this developing field: Merton’s prose provides the semantic analogue, we shall argue, neither to an experience of God nor a theology of God, but to the praxes of denial and simplification, and modes of perception whereby the world is seen in its thereness and God is known in obscurity. The theological context for these claims, each of which is central to Merton’s contemplative or mystical theology, will be made clear in expositional sections given in chapters one to five.

Beyond Sells’s concern with the fusion of antecedents and pronouns, some work has also been done on widening the scope of the modes through which a semantic analogue is formed literarily in mystical writings. Vincent Gillespie’s and Maggie Ross’s argument, for example, that the ‘rhythm’ and ‘contractions’ of Julian of Norwich’s writings ‘are the means by which the spiritual perception of Julian and her audience is dilated’ extends the literary terminology that might be used in a Sellsian account of the performative dimension of mystical writings, whilst also (albeit somewhat vaguely) offering a sense of the semantic

⁷⁹ See Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 14-15. Hereafter *Darkness*.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

analogue formed by Julian's texts—namely, the 'dilated' perception of the reader.⁸² The same is true when Gillespie discusses the 'hyperbolic alliterative structure and the rhythmic pulse' of Richard Rolle's writings, although the object (or indeed non-object) to which such forms might generate an analogue is less clear in this case.⁸³ The question that remains to be answered when analysing forms other than the fusion of antecedents concerns the specific (non)object that comes to be embodied: what precisely might be enacted or performed by rhythm and alliteration in the context of a particular mystical, spiritual, or theological text? If Turner introduces a new argument about the object brought forth by mystical writings (i.e. a form of knowledge), Gillespie and Ross introduce new literary modalities through which mystical writings can be described as performative (i.e. rhythm).

The aim of the present thesis is to bring together Sells's concern with reading specific literary forms in mystical writings as semantic analogues to aspects of the mystical life, Turner's concern with widening the scope of what such analogues can enact or perform, and Gillespie's and Ross's emphasis on new forms through which semantic analogues can be generated. Our readings of Thomas Merton's prose will amalgamate and develop the projects of each of these thinkers by conducting extended close analysis of various literary forms that can be described in terms of denial, simplification, thereness, and the apprehension of God in darkness and obscurity. The only remaining task before beginning our Formalist analysis is to introduce the mystical theologian whose writings will provide the evidence on which our argument will be built.

6. Fourth Key Related Field: Merton Studies

⁸² Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross, 'The Apophatic Image: The Poetics of Effacement in Julian of Norwich', in *Looking in Holy Books: Essays on Late Medieval Religious Writing in England* (Turnhout: Brepolis, 2011), pp. 277-306, p. 291. Hereafter 'Apophatic Image'.

⁸³ Vincent Gillespie, 'Postcards from the Edge: Interpreting the Ineffable in the Middle English Mystics', in *Ibid.*, pp. 307-338, p. 324.

The sections above have introduced the fields of study to which the present thesis proposes to contribute. It remains to be seen, however, why we have chosen Thomas Merton's prose as the particular site on which to build our argument. At root the choice of Merton will be justified most fully later on, in the persuasiveness of the five chapters that make the case for a correlative relationship between theological content and literary form—but there are also preliminary reasons, before we begin, to suppose that Merton's writings will offer a suitable resource for a theologically-informed Formalist analysis, and, further, that to do so will contribute new material to the field of Merton studies. The final aim of this introductory section is consequently to outline our reasons for choosing the source texts we have, by showing that work done on Merton in the decades since his death in 1968 has been preoccupied with Merton himself, rather than with using his thought as a way to contribute to fields of study such as theological poetics. Further, the pages that follow will show that Merton scholars, like theologians of form, have gestured towards the need for a close literary appreciation of Merton's prose, but without performing any such analysis.

Merton's status as a central figure in the history of recent theology,⁸⁴ Catholic thought,⁸⁵ American thought,⁸⁶ spirituality,⁸⁷ and Christian mysticism⁸⁸ is often stated, yet

⁸⁴ Pramuk describes Merton as 'a vital, indeed a classic, resource for theology today'. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009), p. 20. Hereafter *Sophia*.

⁸⁵ See Williams's essay on Karl Barth and Merton, which describes them respectively as 'the greatest Protestant thinker of the twentieth century, and one of the most widely-publicized and widely-read Catholic writers of the age'. See also John Wu's description of Merton as 'a religious contemplative at the very forefront, many believe, of Catholic Christianity and world ecumenism'. Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Fons Vitae: Louisville, 2011), p. 71 (hereafter *Silent Action*); and John Wu, 'Thomas Merton as Teacher and Guru: "In Praise of Divine Folly"', in *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1995, pp. 113-140, p. 116.

⁸⁶ Carr, for instance, describes Merton as 'the most influential and widely read American thinker of our time'. Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 146. Hereafter *Wisdom and Spirit*.

⁸⁷ See John Albert: 'No monk since Saint Bernard of Clairvaux has been more socially established and celebrated as a "spiritual master"'; Donald Allchin: 'If we would seek for a

the use to which his writings has been put has been described as a ‘virtual tsunami of biographical studies, character sketches, [and] reminiscences’,⁸⁹ rather than the heavyweight analysis that such an important figure might seem to warrant. A brief account of the general trends in the secondary literature confirm that this is the case: the majority of the vast material on Merton contributes to the fields of intellectual and non-intellectual biography—or, in George Kilcourse’s words, most of the work on Merton positions the Trappist himself as ‘the final locus of study’.⁹⁰ At their most explicitly Merton-centric, scholars have written essays ‘In Search of Thomas Merton’,⁹¹ have sought out ‘the true Merton’⁹² and ‘what made Merton remarkable,⁹³ have asked ‘why is this man so fascinating?’⁹⁴ and have been concerned, at root, with ‘knowing more about Merton as a man’.⁹⁵

In this vein, the central debate in the secondary literature on Merton has come more specifically to revolve around a question internal to Merton’s *corpus*—namely, do the

spiritual guide for our own century, we could hardly find a better one than [Merton]’; and Ross Labrie: ‘Thomas Merton is now widely recognized as one of the most important spiritual writers in North America in the last hundred years.’ John Albert, ‘Mind Guards Against the White Knight: Thomas Merton and Bob Dylan’, in *The Merton Seasonal of Bellarmine College*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Autumn 1984, pp. 4-10, p. 5; A. M. Allchin, *The World is a Wedding. Explorations in Christian Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell 1978), p. 104; and Ross Labrie, ‘Introduction’, in *Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge*, ed. by Ross Labrie and Angus Stuart (Canada: Thomas Merton Society of Canada, 2012), pp. 1-12, p. 5.

⁸⁸ For Bernard McGinn, ‘Merton was neither a systematic theologian nor a historian, but he was certainly a major spiritual – indeed, mystical – author, as well as a theological essayist of originality and profundity.’ *Foundations*, p. 283.

⁸⁹ David D. Cooper, ‘Confession and Catharsis: Review of The Hidden Ground of Love’, in *The Merton Seasonal of Bellarmine College*, Vol. 10, No. 3, Summer 1985, pp. 7-11, p. 7.

⁹⁰ George Kilcourse, ‘Introduction’, in *The Merton Annual: Studies in Culture, Spirituality & Social Concerns*, ed. by George A. Kilcourse, Vol. 15, 2002 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), pp. 2-18, both p. 13.

⁹¹ John Howard Griffin, ‘In Search of Thomas Merton’, in *Merton Studies Centre*, Vol. 1, (Santa Barbara: Unicorn Press, 1971), pp. 17-24.

⁹² James Conner, ‘The Original Face in Buddhism and the True Self in Thomas Merton’, in *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 1987, pp. 343-351, p. 348.

⁹³ Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton’s American Prophecy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 142.

⁹⁴ John Moses, *Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. xiv.

⁹⁵ John-Eudes Bamberger, ‘Thomas Merton, Our Brother’, in *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1978, pp. 390-395, p. 390.

Trappist's writings display essential continuity, or discontinuity and rupture? Cooper's polemical *Merton's Art of Denial* is perhaps the most emphatic example of the latter, with its portrait of Merton's 'rigid' early stance as a 'petulant ascetic' in contrast to both his 'monolithic notion of the world' in the 1950s, and his eventual stance as a 'radical humanist' and 'candid and informal social critic' in his later years.⁹⁶ Other major arguments for discontinuity include George Kilcourse's *Ace of Freedoms* – 'I propose to place in sharp relief the contrast between the early and the late Merton'⁹⁷ – and William Shannon's *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*, which tracks Merton's movement away from seeking a 'Catholic' readership and towards a more generally 'Christian' one.⁹⁸ The numerous essay-length attempts to track discontinuity in Merton's thought include Andrea Cook's essay on 'Romantic Transcendence',⁹⁹ Susan McCaslin's on 'Merton and Blake',¹⁰⁰ Walter Conn's on 'The Monastic Years',¹⁰¹ and William Apel's *Signs of Peace*.¹⁰² In each case the enterprise

⁹⁶ David Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (London: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), pp. 12, 12, 45 & 45.

⁹⁷ George A. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p. 6. Hereafter *Ace of Freedoms*.

⁹⁸ William Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1987), all p. 144. Hereafter *Dark Path*.

⁹⁹ Cook's view of Merton's radical shift in perspective hinges on 'remote and immediate preparations, actual breakthrough, and final phase' culminating in the 'transforming breakthrough' that resulted in Merton's love affair with 'M' in 1966. Andrea C. Cook, 'The Experience of Romantic Transcendence in Thomas Merton's Eighteen Poems', in *The Merton Annual: Studies in Culture, Spirituality & Social Concerns*, ed. by Victor A. Kramer, Vol. 14, 2001 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), pp. 121-154, p. 123.

¹⁰⁰ McCaslin tracks the change in perspective that led Merton to become 'more committed to the world' in his middle years. Susan McCaslin, 'Merton and Blake: The Heretic Within and the Heretic Without', in *The Merton Annual: Studies in Culture, Spirituality & Social Concerns*, ed. by Victor A. Kramer, Vol. 14, 2001 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), pp. 173-183, p. 173.

¹⁰¹ Conn gives an account of Merton's 'maturing religious life in the monastery' viewed 'through the theoretical lens of developmental psychology'. Walter E. Conn, 'Merton's Religious Development: The Monastic Years', in *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 1987, pp. 262-289, p. 262.

¹⁰² Like Cooper (see note 96 above), Apel contrasts 'the young petulant monk who wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain* with Merton's later role as a social critic. William Apel, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), p. 106.

remains essentially Merton-centric, rather than driven by substantial issues in theology or spirituality.

Arguments for the converse, that is for a central continuity in Merton's work, or what Lawrence Cunningham has labelled 'developmental readings' of Merton, are even more numerous.¹⁰³ Rowan Williams has claimed that '*authenticity*' remains 'one of the most consistent unifying themes in Merton's work';¹⁰⁴ for James Finley 'Merton's whole spirituality, in one way or another, pivots on the question of ultimate human identity';¹⁰⁵ Ross Labrie believes that 'Merton's writings form a coherent whole when considered from the point of view of his emphasis on unity and wholeness';¹⁰⁶ John Higgins contends that 'Merton's understanding of prayer... was undoubtedly the central and unifying theme throughout his writing';¹⁰⁷ Malgorzata Poks, whose essay on Merton seeks a 'master theme', argues for a 'surprising consistency... rather than the sometimes-postulated rupture' in the (rather vague) form of Merton's 'steady broadening of perspectives';¹⁰⁸ Gerald Twomey suggests that Merton's 'monastic vocation' was 'at the core of everything he said and did';¹⁰⁹ Patrick O'Connell suggests that the 'Integrating Factor' in Merton's work is the 'paschal mystery';¹¹⁰ and for John-Eudes Bamberger Merton's 'dominant focus' is upon

¹⁰³ Lawrence Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), p. 14. Hereafter *Monastic Vision*.

¹⁰⁴ *Silent Action*, p. 19.

¹⁰⁵ James Finley, *Thomas Merton's Palace of Nowhere* (Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2003), p. 21.

¹⁰⁶ Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (London: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. viii.

¹⁰⁷ John J. Higgins, *Merton's Theology of Prayer* (Massachusetts: Cistercian Publications, 1971), p. ix.

¹⁰⁸ Malgorzata Poks, 'Thomas Merton's Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons', in *The Merton Annual: Studies in Culture, Spirituality & Social Concerns*, ed. by Victor A. Kramer, Vol. 14, 2001 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), pp. 184-222, p. 212 & 184. Hereafter 'Endless Inscription'.

¹⁰⁹ Gerald Twomey, 'Merton and the Struggle for Radical Justice', in *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1978, pp. 200-215, p. 203.

¹¹⁰ Patrick O'Connell, 'The Paschal Heart of Merton's Spirituality', in *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 1996, pp. 343-362, pp. 343 & 355.

‘contemplation’.¹¹¹ Even a work such as Christopher Pramuk’s *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, the broader aim of which is to develop an original Sophiology rather than to excavate material about Merton, makes the claim that the ‘unifying thread’ in Merton’s work is ‘Christology’.¹¹²

Whilst only giving a taste of the emphasis of Merton studies, the above summary does nevertheless represent the major preoccupations of the field. Some extended theory-driven work has, it is true, been done: for example, Rowan Williams’s *A Silent Action* uses Merton’s thought in order to sketch (amongst other things) ‘a negative theology of the poetic’;¹¹³ Ann Carr’s *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit* develops a theology of the self, using Merton’s thought as a starting-point;¹¹⁴ and Pramuk’s *Sophia*, which chooses Merton as a ‘companion’ *en route* to developing a sophiological view of Christ’s presence in the world¹¹⁵—but these remain exceptions to the Merton-centric norm. No sustained work, furthermore, has thus far been done on the literary form of Merton’s prose, and the close analysis done in the work on Merton’s poetry does not seek, as here, to continue the Sellian project of reading form as a semantic analogue to theological (non)objects.¹¹⁶ Victor Kramer’s view of Merton’s poetry as the ‘exemplification’ of his monastic journey is perhaps the closest work within Merton studies to the present thesis, due to its concern with noting four stages in Merton’s writing life, the last of which is ‘simplification’,¹¹⁷ and each of which represents, through both the form and content of Merton’s poetry, the Trappist’s primary concerns in a given period of his

¹¹¹ Bamberger, ‘Thomas Merton, Our Brother’, p. 391.

¹¹² Pramuk, *Sophia*, pp. xxiii & xxii.

¹¹³ Williams, *Silent Action*, p. 51.

¹¹⁴ See Carr, *Wisdom and Spirit*.

¹¹⁵ Pramuk, *Sophia*, p. xviii. See pp. xviii-xix for an overview of Pramuk’s arguments concerning Divine Wisdom in Merton’s thought.

¹¹⁶ As early as 1984 a bibliography of the criticism of Merton’s poetry was published. See Bonnie Bowman Thurston, ‘Review of Criticism of Thomas Merton’s Poetry’, in *The Merton Seasonal of Bellarmine College* (Vol. 9, No. 2, Summer 1984), pp. 6-9.

¹¹⁷ Chapter Two below is written under the same heading.

history.¹¹⁸ Even Kramer's analysis is not close-textual, however, and his aim, as just stated, remains rooted in uncovering information about Merton rather than developing a substantive account of the theology of form. Book-length studies of Merton's literary side bear a similarly tangential relation to the present thesis: Kramer's book-length study on *Thomas Merton*, similarly, tracks the Trappist's literary development, with a focus on the themes and forms Merton used most regularly during different stages in his writing life, but here, as before, Kramer doesn't primarily seek to propose ideas that might apply outside of the world of Merton studies;¹¹⁹ Labrie's 'general literary introduction' to Merton provides a summative account of Merton's use of symbol and narrative art, and an exposition of Merton's three novels;¹²⁰ and Lentfoehr's *Words and Silence* offers a chronological exposition of the poetry collections.¹²¹ The use to which each of these key works from Merton Studies will be put will thus remain, for the most-part, limited in our own attempt to exemplify a Formalist theological poetics.

One further, final area of concern within Merton Studies serves as an important backdrop to a study of his prose forms: Merton's own writings on writing. Whilst we are not primarily concerned here with whether or not Merton's use of form as a vehicle for the enactment of theological content was intentional, or indeed with using Merton's own theories of literature and language significantly to influence our own theological poetics (for that theoretical background, see section three above), it is still important to make clear that

¹¹⁸ The four stages of Kramer's 'exemplification' are, firstly, the 'mystery of being enfolded in God's love'; secondly, 'self-satisfaction and doubt'; thirdly, the realization that 'no monastic journey was ever to be expressed through words'; and fourthly, 'simplification'. See Victor Kramer, 'Poetry as Exemplification of the Monastic Journey', in *The Legacy of Thomas Merton*, ed. by Br. Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1986), pp. 111-132, pp. 115, 118, 123, & 126. Hereafter 'Exemplification'.

¹¹⁹ Kramer, *Thomas Merton* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), p. 64. Hereafter *Thomas Merton*.

¹²⁰ Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), p. xi. Hereafter *Art of Merton*.

¹²¹ Thérèse Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1979). Hereafter *Words and Silence*.

Merton himself was much concerned with what it means to write in the context of a Christian life. The passages to which we will devote our analysis below spring, that is, from an intellect and an imagination that wrestled with the kind of issues with which we, too, will be concerned. In several ways, and alongside Merton's much-discussed agonizing over 'either "being a poet" or "being a contemplative"'¹²², and his concerns with the point at which 'the aesthetic instinct becomes a real danger' in the monastic life,¹²³ Merton's writings also extend to discussions (albeit brief, often journalistic ones) of the kind of issues outlined above in section four. For example, Merton's comments on 'an age of highly academic linguistic analysis' could have been included earlier on in our discussion of Steiner *et al*: 'The question of meaning,' Merton writes in one of his essays on Camus, 'raises the whole question of reality itself.'¹²⁴ If Steiner suggests that meaning-making presupposes the transcendent, Merton asks the kind of question to which that suggestion responds: 'Can language make sense,' he asks, 'if there is no God?'¹²⁵ We are not just dealing, then, with a writer whose literary forms provide material for a theological study of language; we are dealing with a writer who himself devoted thought, albeit somewhat occasional, to the theology of language.

It would be stretching the evidence to suggest that Merton's thought displayed anything more than occasional references to the kind of particularized analysis of theologically-informed forms that McGinn mentions and Sells carries out—but to collect those references together does suggest that Merton was interested in the relation between

¹²² *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, selected and edited by Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1989), p. 22. (Hereafter *Road to Joy*). For a selection of Merton's writings on writing, see *Echoing Silence: Thomas Merton on the Vocation of Writing*, ed. by Robert Inchausti (Boston: New Seeds Books, 2007), in which some of the quotations from Merton that follow can be found.

¹²³ *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. by Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 350. Hereafter *Literary Essays*.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

form and wider systems of thought. At a more general level, Merton was a thinker (and poet) for whom ‘The words of a poem are not merely the signs of concepts: they are also rich in affective associations’,¹²⁶ and for whom ‘All really valid poetry’ displays ‘generative association’ of some kind.¹²⁷ The simple point to be taken from this is that Merton was a proponent of the view that will be developed in detail in the present thesis, which argues that literary form can be read in terms of, or *association with*, theological content claims; and again, that literary form can *generate* a new moment, or new site, for theology—a site that deepens and broadens our understanding of reports of theological content claims.

Hints of a more specific link between forms of writing and particular systems of thought can also be found in the vast Merton *corpus*. Notably, on several occasions Merton contends that particular kinds of experience influence one’s literary style. Merton’s often vowed (and failed) to give up writing, either temporarily or permanently,¹²⁸ but his desire for a ‘lucid silence’ where he would ‘formulate no word for man or paper’ in the journal entry for December 14, 1949 stands out because of the end to which Merton believed it would bring him when he returned to writing: ‘[there] will still be plenty to say... and what is written will be simpler and more fruitful.’¹²⁹ Similarly, and this time speaking about those who reach a stage ‘where their whole lives become philosophy and poetry’, Merton claims that ‘From such a unified existence come the aphorisms of great Asian contemplatives of

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹²⁸ See, for example: ‘I intend to renounce [writing] for good’; ‘I am not writing and I do not think of writing anything whatsoever’; ‘lately I have been thinking of giving [writing] up for a while’; and then, in contrast: ‘At one time I thought I ought to give up writing poetry because it might not be compatible with the life of a monk, but I don’t think this anymore’. See *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. by Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990), pp. 89 & 101; *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. by Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), p. 63; and *Road to Joy*, p. 90.

¹²⁹ *The Sign of Jonas*, all p. 258.

Christian saints—and the poems of Zen masters.’¹³⁰ The structure of both of these claims is similar: in both, a particular kind of experience of life leads to a particular way of writing. And that same structure is taken in an only slightly altered direction when Merton claims that

The way for sacred art to become more “creative” is not just for the artist to study new and fashionable trends and try to apply them to sacred or symbolic themes. It is for the artist to enter deeply into his Christian vocation, his part in the work of restoring all things in Christ.¹³¹

We have now seen, then, that for Merton silence can lead to simple writing; that the unification of a ‘poetic’ life has led saints and Zen masters to an aphoristic style; and that living out a ‘Christian vocation’, as this latest quotation suggests, can lead to a heightening of creativity. To reformulate these claims in mirrored form is almost to repeat the genre of questioning to which the present thesis is devoted: how can an analysis of the simplicity of style show forth the Cistercian silence in which it was written? How might the aphoristic form imply that the writer has unified his or her own life? How might we analyse the relationship between the ‘creativity’ of a work of art and the Christian vocation from which it springs?

Without needing to be mirrored in this way, there are also moments when Merton discusses form as a site that enables our understanding of worldviews and concepts, in a way even more closely related to the present thesis. Discussing the formal innovations of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, for example, Merton proposes in an essay of 1968 that ‘we must clearly understand the function of nonviolence against the background of the collapse of language’.¹³² The point to be taken away here is that for Merton a literary form (‘collapse’) is necessary for the understanding of a movement and a philosophy. In a similar vein, and this time discussing the beat poets, Merton contends in an earlier letter that

¹³⁰ *Conjectures*, p. 264.

¹³¹ *Literary Essays*, p. 370.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

their very formlessness may perhaps be something that is in their favour. It may perhaps enable them to reject most of the false solutions and deride the “square” propositions of the decadent liberalism around them.¹³³

In Merton’s essay on Joyce form enabled the understanding of nonviolence; here form enables the rejection of liberalism; and in both cases Merton is arguing that the way in which one writes acts as an enabler for the comprehension of ideas. This, as before, resonates with the stated aims of the present thesis: Merton’s brief, scattered, but nonetheless clear comments about the importance of form as a site of understanding will find detailed substantiation below. ‘We must clearly understand the function of nonviolence against the background of the collapse of language,’ Merton said earlier; similarly, we will be arguing that we can more clearly understand a theology when we see it enacted in the shapes of language at a highly localized level.

It remains true that a more penetrating and in-depth account of the relationship between form and wider systems of thought than Merton’s can be found in the work of the Formalists and theologians of form such as Michael Sells, and these shall remain the literary-critical communities to which the present thesis responds and offers its contribution. Yet the point of outlining Merton’s own thoughts on the topic remains valid in spite of this. Clearly Merton did not use literary form in an unselfconscious way, and as we proceed in our analysis it will be helpful, by way of a fleshing out of the picture, to remember that fact. Merton thought and wrote about language, and undoubtedly brought his thoughts to bear on his writings, including those that will provide the heart of our analysis. This need not have been the case in order for the argument of the thesis to stand: the prose forms to be discussed below do not require commentary from Merton in order to display and perform theological ideas in the way, we shall contend, they do, in the same way that a poet need not have written

¹³³ *Courage for Truth*, p. 170.

about synaesthesia in order to use that device in a way that merits analysis. But Merton did write about form, and to be aware of this from the start will subtly influence our critical practice as we shift the focus from Merton's content to his forms. Behind Merton's use of form was a consciousness that a writer's shaping of words could speak of and enable ways of thinking and being. **Our analysis of Merton will thus contribute a particularized substantiation of an area of thought to which Merton himself saw himself as belonging.**

We have now prepared the ground for our main analysis. In sum, the purpose of this introductory section has been to define our enterprise by outlining the major arguments about form that will influence the methods of the present thesis, and also to show that a Formalist theological poetics concerned with the themes of denial, simplification, thereness, and God's obscurity will offer a significant and original contribution to the existing literature on related topics. In the five chapters that follow we shall take Formalism in the direction of theology; the theology of form in the direction of particularization and thereby substantiation; performative language readings of mystical writings in the direction of relationships between new types of form and new content-based themes; and Merton studies in the direction of a theory-driven account of the workings of form in the writings of the Trappist. Our aim at every stage will be to develop a theological poetics rooted in close textual analysis that leads, finally, to readings where Thomas Merton's prose forms are viewed as embodiments of his content claims. **We will begin with Merton claims about *denial*.**

Chapter One: Denial

1. Aims, Definition of 'Denial', Field of Enquiry

In pursuit of the goals outlined above, it is the aim of this first literary-critical chapter to show that the forms of Thomas Merton's prose writings embody claims he makes elsewhere about denial. The chapter will be structured according to a five-part methodology that will be applied to each of our subsequent chapters. In section one, we will define the overarching sense with which we will be using the word 'denial', which will in turn help to make clear the distinctiveness of our own work. In section two, we will conduct an exposition of Merton's key writings on the theme of denial, with reference back to the definition given in section one. In section three, we will outline key literary terms that, as we will show, relate to the theme of denial, also as defined in section one. In section four we will conduct an extended literary analysis of Merton's prose forms, using the literary terms from section three to aid the analysis, and the content claims about denial from section two in order to argue that Merton's prose forms of denial are sites where the theologically-rooted content claims from section two are performed on the page. This fourth section will form the heart of the chapter; the preceding three sections should all be viewed as a preparation for the work done there. In section five, finally, we will show how the analysis already conducted contributes to the fields of enquiry outlined in the introductory chapter above.

To begin with, then, the overarching definition of denial to which all of the discussion in this chapter will conform is taken from the first entry given for the word in the *Shorter*

Oxford English Dictionary (or *SOED*), namely ‘the act of saying “no”’.¹³⁴ To place this definition in relation to our argument: we will contend in this chapter that Merton both writes repeatedly about the value of ‘acts of saying “no”’ as part of the spiritual life, and that he embodies those acts in the way he writes prose. Clearly it will be necessary to specify further the kinds of ‘act of saying “no”’ with which we are concerned, because as it stands the definition bears no obvious or at least specific relation to theological enquiry and therefore no obvious or specific relation to a theological poetics. But the first point to be made is that this definition, broad as it is, will remain the touchstone against which all of our subsequent analysis will be measured. What kind of content claims from Merton’s theology can be described as ‘acts of saying “no”’? Which literary terms can be described as ‘acts of saying “no”’? How do Merton’s prose forms ‘say “no”’, and how, further, can they be described in terms of the mentioned literary terms and content claims? Looking back to our key definition from the *SOED*, the chapter will seek to answer these questions.

Three preliminary examples of the kind of content claims Merton makes about denial will begin to make the task of the chapter clearer, and will also help to distinguish the denials with which we are concerned from those that have more common currency in theological and philosophical enquiry. Firstly, in his early pamphlet *What is Contemplation?* Merton commends his reader to ‘renounce all things for the sake of God alone’.¹³⁵ This is, under our given definition, a form of ‘denial’. ‘Renunciation’, in the *SOED*, has multiple senses including ‘giving up’,¹³⁶ ‘rejecting’,¹³⁷ ‘declining further association’,¹³⁸ ‘forsaking’,¹³⁹ and,

¹³⁴ ‘Denial, 1’, in *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, fifth edn., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Hereafter *SOED*.

¹³⁵ *Spiritual Direction and Meditation and What is Contemplation?* (Hertfordshire: Anthony Clarke, 1975), p. 98. Hereafter *What is Contemplation*.

¹³⁶ *SOED*, ‘renunciation, 1’.

¹³⁷ *SOED*, ‘renunciation, 2’ (first part).

¹³⁸ *SOED*, ‘renunciation, 2’ (second part).

¹³⁹ *SOED*, ‘renunciation, 3’ (first part).

indeed, ‘self-denial’;¹⁴⁰ and each of these can, in turn, be described as an ‘act of saying “no”’: “no” to the thing given up, the thing rejected, the thing declined, the thing forsaken, and the self denied. Secondly, in *The Ascent to Truth* Merton claims that ‘First of all, the contemplative life requires detachment from the senses’.¹⁴¹ The same exercise can be performed again. The closest of the *SOED*’s definitions of ‘detachment’ to Merton’s usage is ‘A condition of spiritual separation from the world’.¹⁴² This, too, can be paraphrased in terms of ‘saying “no”’: “no” to close physical proximity to the world, or, in Merton’s own words, ‘the senses’. Thirdly and finally, in *Contemplative Prayer* Merton claims that ‘we must frankly admit that self-denial and sacrifice are absolutely essential to the life of prayer’.¹⁴³ In this instance the ‘act of saying “no”’ is engendered by the word ‘denial’ itself, and the object of the “no” has become the ‘self’ referred to in the phrase ‘self-denial’.

From these three examples it will be clear that the ‘acts of saying “no”’ with which this chapter is concerned are distinct from the denials normally associated with *apophatic* theology. At no point in this chapter will we quote Merton attempting to describe God in terms of what he is not.¹⁴⁴ Instead, the denials under discussion will relate to modes of *praxis* whereby Merton ‘says “no”’ to objects that in some way obstruct his spiritual life. In the three content claims quoted above, for example, the modes of *praxis* were ‘renunciation’, ‘detachment’, and ‘self-denial’, whilst the objects of the *praxis*, or obstructions to which he ‘said “no”’, were ‘all things’, ‘the senses’, and ‘the self’. It remains true that if, with Michael Sells, the *aphaeretic* mode is a set of literary strategies geared towards ‘speaking away’ their

¹⁴⁰ *SOED*, ‘renunciation, 3’ (second part).

¹⁴¹ *The Ascent to Truth* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1951), p. 10. Hereafter *Ascent*.

¹⁴² *SOED*, ‘detachment’, entry 4.

¹⁴³ *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton, Longmann & Todd, 1973), p. 89. Hereafter *Contemplative Prayer*.

¹⁴⁴ For a recent account of the history of apophatic theology, see Andrew Louth, ‘Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology’, in Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 137-146. Hereafter ‘Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology’, and *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*.

object,¹⁴⁵ or if the same mode (following McGinn) is a form of ‘clearing aside’,¹⁴⁶ then some of the texts under discussion in this chapter clear aside (or ‘deny’) obstacles to the spiritual life by a process of *aphaeretic* renunciation, detachment, and so on. None of our chosen texts, however, can be described in the terms of the *via negativa* as normally understood in relation to the *apophatic* writings associated with Dionysius, John Scotus Eriugena, Meister Eckhart, the *Cloud* author, and others, which are concerned not with the embodiment of a praxis of denial, but with strategies of describing God in negative terms.¹⁴⁷

In line with the distinction made earlier between literary theory and critical theory (see page 23 above), it should also be noted that the present chapter is not concerned with critical debates about denial of the kind championed by Derrida and Kermode in the collection of essays published as *Languages of the Unsayable*.¹⁴⁸ Derrida’s keynote essay in the collection is entitled ‘How To Avoid Speaking: Denials’,¹⁴⁹ but for the most-part overlaps with the present thesis only in title. We use the phrase ‘for the most-part’ here because Derrida does mention the importance of ‘rhetorical, grammatical, and logical modes’ to the construction of mystical theology¹⁵⁰—and the aim of this chapter and this thesis is, as we have already made clear, to substantiate this broad claim. Derrida’s predominant concern with the philosophy of language and the critique of metaphysics, however, is not the object of our enquiry. Whether or not Kermode, writing in *Languages of the Unsayable*, is correct when he claims that mystical theology has ‘smuggled the comforting notion of

¹⁴⁵ Sells, *Unsayings*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁶ McGinn, *Foundations*, pp. 175 & 174.

¹⁴⁷ See Louth, ‘Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology’ for a further definition of apophatic theologies along these lines.

¹⁴⁸ *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987). Hereafter *Unsayable*. See also William C. Johnson Jr., *What Thoreau Said: Walden and the Unsayable* (Moscow, Idaho: University of Idaho Press, 1991). Hereafter *Thoreau*.

¹⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, in Sanford Budick, and Wolfgang Iser (eds.), *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), pp. 3-70. Hereafter ‘Denials’.

¹⁵⁰ ‘Denials’, p. 3.

hyperessentiality’ into its mode of speech in such a way that its negativity is muted beside the ‘greater measure’ of Derridean *différance*, is not at issue here.¹⁵¹ To make this clearer: Shira Wolosky’s essay from the *Unsayable* collection is more relevant to the present task in the case of Wolosky’s essay on Beckett, because of her literary-critical account of Beckett’s ‘apotropic modes’,¹⁵² rather than because of her metaphysical concerns, whether Derridean or otherwise. We might say that both the Derridean project, and the literary-critical projects of Wolosky and the present thesis, contribute to the current ‘preoccupation with negativity’,¹⁵³ as Stéphane Moses puts it, and to the position of the study of ‘negative categories’ as a ‘major aspect of reflection on modern literature’, as Culler puts it¹⁵⁴—but the fundamental aims of the likes of Derrida and Kermode, and the genres of analysis in which they write, are, at root, different from our own.

The starting-point of the present chapter is consequently the contention that our guiding thesis is distinct from two of the major schools of thought with which the word ‘denial’ is often associated, namely *apophatic* theology and the deconstruction of philosophy. In simple form, our aim is to contribute to literary theory, rather than critical theory, an account of how Merton’s prose enacts, not an *apophatic* linguistic strategy, but the *praxis* of denying obstructions to the spiritual life.

2. Exposition: Merton’s Language About Denial

¹⁵¹ Frank Kermode, ‘Endings, Continued’, in *Unsayable*, pp. 71-94, both p. 75. Hereafter ‘Endings, Continued’.

¹⁵² Shira Wolosky, ‘Samuel Beckett’s Figural Evasions’, in *Unsayable*, pp. 165-186, p. 183. Hereafter ‘Figural Evasions’.

¹⁵³ Stéphane Moses, ‘Patterns of Negativity in Paul Celan’s “The Trumpet Place”’, trans. by Ken Frieden, in *Unsayable*, pp. 209-224, p. 223. (Hereafter ‘Figural Evasions’.)

¹⁵⁴ Jonathan Culler, ‘On the Negativity of Modern Poetry: Friedrich, Baudelaire, and the Critical Tradition’, in *Unsayable*, pp. 189-208, p. 189.

Having defined our methods (literary-critical) and the modes of text with which are *not* concerned (those traditionally considered *apophatic*) our next task is to gather the content claims from Merton's writings with which we shall later describe Merton's prose forms, and to consider the theological foundations from which those claims issue. As will be true in future chapters, these content claims will be taken from the eight texts considered in William Shannon's seminal work on Merton's *Writings on Contemplation* to form the heart of the Trappist's work on the contemplative life. These are, in order of their publication: *What is Contemplation*, *Seeds of Contemplation*, *The Ascent to Truth*, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude' (from *Disputed Questions*), *The Inner Experience*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Contemplative Prayer*, and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*.¹⁵⁵ The exposition of Merton's content claims about 'denial' from these books and essays are further organised into four main categories. These are, firstly, the theological roots of Merton's writings about denial—namely, a discussion of the *kenotic* action of Christ on the Cross; secondly, the mode in which a given act of denial takes place—for instance, flight and shaking free; thirdly, Merton's report of the nature of the object being denied—for instance, senses and desires; and fourthly, Merton's account of the end for which an act of denial takes place—for

¹⁵⁵ See the main chapters of William Shannon's *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey: Writings on Contemplation* (Kent: Burns and Oates, 2000), which perform an exposition of the listed texts. On page 17 of *Paradise Journey* Shannon categorises Merton's development in the texts in question as an early stage (*What is Contemplation*, *Seeds Contemplation*, *Ascent*), a stage of growth towards maturity (*Thoughts in Solitude*, 'Notes Towards a Philosophy of Solitude'), his 'mature writings on contemplation' (*Inner Experience*, *New Seeds*, *Contemplative Prayer*, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*), and his work on the relationship between contemplation and the world (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, *Contemplation in a World of Action*). The latter two of these texts contain fewer claims about the themes on which the present essay will use as focal points for a theological poetics (denial, simplification, thereness, obscurity), and for this reason they are not used in our expositional sections. At the same time as appropriating Shannon's list in this way, it should also be noted that any disagreement about the texts we have selected for the expositions in question will not alter our central argument; the key point to be made here is that the chosen texts provide sufficient content claims about denial with which we will read Merton's prose forms in section four below, rather than that they represent the best of Merton's work on the topics in question.

instance, union with God and doing God's will. The aim of this section is not to be controversial or to offer a distinctive argumentation about Merton's writings, but to prepare for the argument of Section 4 below by outlining the main contours of Merton's writings on denial.

Firstly, then, *What is Contemplation* introduces ways of speaking about denial to which he would return throughout his writing career. The young Merton contends that the desire for God and the gift of contemplation have a 'price', which is 'to give up our desire for the things that can never satisfy us.'¹⁵⁶ In order to receive the Holy Spirit one 'must withdraw his desires from all the satisfactions and interests this world has to offer.'¹⁵⁷ The contemplative is one whose life is comprised of 'uncompromising docility to the will of God',¹⁵⁸ and whose task is to 'renounce all things for the sake of God alone'.¹⁵⁹ Each of these quotations involves a mode, object, and end of denial, or in other words the three aspects of *praxis* that we have chosen to focus on. The modes – or the way in which Merton says "no" – are giving up, withdrawing, being docile, and renouncing. The denied objects – or things to which Merton says "no" – are unsatisfactory things, desires, and all things. The ends for which the denials are enacted – the reasons for which Merton says "no" to the objects – are contemplation, the Spirit, and God alone. We have, then, the beginning of a vocabulary with which Merton speaks about the object, mode, and result of acts of denial.

Seeds of Contemplation (1949) offers both a repetition and a development of the vocabulary used in *What is Contemplation?* There is a reappearance of the language of withdrawing ('withdraw from exterior things'),¹⁶⁰ losing ('I shall be lost in Him'),¹⁶¹ and

¹⁵⁶ *What is Contemplation*, p. 90.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁶⁰ *Seeds of Contemplation* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1949), p. 136. Hereafter *Seeds*.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

renunciation ('a fundamental act of renunciation'),¹⁶² the last of which is discussed at length in a chapter devoted to and entitled 'Renunciation'.¹⁶³ The language of docility, too, is refigured as an 'act of submission to the authority of God',¹⁶⁴ and new words about the performance of denial emerge in descriptions of 'flight from the world'¹⁶⁵ and of turning: in denying self, the contemplative experiences 'a change that turns everything completely around'.¹⁶⁶ You, the reader, are asked to 'deliver yourself from the desires and cares and the interests of an existence in time and in the world',¹⁶⁷ and to 'avoid' such things.¹⁶⁸ In saying "no" to worldly desires the contemplative engages in an act of 'setting our wills free',¹⁶⁹ and, similarly, the meditator's task is 'to shake himself free' from an object of denial.¹⁷⁰ We can synthesise these last quotations: flying away, turning away, setting free, and shaking free are all metaphors of physical movement or action, and each will be used later to describe the action of Merton's prose forms. Finally, language about an act of emptying comes to the fore in *Seeds*: like Mary, we must 'empty ourselves and become poor';¹⁷¹ 'you have found contemplation', says Merton, when you have found 'emptiness and silence and detachment.'¹⁷² To relate this to our definition of 'denial': to empty yourself is a 'denial' of the thing which previously made you full. It is to fullness that Merton is saying "no".

As William Shannon has pointed out in his expositional work on Merton, in *Seeds* the Trappist also speaks in a new way about the denied object. The 'false self',¹⁷³ Shannon

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-175.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

¹⁷³ William Shannon, *Dark Path* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1987), p. 57.

shows, now takes precedence—or, as Merton puts it, the ‘false and private self’,¹⁷⁴ which is made up of ‘pleasures and ambitions’.¹⁷⁵ It is also now the ‘burden of his own selfishness’,¹⁷⁶ to which the contemplative must say “no”, as well as to the ‘slag of an inescapable worldliness’,¹⁷⁷ ‘disunity’,¹⁷⁸ ‘the values and standards to which human passion is so powerfully attached’,¹⁷⁹ and even the false comfort of ‘interior peace and recollection’.¹⁸⁰ A prominent place is also given to the denial of ‘attachment to created things’;¹⁸¹ for instance, it is the contemplative’s task ‘to shake himself free of created things and temporal concerns’.¹⁸² All of these quotations can be added to the vocabulary with which we will later describe the objects (as opposed to modes or ends) to which Merton says no in the modes of his prose writing. And finally: to ends that involved God in the earlier text – ‘God alone’ from *What is Contemplation*, for example – *Seeds* adds new notions of the experience of the contemplative, who receives ‘the love and mercy of God’,¹⁸³ and comes, in opposition to the false self, to know his or her ‘true identity in the peace of God’.¹⁸⁴ The one who denies the world is also brought ‘to the pure possession of Him as He is in Himself’,¹⁸⁵ and to ‘finding yourself left with nothing but yourself.’¹⁸⁶ These, too, can be added to the vocabulary with which we shall read the forms of Merton’s prose.

The Ascent to Truth (1951) slightly changes the key in which Merton speaks about ‘saying “no”’ through its extended and explicit appropriation of Thomas Aquinas and John of

¹⁷⁴ *Seeds*, p. 28.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84 .

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

the Cross. At times the basic centrality of denial to Merton's project is restated, especially in a paraphrase of John of the Cross, for whom 'the imitation of Christ means only one thing: absolute self-renunciation',¹⁸⁷ and again later, in Merton's claim that 'self-denial is the characteristic of those who follow Christ, because the sign of the Christian is the sign of the Cross'.¹⁸⁸ Merton also revisits the notion of submission, for instance 'submission to His will',¹⁸⁹ and 'free submission of our judgement in blind faith'.¹⁹⁰ Besides this repeated material we can also add new terms regarding the mode through which denial takes place, namely the 'blackout of desire'¹⁹¹, the importance of 'generosity in self-denial',¹⁹² and denial as a 'negative predisposition'.¹⁹³ There is also an extended discussion of the denial specifically of *concepts*: 'The theologian cannot reach God in his concepts', says Merton 'until he renounces their limits and their "definitions"'.¹⁹⁴ To this can be added very few (if any) re-imaginings of the denied object, but a few novel accounts of the end for which the denial takes place do appear. There is a short passage, for instance, about the 'pleasure in everything... knowledge of all... possession of all... [and] literal fulfilment of the First Commandment'¹⁹⁵ that result from denial. Even more strikingly, we read that 'self-denial... will keep all the faculties of the soul responsive to the keys when they are struck by God.'¹⁹⁶ This is (rather typically for Merton) an ambiguous claim; but our task later will be to argue that, despite its ambiguity, Merton's prose forms of denial can be read as leading to end results of this kind.

¹⁸⁷ *Ascent*, p. 57.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

Ascent also offers a key development of Merton's account of the relationships between the ends for which an act of denial is performed, and the theological roots from which the *praxes* we have been outlining grow. Merton now claims that 'the whole ascetical and mystical life is a reproduction of the life of Christ on earth because it completely empties and "annihilates" the soul in order to unite it to God'.¹⁹⁷ There is repetition here of the purpose or end of the life of denials (unification), but there is also a theologizing of that aim: the ascetic performs self-denials because to do so reflects the life of Christ on earth. As it stands this connection between denial and Christ is somewhat vague, but later in *Ascent* Merton hints at why self-denial might, for the Christian, relate back to the life of Christ on earth: 'self-denial', Merton says 'is the characteristic of those who follow Christ, because the sign of the Christian is the sign of the Cross.'¹⁹⁸ The *praxes* Merton discusses repeatedly in his early works can now begin (albeit in a still somewhat vague form) to be sketched against the background of an emerging theological doctrine: to deny oneself is to be united with God because God also denied Himself in His life on earth, and specifically to be united with his death on the Cross. We shall see this outline of a *kenotic* background to the praxis of self-denial developed further in Merton's later work.

Thoughts in Solitude (1958) is notable for its focus on a series of distinctive figurations of modes of denial, and a development of the *kenotic* theological root. Writing in solitude in an abandoned tool-shed, Merton imagined acts of denial in terms of 'control of emotion by self-denial',¹⁹⁹ 'the attack of mortification upon sense',²⁰⁰ the role of 'Self-conquest',²⁰¹ and the need 'to have enough mastery of ourselves to renounce our own will

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹⁹⁹ *Thoughts in Solitude* (London: Burns and Oates, 1997), p. 27. Hereafter *Thoughts in Solitude*.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

into the hands of Christ'.²⁰² The emphasis here is upon gaining power or authority over oneself, with an emphasis on metaphors of physicality and violence. This way of thinking extends briefly to the end for which the act of denial is performed – 'so that he [God] may conquer what we cannot reach by our own efforts'²⁰³ – but is largely limited to the mode in which the denial is enacted.

In *Thoughts* Merton also offers us more theological roots: 'We must love our own poverty as Jesus loves it', he says. 'It is so valuable to him that he died on the cross to present our poverty to his Father, and endow us with the riches of his own infinite mercy'.²⁰⁴ There comes into view, then, another link between Christ's *kenotic* act on the Cross and an ascetic's relationship with God. To experience 'poverty' through self-denial is to perform an act that is 'valuable' to Jesus to the extent that he would endure suffering and death for it, but it is also to perform an act that is highly-esteemed by the Father, who responds to Jesus's presentation of our poverty on the Cross by endowing us with 'infinite mercy'. The end for which the denial takes place here is constituted by the response of God to our denied selves in poverty, which was shown in Christ crucified. The intricacies of this kind of claim should not, however, delay us here: for the purposes of the present thesis it suffices to say that *Thoughts* offers a new root and a new for the act of denial, namely the value placed on acts of self-denial by God, and the infinite mercy bestowed on us by God as a result of our self-denials.

Merton's emphasis then shifts again, however, in the more scholarly style of 'Notes Towards a Philosophy of Solitude (1960). In terms of the mode through which denial takes place, the essay calls the contemplative to 'transcend himself';²⁰⁵ and describes the thing denied in terms of a person's 'social image', which Merton further describes as those things

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁰⁵ See *Disputed Questions* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1961), p. 178. Hereafter *Disputed Questions*.

that ‘society prescribes as beneficial and praiseworthy’.²⁰⁶ At the start of the 1960s, then, Merton was no longer focussing on ‘created things’ in general, as he was in *Seeds* and the works that preceded it, but on ‘society’ specifically, as the object of denial. ‘The solitary’, he now claims, ‘is first of all one who renounces... arbitrary social imagery’.²⁰⁷

In *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962), Merton’s focus on the object of denial as a societal construction gives way to a return of language about the ‘false self’.²⁰⁸ The return is unsurprising considering that *New Seeds* is a re-write of *Seeds*, where (as we noted above) the false self first took a prominent place in Merton’s thinking. More in keeping with the chronological development of Merton’s thinking on denial is the language in *New Seeds*, which emerged forcefully in *Thoughts in Solitude*, of death and violence: the contemplative is now called to embrace ‘death to our exterior self’,²⁰⁹ and you, the contemplative, must ‘strip your soul of images’²¹⁰ and perform ‘the annihilation of every trace of pride’.²¹¹ As in *Thoughts in Solitude*, Merton is also concerned in *New Seeds* with the ‘heroic acts of self-denial’²¹² through which a contemplative prepares himself or herself for the Dark Night of the Soul, although he also affords a place to the less dramatic and less violent Night of the Senses, during which the mind is ‘peacefully and gently purified of false hopes and illusory conceptions’.²¹³ Within the quotation of these two very different experiences of emptying, a new object of denial has appeared, namely, ‘every trace of pride’. It will be relevant to Merton’s prose forms of denial later on.

New ends and a repetition of the *kenotic* root are also to be found in *New Seeds*, in the following two passages:

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, both p. 186.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

²⁰⁸ See, for instance, *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 141.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 155-6.

If I am to be “holy” I must therefore be something that I do not understand, something mysterious and hidden, something apparently self-contradictory; for God, in Christ, “emptied himself”.²¹⁴

If... we want to seek some way of being holy, we must first of all renounce our own way and our own wisdom. We must “empty ourselves” as He did’.²¹⁵

The act of denial in both of these quotations is described in the now familiar language of ‘emptying’, but placed in relation to the language of ‘holiness’ that is linked, in turn, to God’s act of emptying ‘in Christ’, or Christ’s act of emptying, presumably on the Cross. In the latter of the two passages there is also a hint, involving an object of denial, as to the link between our acts of *kenotic* emptying and the holiness for which the act is performed: to empty oneself is to become holy because it involves renouncing our own way and our own wisdom. This kind of language has already been quoted above in Merton’s discussions of, for example, the ‘false self’ and the ‘senses’, but its novelty here is its positioning between the background of Christ’s emptying and the end-goal of holiness. The quotations above are striking, that is, because they present us with a picture that includes both the *praxis* of denial and the thought-system from which it springs. There is a theological background (the self-emptying of God), a mode (emptying), an object (our own wisdom), and an end (holiness). In section four below, the discussion of Merton’s literary embodiment of denials in his prose writings will contribute further to how Merton expresses and enacts this theological picture.

Merton’s final books on contemplation add little to the word-pool of content claims with which we shall read the literary forms of the Trappist’s prose writings, but they do continue to stress Merton’s view of the central importance of denial to the contemplative life. In *Contemplative Prayer* (1973), ‘The monk is one who has responded to a special call from God... in order to devote himself completely to repentance, “conversion”, *metanoia*,

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

renunciation and prayer'.²¹⁶ As was true of both *What is Contemplation* and *Seeds*, we must also show 'obedience and cooperative submission to grace'.²¹⁷ The same pattern of thinking recurs in *The Inner Experience*, which offers a few nuances of old themes. Of 'contemplation' and 'happiness', for instance, Merton writes that 'neither can be found unless [they are] in some sense renounced',²¹⁸ and speaks of the self-denial of the Desert Fathers, who went into solitude in order to 'wrestle with practical evil'.²¹⁹ Besides this, Merton's vocabulary of denial does not notably grow in these later works.

To summarise: we have gathered a vocabulary with which Merton describes the roots, modes, objects, ends of various 'acts of saying "no"', or acts of denial. The roots of denial we have gathered are the self-denial performed by Jesus on the Cross,²²⁰ the self-emptying of Christ on the Cross,²²¹ and the value placed by God on our self-denial, which was shown by Jesus on the Cross.²²² The modes of denial we have gathered are acts of giving up,²²³ withdrawing,²²⁴ being docile,²²⁵ renouncing,²²⁶ losing,²²⁷ submitting,²²⁸ flying,²²⁹ turning,²³⁰ delivering,²³¹ avoiding,²³² setting free,²³³ shaking free,²³⁴ emptying,²³⁵ detaching,²³⁶ blacking

²¹⁶ *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 19.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²¹⁸ *The Inner Experience* (London: SPCK, 2003), p. 2. Hereafter *Inner Experience*.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²²⁰ *Ascent*, p. 126.

²²¹ See *New Seeds*, pp. 49 & 50.

²²² *Thoughts*, p. 38.

²²³ *What is Contemplation*, p. 90.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93 and *Seeds*, p. 136.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 98; *Seeds*, p. 34; *Seeds*, pp. 165-175; *Ascent*, p. 57; *Ascent*, p. 126; *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 19.

²²⁷ See *Seeds*, pp. 33-34.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81; *Ascent*, p. 34; *Ascent*, p. 36; *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 68.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103 & pp. 115-116.

out,²³⁷ controlling,²³⁸ attacking,²³⁹ conquest,²⁴⁰ mastery,²⁴¹ transcending,²⁴² dying,²⁴³ stripping,²⁴⁴ annihilating,²⁴⁵ and wrestling.²⁴⁶ The objects of denial we have gathered are unsatisfactory things,²⁴⁷ worldly desires,²⁴⁸ all things,²⁴⁹ exterior things,²⁵⁰ the world,²⁵¹ the cares of the world,²⁵² the false self,²⁵³ pleasures and ambitions,²⁵⁴ selfishness,²⁵⁵ worldliness,²⁵⁶ disunity,²⁵⁷ the standards of human passion,²⁵⁸ interior peace,²⁵⁹ attachment to created things,²⁶⁰ temporal concerns,²⁶¹ desire,²⁶² concepts,²⁶³ society's image of who we are,²⁶⁴ images,²⁶⁵ pride,²⁶⁶ illusory conceptions,²⁶⁷ and evil.²⁶⁸ The ends for which Merton's

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

²³⁷ *Ascent*, p. 40.

²³⁸ *Thoughts*, p. 27.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁴² *Disputed Questions*, p. 178.

²⁴³ *New Seeds*, p. 22.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²⁴⁶ *Inner Experience*, p. 33.

²⁴⁷ *What is Contemplation*, p. 90.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁵⁰ *Seeds*, p. 136.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 28, *New Seeds*, p. 33.

²⁵⁴ *Seeds*, p. 29.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 84 .

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

²⁶² *Ascent*, p. 40.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. p. 70.

²⁶⁴ *Disputed Questions*, p. 186 & 187.

²⁶⁵ *New Seeds*, p. 110.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 155-6.

²⁶⁸ *Inner Experience*, p. 33.

performed his acts of denial are doing the will of God,²⁶⁹ serving God alone,²⁷⁰ being under God's authority,²⁷¹ pure possession of God,²⁷² identity in the peace of God,²⁷³ the love and mercy of God,²⁷⁴ pleasure in everything,²⁷⁵ responsiveness to God,²⁷⁶ holiness,²⁷⁷ and God's infinite mercy.²⁷⁸ Many of these modes, objects, and ends of denial will be used in section four below to describe Merton's prose forms, and thus to develop our argument that the literary modes of Merton's prose writings enact claims he makes at the level of content.

3. Literary Terminology: Caesura, Volta, and Hiatus

The purpose of the previous section was to gather a vocabulary with which Merton speaks about self-denial, both in itself and in relation to causes and purposes. The next questions to be answered, with the help of the vocabulary just gathered, are: 'How does Merton embody acts of giving up, withdrawing, emptying, renunciation, and flight at the level of literary form?' 'How are these acts directed towards obstacles to the spiritual life, such as desires, created things, and social images?' 'How does Merton's prose generate the sense that such poetic denials lead to God alone, God's love, or God's mercy?' In order to answer these questions more clearly in section four, where we shall conduct an extended literary-critical account of Merton's poetic denials, it is the aim of this section to outline literary-critical terms that help to describe three of the major modes through which Merton's prose enacts denial. The terms in question are 'caesura', 'volta', and 'hiatus'. Each, we will now show,

²⁶⁹ *What is Contemplation*, p. 94.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁷¹ *Seeds*, p. 81.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29 and *New Seeds*.

²⁷⁵ *Ascent*, p. 40.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

²⁷⁷ *New Seeds*, pp. 49 & 50.

²⁷⁸ *Thoughts*, p. 38.

can be associated with ‘the act of saying “no”’; each can also be associated with specific ways in which Merton figured the act of saying “no” in our exposition above (such as renunciation, withdrawal, emptying, and so on); and each can be placed within the context of wider studies of mystical poetics, and specifically to modes of language that Bernard McGinn has identified in the literary ‘strategy’ of Meister Eckhart.²⁷⁹ The purpose of mentioning McGinn’s Eckhart alongside the introduction of our literary-critical apparatus is to show, once again, that the present study builds on themes to which prominent scholars have begun to point, but without performing that close analysis that will be offered here in section four.

‘Caesura’, firstly, which stems from ‘*caedere*’ (‘to cut off’), is defined by the *Princeton Encyclopedia* as ‘the place in a line of verse where the metrical flow is temporarily “cut off”’.²⁸⁰ To relate this to our tri-part anatomization of an act of denial from section two: the mode through which caesura enacts denial is ‘cutting off’; the denied object is ‘metrical flow’; and the end for which the denial takes place is, in the given definition, unspecified. Of these three aspects, it is the *mode* of caesura that will be relevant to our analysis of Merton’s prose in section four. The object (‘metre’) is only partially applicable to Merton’s normally non-metrical prose, and the unspecified end of caesura bears no relation to Merton’s search for ‘God alone’ or ‘possession of all’. The mode of caesura, however, will relate closely in section four to, amongst other things, ‘renunciation’, ‘detachment’, ‘attack’, and ‘stripping away’, the sense of each of which is generated in Merton’s prose, we will show, through various modes of caesura-esque cutting off at the level of literary form. A similar phenomenon has been pointed out already (albeit very briefly) by Bernard McGinn, who writes of the literary strategy of ‘detaching or cutting off’ in Meister Eckhart’s prose.²⁸¹ As we have already noted McGinn does not, however, provide a literary-critical account of such

²⁷⁹ Bernard McGinn, *Harvest*, p. 165.

²⁸⁰ *Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 174.

²⁸¹ *Harvest*, p. 165.

strategies, or relate it to the content of Eckhart's theology. This will be part of our aim in section four.

'Volta', secondly, is defined by the *Encyclopedia* as the 'turn' in content or tone that occurs after the opening octet of a sonnet, and which is sustained in the subsequent sextet.²⁸² As with 'caesura', the relevant aspect here is the *mode* of denial (the 'turn') rather than the denied object (the octet of a sonnet), or the end for which the denial takes place (unspecified). More specifically, the 'turn', as we will see, can be related to Merton's language, gathered above, of 'giving up', 'withdrawing', 'flight', and 'turning around', each of which reflect the dynamics of volta's turn. Finally, 'volta' can be related to McGinn's description of Eckhart's literary strategies for 'leaving, letting go, resigning',²⁸³ although McGinn leaves open the question of *how* Eckhart does this at the level of particular forms.

'Hiatus', thirdly, is defined by the *Encyclopedia* as 'the gap that is created by pronunciation of contiguous vowels'.²⁸⁴ The mode of denial in hiatus, then, is 'pronunciation'; the object of denial is 'contiguous vowels'; and the end of the denial is a 'gap'. It is the *end* of hiatus (the 'gap') rather than the mode ('pronunciation') or the object ('contiguous vowels') that will apply to our Formalist theological poetics of denial. More specifically, in section four we will associate the generation by form of a 'gap' with Merton's language about 'becoming-empty' in order to be left with 'nothing but oneself'. McGinn has also pointed to this phenomenon in Eckhart's prose: the medieval mystic's writings leave a 'gap', McGinn suggests, as the result of a literary 'un-forming', 'dis-imagining', and 'unbecoming', each of which leads to 'the freedom, emptiness, and nakedness of the

²⁸² *Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 1527. For a more detailed account of the etymology of 'volta' in the context of a theory of literature as a site of various kinds of 'veering', see Nicholas Royle, *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

²⁸³ *Harvest*, p. 165.

²⁸⁴ *Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 629.

dispossessed soul.’²⁸⁵ This is a very Sellsian claim. McGinn connects literary modes (of ‘un-forming’, ‘dis-imaging’, and ‘unbecoming’) with a mystical experience (that of the ‘dispossessed soul’) in a way reminiscent of Sells’s work on the generation of semantic analogue to mystical union through the grammatical fusion of antecedents. But as ever, McGinn neither exemplifies the forms of Eckhart’s prose nor develops a methodology for reading form as poetically enacting an experience of dispossession. This will be our aim in section four.

Section four will thus use ‘caesura’, ‘volta’, and ‘hiatus’ in a qualified sense that discards the object upon which they act, as well as either their mode of action or the result of their action. As such the ‘cutting off’, ‘turning away’ or generation of a ‘gap’ brought about by Merton’s poetics are not in themselves instances of the three terms as normally understood. Their usefulness is as an initial clarificatory tool. Identifying the mode of caesura leads to the questions at the heart of our poetics of denial, for instance ‘Is the mode through which a passage “cuts off” reminiscent of renunciation or stripping away?’ ‘How so?’ As we shall now see, the application of our three literary terms will provide a familiar starting point to the novel, theologically-informed literary readings to which we will now turn.

4. Literary Analysis: Merton’s Poetics of Denial

The aim of the rest of this chapter is to analyse examples of the poetics of denial in Merton’s prose. The analysis will draw upon each of our previous three sections. Each quotation from Merton’s prose will be shown to embody an act of denial in conformity with our definition of the term as an ‘act of saying “no”’ (see section one); each will be shown to perform that act in relation to caesura, hiatus, or volta (see section three); and each will be read in terms of

²⁸⁵ *Harvest*, p. 166.

content claims from Merton's writings about denial (see section two). A sample question to be answered is: 'How, by a process of 'saying "no"' to an object by cutting it off in a way reminiscent of caesura, does a passage of Merton's prose generate a sense of renunciation, or detachment, or withdrawal from an obstacle to spiritual growth?' In the pursuit of answers to this and similar questions, we shall begin by offering readings of passages from Merton that emphasise actions exerted upon denied objects, such as attacking them, stripping them away, or controlling them, and proceed to readings that emphasise the emptiness, gap, or sense of transcendence that results from an act of denial.

The following, firstly, which is taken from the journal *Entering the Silence*, is an attempt by the speaker to deny an object through control, mastery, and attack.²⁸⁶ The mode through which it 'says "no"' conforms closely to our definition of 'denial', and can be described in terms of the positive action exerted upon an object in a caesura-esque act of cutting off. Writing on 27 January 1948, Merton has just been discussing the proofs of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The quoted text is a paragraph in its own right.

God defend me from the stuffy academic language and from the pious jargon I fell into in so many parts of *Mother Berchmans* 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.²⁸⁷

First of all we can note that two objects are denied in this passage: 'stuffy academic language' and 'pious jargon'. The implicit end for which these two denials take place are the cessation of the denied objects, and therefore the cessation of something that does 'NO good', with the implication that a more constructive end of the denials will be the speaker's employment of a mode of writing which, contrastingly, does 'good', and will allow Merton metaphorically to climb out of the literary ways he previously 'fell into'. The mode of denial,

²⁸⁶ *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, ed. by Jonathan Montaldo (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 161. Hereafter *Entering the Silence*.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

which is more complex and will require further analysis, involves a multi-pronged attack on the denied object. Merton ‘says “no”’ to stuffy language and jargon by bidding ‘God defend’ him from it, by outlining that it is ‘NOT the way to write’, that ‘It does NO good’, and, most emphatically, by saying ‘NO!’ to it. Thus we have a mode, an object, and an end of an act that conforms to our definition of denial from section one.

Merton’s ‘NO!’ relates closely not only to our definition of ‘denial’, but also to Merton’s content claims from section two. An account of the characteristics of the ‘NO!’ will make this clearer. Most obviously, the capital letters and exclamation mark lend the ‘NO!’ emphasis, as does its status as a single-word sentence. It is a raw, impassioned denial, devoid of content beyond that of seeking to control an object by blocking it off, or, in the metaphorical phrase associated with caesura, by *cutting* it off. On the one hand, the descriptive parts of the text, with their mention of ‘stuffy academic language’ and ‘jargon’, orient the speaker towards the denied object; the ‘NO!’, on the other hand, simply raises a cautionary hand in the direction towards which the descriptive sentences have already oriented us. Merton’s ‘NO!’ displays an attitude, then, rather than describing what the attitude is or the object towards which it is help—or in other words, it is an instance of the form of an attitude rather than its content.²⁸⁸ Further, the form of the ‘NO!’ resonates with imagery used in the rest of the passage. God will ‘defend’ the speaker (or so he prays) and the speaker,

²⁸⁸ For this reason the analysis of the ‘NO!’ responds to Hollywood’s thesis that, whilst mystical literature is much concerned with ‘rejecting external forms’, the tendency of modern work on mysticism has been to neglect the ‘forms of life’ in which such acts of rejection take place. In the case of the ‘NO!’, and of the subsequent denials analysed in this chapter, the content (‘rejecting external forms’, as Hollywood puts it, or ‘denials’ as this chapter puts it) is brought together with what Hollywood might call a ‘form of life’, and what we have been calling literary form. Such an analysis of particular forms through which a denial takes place, and the subsequent task of relating those forms to Merton’s theology of denial, does not answer Derrida’s question about negative theology – ‘Is there *one* negative theology, *the* negative theology?’ – but it does change the terms of the inquiry, by saying, there is *this* instance of denial, which has an analogous relationship to *this* mode of thinking. See Amy Hollywood, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, pp. 1-36, p. 7; and Derrida, ‘How to Avoid Speaking: Denials’, p. 3.

similarly, defends himself by holding up his hand and crying out 'NO!' The theme of defence runs through the passage, then, both explicitly and implicitly. And the 'NO!' also brings the act of denial into the present moment. On the one hand, the speaker 'fell' into jargon and is not, in the passage, 'fallen' in the present moment, but on the other hand the 'NO!' is emphatic enough to imply the continuing need for the speaker to master a tendency towards 'jargon'. The speaker must keep his stuffy academic past at bay in the here and now. Why else does he shout 'NO!'?

In this brief analysis, the words *attack*, *control*, and *mastery* have been used. Those words were also quoted in section two, in our exposition of the theme of denial in *Thoughts in Solitude*, which we noted for its images of forceful physical actions. The denial of the passage is describable, then, in terms of the denials Merton writes about elsewhere at the level of content. Having observed this overlap between the critical vocabulary we gathered in the first half of this chapter and the vocabulary with which we have just described the passage, the overall methodology with which we will be developing a Formalist theological poetics in this thesis begins to come into view. We can now say that the passage conforms to the framework built up in the first half of our chapter: it is an act of denial, and an act of denial that is describable in a number of the different ways that Merton described acts of denial elsewhere in his prose. Merton writes, in our reading of the passage, in a way that conforms to claims he made elsewhere at the level of content. We have, then, the first exemplification of our argument, albeit a very basic one.

A critic of our reading might point out that whilst we have placed emphasis on describing the mode of the denial in terms of Merton's content claims (attack, control, and mastery), little has been said about how the passage evokes the objects and ends Merton wrote about in section two above, let alone the theological root of Christ's *kenotic* act on the Cross. Such a critic might consequently claim that the passage embodies a mode of attacking

denial, but could not convincingly be called a denial that corresponds to the kind of actions that were described in section two, for instance an attacking denial of worldly things for the sake of pleasing God in a way that enters into the great value (*pace* our discussion of *Thoughts* above)²⁸⁹ God places on the self-emptying of humanity. In response to this hypothetical criticism we offer two defences. Firstly, it should be noted that many of the objects of denial about which Merton wrote in the exposition of section two were extremely general. He wrote, for example, about denying ‘unsatisfactory things’,²⁹⁰ ‘all things’,²⁹¹ ‘the world’,²⁹² ‘exterior things’,²⁹³ and ‘pride’.²⁹⁴ Three of these objects (all things, the world, and exterior things) undoubtedly include ‘academic language’ and ‘pious jargon’ within their remit; one very clearly describes the stance Merton takes towards the objects he denies (it would be hard to dispute that, for Merton, academic language and jargon are unsatisfactory things); and one of them relates plausibly, if not definitely, to Merton’s attitude to the denied object (Merton’s pious jargon could, that is, have been the result of pride). The most emphatic aspect of the passage, as we read it, remains its embodiment of the attacking mode of denial Merton wrote about in *Thoughts in Solitude*; but it also conforms to Merton’s objects of denial in these ways.

Secondly, and in relation to the ends of the denial, we can note a similar level of correspondence between the passage and Merton’s vocabulary from section two above. When Merton bids ‘God defend me’ and describes himself as a ‘monk’, the reader might well assume that that the ‘NO!’ is the action of a man whose life is rooted in seeking God in the context of a monastic rhythm, and, even more clearly, who asks God to aid and defend him. In section two we quoted Merton seeking to ‘please God’ and to be in the presence of the

²⁸⁹ See the discussion above of *Thoughts*, p. 38

²⁹⁰ *What is Contemplation*, p. 90.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁹² *Seeds*, p. 57.

²⁹³ *Seeds*, 136.

²⁹⁴ *New Seeds*, p. 125.

Holy Spirit, both of which we can now read as relating to Merton's plea for God's help. To ask God to defend oneself from something that will isolate one from God seems implausible; it seems more likely that Merton's plea has the aim, not only of attacking and controlling jargon, but also of bringing him closer to God (especially given that the author of the passage is a monk). As before, these aspects of the passage are not as prominent as its mode of mastery and control, but they nevertheless confirm the place of the passage within our theological poetics. And finally, in relation to the *kenotic* root of Merton's account of self-denial, we have seen that there was nothing in our exposition from section two to suggest that particular forms of self-denial constituted valid ways to enter into Christ's self-emptying on the Cross, as opposed to other particular forms that did not. The implicit connections we have just made between Merton's 'NO!' and the modes, objects and ends of the denials he wrote about as expressions of a *kenotic* pattern are thus enough, we argue, to be placed in relation to Merton's theology of Christ's self-emptying by merit of their being describable in terms of acts of denial that Merton repeatedly described as ways to come closer to God. As we go on, and the examples of Merton's literary form become less basic, we shall witness examples that more explicitly evoke Merton's wider theological writings; but that does not lessen the conformity of the present passage to the dynamics of Merton's claims from section two at a more implicit level. In sum, then, and in conformity with Merton's writings about the modes, objects, and ends of acts of denial from section two, the passage enacts an attacking denial of unsatisfactory things in the pursuit of coming closer to God. This is our first example of Merton's poetics of denial.

Our reading of the following passage, which is taken from Merton's *The Sign of Jonas*, also emphasises the mode of a denial, and also relates closely to objects and ends described in section two. The passage belongs to five paragraphs that form one distinct part of Merton's diary entry for 29 November 1951. Merton has been discussing the change in his

approach to solitude and spirituality since becoming Master of the Scholastics at the Monastery of Gethsemane.²⁹⁵ As part of this discussion he asks:

Do you suppose I have a spiritual life? I have none, I am indigence, I am silence, I am poverty, I am solitude...²⁹⁶

The denied object in this case is the supposition that the speaker has ‘a spiritual life’. The end of the denial is the replacement of that supposition with the view that the speaker has ‘none’. The initial mode of denial is the correction of one view through the positing of another—it is “no” to ‘I have a spiritual life’ and “yes” to ‘I have none’. The force of this correction is heightened by the distance between the speaker’s view of affairs and the incorrect view of affairs held by an imaginary reader. Only ‘you’ *might* hold the view that Merton has a spiritual life, if you answered “yes” to the speaker’s opening question (‘Do you suppose...?’). The speaker, on the other hand, never questions his conviction that the correct answer to his own question is “no”. The denied view does not threaten the speaker, then, in the way that academic jargon did in the ‘NO!’ example earlier on. By saying ‘NO!’ the speaker in *Entering the Silence* was protecting himself from a mode of writing that did ‘NO good’, whereas by saying ‘I have none’ the speaker in the *Jonas* passage protects ‘you’, who may not even need protecting, depending on what your answer to the quoted question was.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁵ See *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Image Books, 1956), pp. 333-334. Hereafter *Jonas*.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

²⁹⁷ One further possible reading can be noted: that the speaker is addressing *himself*. Read this way, not only the mode but also the urgency of the denial mirrors the ‘NO!’ example. The speaker does, at least partially, believe that he *has a* ‘spiritual life’, and the self-descriptions of ‘indigence’, ‘silence’, and ‘poverty’ are designed to control his error. In this reading the passage generates detachment of the kind described by Denys Turner: ‘The strategy of detachment is the strategy of dispossessing desire of its desire to possess its objects, and so to destroy them.’ The desire in this case is the speaker’s to answer ‘yes’ to his own question, and the mode of destruction is the repeated denial of the speaker’s erroneous views by the force of his own description of ‘silence’, ‘indigence’, and ‘poverty’ as reinforcements that he has ‘none’. See Turner, *Darkness*, p. 183.

In this way the initial mode of the denial in the passage from *Jonas* starts to become clearer; but it is made more complex as the passage proceeds. Merton does not follow his initial question with concluding remarks along the lines of: *if so, you are wrong, because I don't have a spiritual life*. Instead he lists 'indigence', 'silence', 'poverty', and 'solitude'. Each of these words concerns *lack*—lack of possessions ('indigence'), lack of noise ('silence'), lack of possessions again ('poverty'), and lack of companions ('solitude'). Merton's list is thus a continuation or reinforcement of the speaker's self-description as a person who lacks things: *as well as having no spiritual life, I have no possessions, voice, or companions*, he seems to be saying. Further, the purpose of listing 'indigence', 'silence', 'poverty' and 'solitude' seems, given its close proximity to the two sentences that precede them, actually to be a reinforcement of the very claim that the speaker does not have a spiritual life. What else might the relationship between the sentences be? The subtext appears to be: *I have no spiritual life because I am indigence, silence, poverty, and solitude*. The nature of this causal link between lacking possessions and the ability to make noise and lacking a spiritual life is not made clear either in the passage or in the text that precedes and succeeds it—but this does not change its effect. In caesura-esque fashion, the text both cuts off the view that the speaker has voice or possessions, and also implies the further denial of the speaker's 'spiritual life' through the mysterious causal connection that seems to result from the close proximity of the two sets of claims. Overall, the 'I am' clauses work both lexicographically and grammatically to deny something to the speaker.

The two distinctive features of the passage's denial in the reading just given are the purpose for which the denial takes place (to protect *you* from error) and the mode of denial in the second sentence (the denial of possessions, voice and companions to the speaker). These features correspond to two distinct acts of denial: firstly, the denial of your erroneous view that Merton has a spiritual life, and secondly, the denial of voice and possessions to the

speaker. The two denials dovetail in that, as we have read it, Merton's not having a spiritual life is linked causally to his lacking possessions and the ability to make noise. But they are also distinct, because the first denial concerns the correction of an erroneous view (it is a "no" to a wrong viewpoint about spiritual life), whilst the second concerns the nature of a correct view (the "no" is constituted by Merton's lacking possessions and noise-making ability). Distinguishing the two denials in this way, we can further say that both are describable in language from section two above, as follows.

The act of protecting you from an erroneous view, firstly, might be described in terms of Merton's language about purifying,²⁹⁸ delivering,²⁹⁹ or setting free.³⁰⁰ The reader is asked (with volta) to turn, to take up a purer view, to be delivered or released from a faulty account of Merton's spiritual life. Secondly, the view to which Merton points his readers in the 'I am' clauses corresponds with Merton's commendation in section two that we 'empty ourselves and become poor',³⁰¹ and 'withdraw from exterior things'.³⁰² The former of these two quotations bears a particularly strong correlative relationship to the passage, which directly encourages the reader to regard Merton as lacking, or being empty of, spiritual life and possessions. In this way, and beyond the implicit relation we noted between the 'NO!' example from earlier and the *kenotic* roots of Merton's thoughts on self-denial, the dynamics of the mode of denial in this case refer explicitly back to a theological foundation-point. God values acts of self-emptying, Merton said earlier on his account of Christ on the Cross, and here, in his poetics, he performs a grammatical act of emptying out the characteristics of his speaker.³⁰³ Merton's words about '[withdrawing] from exterior things requires only a little

²⁹⁸ *New Seeds*, pp. 155-6.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

³⁰² *Seeds.*, p. 136.

³⁰³ See *Ascent*, p. 126 and *Thoughts*, p. 38. Other content claims about Merton's own emphatic desire to deny himself might be also used to describe this aspect of the passage, for

more interpretative work in order to be viewed as a descriptive correlate to the passage. Whilst it remains questionable whether ‘spiritual life’ could be described as one of the ‘exterior things’ from which Merton commends his reader to withdraw, there can be little doubt that ‘possessions’ can. In these ways the passage from *Jonas* maps onto modes (purifying, delivering, setting free, emptying, withdrawing), objects (oneself, exterior things), and ends (poverty) that he commended at the level in content in section two. This is our second example of an instance of Merton’s theological poetics of denial.

Our third example is taken from *Seeds*. Its mode of denial is more complex than the two examples just discussed. Merton has just been discussing a stage in the spiritual life during which a person is close to, but still separate from, the presence of God.³⁰⁴ He goes on, in a new section, to write:

When the next step comes, you do not take the step, you do not know the transition, you do not fall into anything. You do not go anywhere, and so you do not know the way by which you got there or the way by which you come back afterwards. You are certainly not lost. You do not fly. There is no space, or there is all space: it makes no difference.³⁰⁵

The denied object here is the description of what happens ‘When the next step comes’. The end of the denial is the removal of a particular view of what happens ‘When the next step comes’. The mode of denial can be divided into four categories, as follows.

Firstly, Merton does not describe what happens when the next step comes, but instead describes what does *not* happen. It is a “no” to the possibility that X, Y, and Z (falling, going

instance Merton’s famous claim that ‘I have to be a person that nobody knows. They can have Thomas Merton. He’s dead. Father Louis—he’s half dead too’; his related statement about hating ‘to be *something*. To be doomed to possess a name, a notable personality’; and his plea that those around him consider him ‘not as a figure representing an institution, but as a statusless person, an insignificant person.’ See *Jonas*, p. 247, *Entering Silence*, p. 314, and *Asian Journal*, p. 306.

³⁰⁴ *Seeds*, p. 194.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

somewhere, flying, and so on) are accurate accounts of what happens when the next step comes.

Secondly, Merton denies that the *opposite* of X, Y, or Z is an accurate account of what happens when the next step comes. On the one hand, ‘you do not know the way by which you got there’, and on the other, ‘You are certainly not lost’. Similarly: on the one hand, ‘you do not fall’, and on the other, ‘You do not fly’. Not knowing the way and not being lost, not falling and not flying, function as two pairs of opposites here; or at least as two sets of claims that call one another into question. As such the ‘no’ said in the first kind of denial outlined above – the no to X, Y, or Z – cannot come to imply that the opposite of X, Y or Z is true, because that implication is also denied. The passage is a multi-pronged example of what Denys Turner has called ‘the utterance which first says something and then, in the same image, unsays it.’³⁰⁶ To the extent that the denial of X (i.e. not knowing the way and falling) implies that the opposite of X might be true (i.e. being lost and flying), the passage both says and unsays the opposite of X.

Thirdly, Merton both claims X and the opposite of X to be true. ‘You do not go anywhere and so you do not know the way by which you got there’. This skirts the realm of paradox. If you do not go anywhere then there *is* no way by which you got there. It thus makes sense that, as the speaker says, ‘you do not know the way’, because ‘the way’ does not exist. The sheer mention of a non-existent pathway, however, and indeed ‘the way by which you come back afterwards’ later on in the passage, paradoxically implies that ‘you do not know’ about a ‘way’ by which you did not go somewhere. In sum: you simultaneously do not go anywhere, and are ignorant about the way by which you got there.³⁰⁷ This is not, as

³⁰⁶ Turner, *Darkness*, p. 21.

³⁰⁷ See also Merton’s lines in *Thoughts on the East*: ‘It [Zen] is a “way” and an “experience,” a “life,” but the way is paradoxically “not a way”’ (p. 39).

before, a case of *unsaying* X or the opposite of X, but of *saying* both X and its opposite, and thereby calling both into question.

Fourthly, the passage denies opposition itself. ‘There is no space, or there is all space: it makes no difference’. This is one of the more positive sentences in the passage because it asserts that one thing or another *might* happen, rather than that something does *not* happen. But the sentence also denies the view that it ‘makes a difference’ whether there is ‘no space’ or ‘all space’. This is the denial, not of the occurrence of X or its opposite, as there was in ‘to fly’ or ‘to fall’, but of the way in which we understand that X might happen. It is not, *not X, which you understand*, or, *both X and the opposite of X*, but *possibly X, which you do not understand*. The factor unifying each of these three modes of denial is that the reader does not know what X is. For this reason we can reconfirm that the denied object in each of the four kinds of denial now discussed is the description of what happens ‘When the next step comes’.

The overall effect of the passage as we have read it is that nothing is stable or definable; every possible avenue of possibility is (to use a word with which Merton was much concerned) *disarmed* by its opposite.³⁰⁸ In the second kind of denial discussed above, for example, even the process of disarming is disarmed.³⁰⁹ All positive images are given up, one by one, through the build-up of the sense that the *only* mode of speech with which it is possible to speak about the ‘next step’ is denial. The speaker and reader must renounce, give

³⁰⁸ For the (briefly-stated) view that Merton language enacts a kind of disarmament, see David W. Givney, *The Social Thought of Thomas Merton: The Way of Nonviolence and Peace for the Future* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), p. 57.

³⁰⁹ This disarming of the disarming is not common to all texts that describe an object in terms of what it is not. The things that ‘Contemplation’ is not in the following, from *New Seeds* (p. 19), for instance, do not conflict with one another: ‘Contemplation is not trance or ecstasy, nor the hearing of sudden unutterable words, nor the imagination of lights. It is not the emotional fire and sweetness that come with religious exaltation. It is not enthusiasm, the sense of being “seized” by an elemental force and swept into liberation by mystical frenzy’. In this case the disarming or negation is singularly directed at the objects (trance, ecstasy, hearing unutterable words, and so on) of the sentences, rather than at the negated objects themselves, as is true in the passage from ‘When the next step comes’ passage.

up, detach from, three kinds of view: firstly, that X happens ‘when the next step comes’; secondly, that the opposite of X happens; and thirdly, that anything definable happens ‘when the next step comes’, whether because both X and the opposite of X seem to happen, or because it ‘makes no difference’ whether X or the opposite of X happens, or because the passage speaks only in terms that do not define what happens at the next step.

The passage thus read can be associated with a number of descriptive correlates from Merton’s content claims. The process of building up a mode of speech whereby denial comes to predominate might be seen, more passively, as an act of withdrawing,³¹⁰ or more actively as an act of delivering³¹¹ or blacking out.³¹² To make this last correlate clearer: the multiple layers of opposition gradually black out any clear view of what happens when the next step comes. In relation to this, the objects of denial can be read in terms of Merton’s claim that we, his readers, should deny ‘all things’³¹³ and ‘images’.³¹⁴ When it comes to knowing what happens when the next step comes everything is called into question; every idea or image of what might happen next is blacked out by our four different kinds of denial. And finally, also in relation to our reading of a blackout of all things, we can read the ends of the denial in terms of Merton’s language about ‘emptiness and silence and detachment’,³¹⁵ each of which relate to the overall negativity to which the passage leads us. To bring the modes, objects and ends of the denial together: the passage withdraws from, delivers us from, or blacks out all things and images that might give us a clue about what happens when the next step comes, and leaves us with an empty semantic space, silence, and detachment from any view of what the mysterious happenings of the next step might be. As was true of the ‘NO!’ example from earlier, the *kenotic* background to all of this remains implicit; but as before, it does so within

³¹⁰ *What is Contemplation*, p. 93.

³¹¹ *Seeds*, p. 67.

³¹² *Ascent*, p. 40.

³¹³ *What is Contemplation*, p. 98.

³¹⁴ *New Seeds*, p. 110.

³¹⁵ *Seeds*, pp. 115-116.

the strict boundaries of conforming to each of the further three aspects of denial discussed in section two above. For this reason, we argue, it is possible to place the series of (non)paradoxes in close relation to Merton's theological background thinking. We shall return to this point about implicit correlation later on, in the conclusion to this chapter. For now, we have our third example of Merton's poetics of denial.

The following, from *Dancing in the Water*, is a further example of a series of denials building up the impression that acts of giving up, emptying, and detaching from various objects form the dominant modality of the text. Writing on 22 February 1964, Merton has mentioned that it is the 'twenty-second anniversary of my reception of the habit' and described how those years have 'not been well spent'.³¹⁶ He goes on to write:

I am trying to get back now to a little of the asceticism (how awfully little!) without the intolerance and uncharity, yet I am still not broad and warm as a monk this long in the monastery ought to be. All this, I know, is useless talk. Better to find refuge in the psalms, in the chanted office, the Liturgy.³¹⁷

There are two easily definable objects of denial here. The speaker wishes to turn away from 'intolerance and uncharity', and also from 'useless talk'. When considered separately, the modes through which the 'intolerance' and the 'talk' become objects of denial are also easily defined. The speaker desires a state 'without' the presence of 'intolerance' and 'Better' than 'useless talk'. In other words, the speaker 'says "no"' to the two denied objects by describing them in negative terms (intolerance, uncharity, uselessness) and outlining his aim to find an alternative state ('without' and 'Better'). The ends of the two denials, taken as separate acts, are similarly clear. The state without 'intolerance' will, the speaker hopes, be a reformed

³¹⁶ *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, ed. by Robert E. Daggy (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), both p. 79. Hereafter *Dancing in the Water*.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

practice of ‘asceticism’,³¹⁸ and the activity which is ‘Better’ than ‘useless talk’ will consist of saying the ‘psalms... chanted office... Liturgy.’ By way of an initial conclusion we can add that the metaphor of ‘[getting] back’ is evocative of the metaphors concerning physical movement discussed earlier in our exposition of Merton’s content claims, such as turning and flying away from denied objects,³¹⁹ and also that the desire for a state ‘*without* the intolerance’ corresponds to Merton’s notion of giving things up and emptying oneself of worldly things.³²⁰ That the mode of the denial can be described as an act or ‘turning’ further makes clear the passage’s association with volta, rather than the caesura-esque acts of cutting off associated with the three passages discussed above. In these ways, each of which is relatively straightforward to observe, the passage is a textbook exemplification of our poetics of denial.

Two further factors, however, complicate the passage. The first is the additional denial of the view that the speaker’s attempt to get back to asceticism is proving successful, which we now italicise.

I am trying to get back now to a little of the asceticism (how awfully little!) without the intolerance and uncharity, *yet I am still not broad and warm as a monk this long in the monastery ought to be*. All this, I know, is useless talk. Better to find refuge in the psalms, in the chanted office, the Liturgy.

The conjunction ‘yet’ is the hinge-point of a third denial of the passage. Rewriting the first sentence of the passage makes the function of the ‘yet’ clearer: *I am trying to get back to asceticism, yet I am still not broad and warm*. There is an association, in other words,

³¹⁸ The speaker’s desire thus equates with the Eckhart’s view, according to McGinn, that the way to reach *gelassenheit*, or total surrender to the will of God, ‘[does] not mean abandoning one’s usual exercises, but rather changing the attitude out of which they are performed.’ In the case of our passage, intolerance and uncharity are taken away from the practice of asceticism. To repeat Sells’s words from earlier ‘the entire image was not withdrawn, only the central mass’. See McGinn, *Harvest*, p. 220, and Sells, *Unsayings*, p. 18.

³¹⁹ *Seeds*, p. 57.

³²⁰ *Seeds*, p. 106.

between 'asceticism' and being 'broad and warm', because to fail to be broad and warm is also to fail at asceticism. This makes sense. The speaker seeks to replace asceticism that leads to 'intolerance and uncharity' with asceticism that leads to being 'broad and warm'. The 'yet' connects these contrasting sets of characteristics, the former two of which Merton denies, and the latter two of which he embraces.

Such a reading is complicated again, however, by '(how awfully little)', which, whilst not forging the link between asceticism and being broad and warm, performs the same function as the 'yet' by making clear that the speaker's attempt to 'get back' to ascetic life has somehow failed. Does the text that comes after the 'yet' in any way controvert 'how awfully little' asceticism the speaker has done? It seems not. If a logical progression of thought was Merton's aim when writing the passage, he has placed his parenthetical text on the wrong side of his conjunction. The speaker has attempted to say "no" to an ascetic practice that involves intolerance, has said "no" to the view that his attempt has been successful, and then both denied and affirmed that the reason for his lack of success is 'how awfully little' asceticism he has done. There is a progression, as we saw in our previous example, from denial to the denial of the initial denial. To follow McGinn's definition of the 'aphaeretic mode' as a literary 'clearing aside',³²¹ the passage clears aside an object before clearing aside the initial task of clearing aside.³²² In contrast to the speaker's straightforwardly-expressed desire to turn away (in volta-esque fashion) from 'useless talk' and 'intolerance and uncharity', the more complicated mode of denial of the passage stems

³²¹ *Foundations*, pp. 175 & 174.

³²² Merton's commentators have often noted the paradox between this last kind of denial, or 'clearing aside', and the vast output of Merton's work. Given Merton's millions of published words, his attempt to bring his own writing to an end clearly failed. Higgins summarises: 'Merton was prepared to wage a doomed war on his imagination and his talent'. See Michael J. Higgins, 'Thomas Merton: The Poet and the Word', in *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 12, 1977, pp. 292-307, p. 293.

from the caesura-esque cutting away of stable meaning that was exemplified earlier in the passage that refused to describe what happens ‘When the next step comes’.

The second complicating factor in the passage also relates to the denial of a denial. If the opening sentence denies the success of the speaker’s denials, the second sentence denies this double denial by describing the first sentence as ‘useless talk’.

I am trying to get back now to a little of the asceticism (how awfully little!) without the intolerance and uncharity, yet I am still not broad and warm as a monk this long in the monastery ought to be. All this, I know, is useless talk. Better to find refuge in the psalms, in the chanted office, the Liturgy.

The question is: in what sense is the first sentence ‘*useless*’? The subtext might be: *to talk as the first sentence of the passage does is useless; I will really find breadth and warmth in the asceticism of the psalms and chanted office, rather than in writing about it.* But the subtext might also be: *the attempt to get back to asceticism is useless; I will find breadth and warmth in other ways, for instance, in the Liturgy.* Either the mode through which the first sentence is expressed (i.e. ‘talk’),³²³ or the content of the first sentence (getting back to asceticism), is undercut, described as ‘useless’. And as in the example from earlier that opened ‘When the next step comes’, the resulting effect in our reading is the generation of a mode of writing that forces the reader to give up, or detach from, ‘the act of saying “yes”’, whether it be a “yes” to ‘intolerance’, to the success of the speaker’s attempt to say “no” to intolerance, or to the speaker’s attempt to talk about any of the above.

Further to this, and in distinction from the passage about ‘the next step’ from earlier, each of these objects relates to the capacities of the speaker, namely, his capacity to be

³²³ Accepting that the *mode* is the object of denial, the text is describable in terms Porter has used to describe other Merton texts: ‘the meaning of... words eclipses their presence’. In other words, the ends of the language are the deletion of the language. John S. Porter, ‘Thomas Merton’s Late Metaphors of the Self’, in Victor A. Kramer (ed.), *The Merton Annual: Studies in Culture, Spirituality, & Social Concerns*, 1, 1994 (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press), pp. 58-67, p. 67.

tolerant, to seek to be tolerant, and to talk about seeking to be tolerant. As a result there is a repeated sense of the speaker's *failure* in the passage. He fails both to achieve asceticism and to write about his failed asceticism. The object of denial in the passage can consequently be described in terms of more specific correlates than the other passages discussed so far. Not only is there a sense of widespread denial built up by the various conflicting relationships between and within sentences; there is also the sense that this denial applies specifically to the actions of a particular person. To Merton's language (used earlier to describe what happens 'when the next step comes') about '[blacking out]'³²⁴ as the mode of denial, 'all things'³²⁵ as the object of denial, and 'emptiness'³²⁶ as the end of the denial, we can consequently add a series of new ways to describe the object of denial—namely 'the false self',³²⁷ the 'exterior self',³²⁸ or simply 'oneself', as Merton put it earlier.³²⁹ In sum, we have encountered a poetic denial of *self*. Whereas in the first three passages discussed in this chapter the predominant emphasis was on the mode of the denial, we can now see that the mode of the denial in the passage just discussed applies to a notable *object* of denial. This in turn places the passage into a more explicit relationship with the character of the *kenotic* roots of the denial: we read earlier in our account of *New Seeds* that, for Merton, holiness lies in the mysterious way of renunciation begun by Christ, who 'emptied himself'.³³⁰ A new kind of explicit relation between Merton's theological roots and the poetics of denial thus comes into view: earlier, in the passage that began 'Do you suppose', the mode of poetic emptying performed in the passage was evocative of *kenosis*; here, the object of the self performs is the

³²⁴ *Ascent.*, p. 40.

³²⁵ *What is Contemplation*, p. 98.

³²⁶ *Seeds*, pp. 115-116.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³²⁸ *New Seeds*, p. 22.

³²⁹ *Thoughts in Solitude*, pp. 27 & 31.

³³⁰ See *New Seeds*, pp. 49 & 50.

evocative factor. This act of poetic self-emptying via a complex weave of failures is our fourth example of Merton's poetics of denial.

Our fifth example has a similar structure to the last one (an initial set of denials is in turn denied) but a different set of descriptive correlates. The passage is taken from *The Intimate Merton*, and concludes a discussion about Merton's regret at ever being told that 'it was a good thing to know myself'.³³¹ As before we shall begin by defining the object, mode and end of the denial.

I was certainly afraid of being an introvert because introversion is a sin for materialists and, what is more, it is used conversationally almost as if it were synonymous with 'perversion'.

(What a ridiculous thing it is to take oneself so seriously!)³³²

There are two objects of denial here: the view that 'introversion is a sin', and the tendency 'to take oneself so seriously'. The implicit ends of these denials are, conversely, a more positive view of introversion, and not taking oneself so seriously. The modes through which these denials are enacted are the implication that the materialist's equation of '[introversion]' and 'perversion' is a view that Merton has now left behind ('I *was* certainly afraid'), and the negative labelling of taking oneself too seriously as 'ridiculous'.

As with the 'useless talk' passage discussed above, however, the passage becomes more complex when the second denial (the "no" to seriousness) is read in relation to the first (the "no" to introversion-as-sin). On the one hand, the second denial can be read as furthering the first: 'taking oneself so seriously' is associated in this reading with what Merton deems to be the materialist's view of the sinfulness of introversion, and the passage uniformly leads to

³³¹ *The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals*, ed. by Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (New York: Lion Publishing plc., 1999), p. 27

³³² *Ibid.* See also *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, ed. by Patrick Hart (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 96. Hereafter *Run to the Mountain*. The text in the former is an abridged version of the full version printed in the latter. I have assumed, with the editors of *The Intimate Merton*, that the abridged passage under discussion is worthy of a readership, and therefore of a reading of the kind I am offering, in its own right.

the claim that the materialist's view is 'ridiculous'. *How ridiculous it is to take oneself so seriously as to think that introversion is a sin*, the text says. On the other hand, the second denial could be a denial of the first, as opposed to its furtherance. In this case the act of taking oneself seriously comes to be associated with the act of describing an erroneous, previously-held view of sin. *How ridiculous it is to talk about whether or not introversion is a sin*. This second reading can then be taken a step further; the parenthetical sentence could be read as describing the non-parenthetical text *in general* as 'ridiculous', which leads to the subtext, *pausing for a moment from the dominant mode of speech in which this text is written, let me say how ridiculous that dominant mode is*. In any case we have, following Turner's distinction, an example not of 'negative propositions', as was true in the 'you do not fall... you do not fly' passage above, but of 'negating the propositional'.³³³ An object is proposed and then denied.

One major shared characteristic of the denials in both the 'useless talk' example from earlier on and the present example is that both can be read as constituting, not so much the denial of a denial, but the denial of a mode of speech that is structured around denials. Neither is an instance, that is, of the denial of claim 'not-X'; they are, rather, the denial of trying to speak about 'not-X' at all. In the case of the 'useless talk' passage we read that the "no" to intolerance and uncharity precedes a "no" to speaking about the "no" to intolerance and uncharity; in the case of the passage just discussed we have contrastingly read that a "no" to the view of introversion of sin precedes a further "no" to talking about whether or not introversion is a sin. We have already noted in our discussion of the 'useless talk' passage that this process of multiple denials generates the sense that the object of denial is 'all things'³³⁴ and the mode of the denial is a 'blackout'³³⁵ with respect to speech; and to this we

³³³ Turner, *Darkness*, p. 35.

³³⁴ *What is Contemplation*, p. 98.

³³⁵ *Ascent*, p. 40.

can now add that, in both the ‘introversion as sin’ passage and the ‘useless talk’ passage, the overall character of the denial could be labelled the denial of acts of denial. This doubling of denial constitutes our fifth example of Merton’s theological poetics of denial.

We have now read five short passages from Merton’s prose in terms of descriptive correlates. From now on we shall refer to these passages as the ‘NO!’ passage, the ‘indigence, silence, poverty’ passage’, the ‘when the next step comes’ passage, the ‘useless talk’ passage, and the ‘introversion as sin’ passage. We shall also refer to them as examples of *singular* denial, because in each case an overarching denial was never called into question. There was no stage at which Merton was *not* denying jargon in the ‘NO!’ passage; no stage at which Merton claimed to have a spiritual life in the ‘indigence, silence, poverty’ passage; no stage at which Merton made clear a belief about what happens ‘when the next step comes’; no stage at which Merton claimed to be succeeding in his asceticism in the ‘useless talk’ passage; and no stage at which Merton claimed that the materialist’s view of sin was a correct view. In distinction from those five examples, the two examples to which we shall now turn can be described as *reactive* denials, because in each case an act of denial (normally situated at the end of a passage) ‘says “no”’ reactively, to an object that the text has sought to affirm elsewhere.³³⁶ If our previous examples continuously claimed various kinds of ‘not-X’ (where X included the act of performing denials), the following examples claim ‘X’ before claiming ‘not-X’. They are not singular, then, but involve a reaction between something posited and something denied.

³³⁶ The wider context of (as Sells puts it) the ‘classic apophatic motif of “turning back” (*epistrophē*)’ should be noted here, as should the centrality of the theme to specific mystical thinkers, notably Tauler. As McGinn puts it, ‘Three essential attitudes that Tauler constantly preached can be summarised as *turning, releasing, and receiving.*’ Our distinctive purpose is to read literary forms of *epistrophē* (understood in relation to *apophasis*, rather than in its designation of a repetition trope) as embodiments of content claims about acts of saying no that imply a turn from a denied object; the wider importance of the ‘turn’ to apophasis and mystical theology more generally serves to emphasise the possible wider applicability of our more particular task.. See Sells, *Unsayings*, p. 28, and McGinn, *Harvest*, p. 266.

Our first example of this type of reactive denial is taken from *Jonas*. As before, we shall identify the mode, object, and ends of the denial before proceeding to read it in terms of descriptive correlates from Merton's content claims, and thereby placing it in a wider relation to Merton's wider theological concerns. The passage was written on June 19th 1949, less than a month after Merton was ordained to the priesthood.

I stand at the altar with my eyes all washed in the light that is eternity, and I become one who is agelessly reborn. I am sorry for this language.³³⁷

The mode of denial here is apology, the details of which we shall turn to in a moment. The end for which the denial is performed is unspecified—that is, the result of being ‘sorry for this language’ is, initially at least, unclear. The object of denial is ‘this language’, the sense of which is also unclear, because it could refer to the first quoted sentence, to the whole quoted passage, or to the second quoted sentence. Even when we assume, furthermore, that ‘this language’ refers to the first quoted sentence, the exact object of denial remains unclear. Is the speaker sorry for the *way* in which he has described standing ‘at the altar’ (is it a cliché, perhaps, or is ‘all washed’ a childish phrase?), or for the fact that he has used language *at all*? Perhaps the speaker is saying “no” not just to ‘*this language*’ but to *all* language that seeks to describe ‘the light that is eternity’ and the transformation of the speaker into ‘one who is agelessly reborn’. *I am sorry that I have even tried to speak of such an experience*, the text says.³³⁸

³³⁷ *Jonas*, p. 200.

³³⁸ The mode of retrospective apology for failed language can be further distinguished from observations that a speaker will not be able to succeed with language *in the future*, such as that found in *The Cloud of Unknowing*: ‘it is right for me to let you know that I cannot tell you.’ The end result – the failure of language – is the same in both *Jonas* and the *Cloud*, but in the former a failed attempt is cut away or renounced, whereas in the latter the object of denial is denied before an attempt is made to write about it. A mid-point between these two occurs in Julian's *Revelations*, where the Saint speaks about the Lord: ‘As I see it, his words are the greatest that can be uttered, for they embrace... I cannot tell!’ The ellipsis here embodies a mid-point between Merton's failed language and the *Cloud*'s admission that he

This last paraphrase can lead to a distinctive reading of the relationship between the passage and descriptive correlates from section two. The apology of the paraphrase may have a larger object (i.e. language as a whole) than an apology for a mode of language would have done (e.g. childish language on its own), but there nonetheless remains a clear *limit* on the scope of the object. Whereas there was no clear limit on, for example, the blacking out of the reader's knowledge of what happens 'when the next step comes' earlier on, the denial of the apology in the passage from *Jonas* is limited to the object Merton refers to as 'this language', and does not extend to Merton's experience of '[standing] at the altar'. In other words: only the power of language to describe the altar experience is in question, and not whether there is, in fact, an experience at the altar. In conformity with Michael Sells's claim that 'apophasis does not negate the first proposition, it withdraws from it a delimiting element', the passage (whether it could be called *apophatic* or not) does not negate the speaker's experience, but only withdraws the delimiting element of using language to convey it.³³⁹ For this reason the metaphor of turning away as a description of the mode of the apology is less apposite in this case than the metaphor of stripping language away from an experience that cannot be described. The caesura-esque cutting-off, we might say, is only partial.

To step aside momentarily from our own analysis, it should be noted that, in the case of this particular aspect of Merton's poetics, helpful related work has been done in the wider world of Merton studies. A similar pattern is at work, for example, when Christopher Pramuk claims that Merton's Christology 'breaks itself open again and again—*kenotically* we might say—to the wisdom and presence of God'.³⁴⁰ In both the 'I stand at the altar' passage and Pramuk's formulation there is not only an act of breakage, or of turning or stripping away,

will not be able to use language. See *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. by James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 183, and Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. by Clifton Walters (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 102-3. Hereafter *Cloud and Revelations*.

³³⁹ *Unsayings*, p. 18.

³⁴⁰ Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia*, p. 10.

but also of breaking open *to* something, or stripping something away in order to reveal something else. For Pramuk, that revealed something is ‘the presence of God’ and the mode, in conformity with the theological roots we have been tracing Merton’s poetics back to, is the act of *kenosis* associated with God in Christ; in Merton’s words from the altar passage the something is a wordless experience of ‘the light that is eternity’ and being ‘agelessly reborn’. To make another departure, this time from the task of describing Merton’s prose forms in terms of his own content claims, we might say that the language of the altar passage, like Merton’s Christology, breaks itself open to the light that is eternity. And to return to the word-pool from section two: the passage denies what we might describe as verbal images,³⁴¹ and leaves the speaker standing in what we might call semantic poverty,³⁴² empty of words,³⁴³ and in silence.³⁴⁴ Further, the passage leaves the speaker in a spiritual ‘light that is eternity’, which we might describe in terms of Merton’s quest to find ‘the peace of God’³⁴⁵ and ‘possession of Him as He is in Himself’.³⁴⁶ In simpler terms, the passage is distinctive for the limit of its denial, which generates the specific end of standing wordlessly at the altar in the presence of God. This is our sixth example of Merton’s poetics of denial.

The following, from *Dancing in the Water*, can also be read as performing an act of stripping language away, but with the addition of a further object of denial that complicates the passage in a way that we have not yet encountered. Writing his diary entry for 12 November 1963, Merton has been criticising the ‘fools’ in the curia at Vatican II, and proceeds to claim that

I am glad someone is finally opposing them (without Paul VI the opposition would not have any meaning).

³⁴¹ *New Seeds*, p. 110.

³⁴² *Seeds*, p. 103.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

What a weary, silly mess. When will I learn to go without leaving footprints?³⁴⁷

There are three stages of denial here. Firstly, the speaker criticises the Roman curia; secondly, the speaker is critical of a ‘mess’; and thirdly, the speaker criticises himself for ‘leaving footprints’. The first of these three acts of ‘saying “no”’ is clear enough: Merton is ‘glad’ that somebody is ‘opposing’ the ‘fools’ in the ‘curia’; he is expressing support, then, for an objection to, or act of saying no to, the curia. The second criticism also seems relatively clear at first sight: the ‘weary, silly mess’ refers, it seems reasonable to assume, to the situation at Vatican II, which has presumably been brought about by the curia’s ‘fools’. Overall, Merton criticises the silliness of a situation which has been brought about by fools, and fools who Merton is glad are being opposed. The third criticism, however, is less clear. What are the ‘footprints’ Merton mentions? And how do they relate to the preceding two sentences?

To answer these questions is to complicate the passage. Initially, in the reading just given, it seemed that the ‘mess’ referred to the ‘curia’, but it could also refer to the ‘footprints’, which would help to clarify what the ‘footprints’ are. In that latter case, however, the relationship between the second quoted paragraph (beginning ‘What a weary...’) and the first becomes unclear. In what sense can Merton’s account of feeling glad about opposition to the curia be described as a ‘weary, silly mess’, which is itself a footprint that the speaker would rather not have left? One possible subtext is: *it was a silly, messy thing even to seek to evaluate the situation at Vatican II; my words on that subject are like a footprint I wish not to have left*. In this case, as was true of the ‘I stand at the altar’ example, language itself is being stripped away. This is one way to resolve the ambiguous relationship between the fools, the mess, and the footprints.

³⁴⁷ *Dancing in the Water*, both p. 33.

Following this reading, we can begin to describe the passage in terms of varied descriptive correlates. The first thing to note when performing this task is that, unlike the ‘I stand at the altar’ passage, there is no sense in the given reading of a further object that will remain once the ‘footprints’ of language have been stripped away. The passage thus not only cuts away language in an act reminiscent of caesura, but also turns towards an end which is itself negative, namely the ability ‘to go without leaving footprints’. The image that remains after the denial is a blank, a ‘without’ as Merton put it, rather than the positive (if wordless) experience to which the text pointed in the altar passage earlier on. For this reason the passage generates an extreme instance of the gap brought about by hiatus under the definition of that term given above in section three; it enacts what Wolosky, discussing Beckett, has called the ‘drive to nothing’,³⁴⁸ and Gehl, discussing the limitations of metaphysical writings, calls a ‘linguistic disappearing point’.³⁴⁹ To re-formulate this in language from section two: the mode of the passage could be described as a total withdrawal from,³⁵⁰ or renunciation of,³⁵¹ the use of language, and the end of the denial could be described, more fully than in any of the other passages discussed so far, as ‘emptiness and silence and detachment.’³⁵² The object from which the passage detaches through its generation of a hiatus with respect to

³⁴⁸ Wolosky, ‘Figural Evasions’, p. 183.

³⁴⁹ Paul Gehl, ‘An Answering Silence: Medieval and Modern Claims for the Unity of Truth Beyond Language’, in *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 30, Fall 1986, pp. 224-33, p. 224. The seminal literary-critical work to examine this kind of phenomenon is Stanley Fish’s *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth Century Literature* (London: University of California Press, 1974). The texts Fish analyses tend ‘first to involve the reader in discursive activities—in evaluating, deducing, interpreting—and then to declare invalid or premature the conclusions these activities yield’ (vii). Intriguingly, McGinn seems to evoke Fish’s book directly by referring to Eriugena’s writings as ‘a form of self-consuming artefact whose limitations are more important than its advantages in the task of attaining God’. Whether McGinn intended the reference or not, the repetition of the phrase confirms a relation between Fish’s literary-critical study and studies of mystical discourse. See McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, Vol. 2 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (London: SCM Press, 1994), p. 98.

³⁵⁰ *What is Contemplation*, p. 93.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

³⁵² *Seeds*, pp. 115-116.

language is the task of describing a mess, or footprints, by criticising the fools of the curia. This is our seventh example of Merton's poetics of denial.

We have now discussed two examples of texts that perform denials, not by continuously attacking, renouncing or withdrawing from an object, but by performing those actions upon objects that have previously been proposed or posited by the text. In each case there was a diachronic progression from the assertion of X to the denial of X, whereas in our five initial examples X was clearly defined as the object of denial throughout the text. Of the two diachronic examples we can also note that the effect of the progression from X to its denial was to point us towards readings that gave greater emphasis to the end result of the denials in question. In the case of the 'I stand at the altar' passage this focus on ends was closely linked to a particular mode of denial whereby an act of stripping away revealed a further object, but even in this case the culmination of the mode of denial was the distinctive end to which it pointed; or in other words, the purpose of the denial was not to emphasise a mode of partial stripping away, but to show that, in the end, Merton stood wordlessly at the altar. In summary, the texts discussed so far have shifted from an emphasis on modes to an emphasis on ends. Our final two examples will continue this trend.

The following, firstly, from *Entering the Silence*, not only denies an object, but also describes the activity that replaces it. The passage, which opens Merton's diary entry for 31 August 1949, is a paragraph in its own right, and is followed by a description of 'small black lizard' to which it bears no obvious relation.³⁵³ As ever, we shall identify the mode, object, and end of the denial before proceeding to describe it in terms of Merton's content claims.

Morning after morning I try to study the 6th chapter of St. John and it is too great. I cannot study it. I simply sit still and try to breathe.³⁵⁴

³⁵³ *Entering the Silence*, p. 364.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

The denied object here is ‘the 6th chapter of St. John’. The result of the denial is that the speaker ‘simply [sits] still and [tries] to breathe’. The mode of denial is a gradual process of turning away. The speaker begins by facing the object (‘I try to study the 6th chapter...’), proceeds to describe the impossibility of facing the object (‘I cannot study it’), and concludes by facing in a direction other than the object (‘I simply sit still...’). This act of turning away is reflected in the number of words used to describe the object in each of the sentences: the first sentence describes ‘the 6th chapter of St. John’, the second refers to those six words in the compressed form of the abstract pronoun ‘it’, and the third does not mention ‘it’ at all. This progression from description to compression to absence mirrors the progression from facing to the impossibility of facing to facing away. As a preliminary act of descriptive reading we can immediately say that the mode of the denial is a clear instance of the kind of turning away Merton wrote about in *Ascent*, which was quoted above in section two.³⁵⁵

At the same time, however, the denial works in a markedly different way from our previous examples, because the speaker does not opt to say “no” to the ‘6th chapter’. On the contrary, the chapter is ‘too great’ for Merton; it is something to which he would like to say “yes” but cannot. Its equivalent in Merton’s theology is consequently not the ‘created things’ or ‘unsatisfactory things’ against which the contemplative must guard, but something more like the ‘interior peace’ against which Merton warned in *Seeds of Contemplation*—that is, something that at least seems desirable. Yet Merton is not even *warning* against the ‘6th chapter’; he seeks to read it but fails in his task. The passage does not, in short, conform to the pattern of denying objects that are worldly, or unsatisfactory, or false.

The passage does, however, enact Merton’s content claims from section two when viewed as a response to Merton’s command to renounce ‘all things’. Regardless of the character of the denied object, or the reason for the denial, the passage is a mode of

³⁵⁵ *Seeds*, p. 85.

‘withdrawal’,³⁵⁶ ‘becoming empty’,³⁵⁷ ‘giving up’,³⁵⁸ and ‘turning away’.³⁵⁹ We have already noted how these modes of denial are appropriate descriptive correlates to the literary progression from facing to not facing, having to not having, but we can add that they are also appropriate because of the character of the end of the denial, or the new object to which Merton turns after he has failed to read the sixth chapter of St. John. Merton does not, that is, cease reading St. John in order to start reading the Gospel of Luke or St. Paul; rather, the greatness and difficulty of reading John is contrasted with the task of simply sitting and trying to breathe. And the latter is, in two ways, a task that *lacks* – is empty of – the ‘greatness’ of the task of reading John. Firstly, Merton’s sitting is coloured by his earlier failure to study, with the subtext, *I cannot study, so I will just sit and breathe, which is easier, less ‘great’*; and secondly, the character of the sitting is itself described as something less strenuous than studying John: it can be attempted ‘simply’, and does not need to be given up (unlike John) even if one may only ‘try’ (and perhaps fail) to do it. The character of the end of the denial, or the result of the act of turning, is a clearly defined state of increased ‘poverty’,³⁶⁰ a state where there is less than there was before. And in this, looking back to section two, we have a final reason to read the passage as a compelling instance of Merton’s theological poetics. It is our ‘poverty’, after all, that Merton described in *Thoughts* as being at the heart of the *kenotic* drama: Jesus shows our poverty to the Father by dying on the Cross, and the Father responds with ‘infinite mercy’.³⁶¹ It is into the framework of this vocabulary that Merton’s poetic enactment of becoming-poor fits. We have, then, an eighth new set of dynamics through which the form of Merton’s writings embodies claims he makes about denial at the level of content.

³⁵⁶ *What is Contemplation*, p. 93.

³⁵⁷ *New Seeds*, p. 103.

³⁵⁸ *SOED*, ‘renunciation, 1’.

³⁵⁹ See section two above for Merton’s use of each of these descriptions of denial.

³⁶⁰ *New Seeds*, p. 103.

³⁶¹ *Thoughts*, p. 38.

Our reading of the following passage, which is taken from *No Man is an Island*, is our final example of an act of denial that can be described in terms of Merton's content claims from section two. The passage contributes to a longer series of aphorisms about 'Love', each of which can stand on their own.

Love shares the good with another not by dividing it with him, but by identifying itself with him so that his good becomes my own.³⁶²

The object, mode, and end of the denial here are not initially clear. There are three agents of action: 'Love', the one with whom Love identifies ('him'), and the speaker (the one who owns in 'my'). That much is clear; but two key questions remain: 'What is the relationship between love's sharing the good with another and the good of another becoming *my own*?' 'Why does the good of the other not become *love's own*, seeing that it is love that identifies with the other?'

One way to answer these questions is to assume that 'Love' shares its identity with the speaker. The subtext comes to be, *When I love, I share the good with another by identifying myself with him so that his good becomes my own*. The effect of Merton's initially presenting 'Love' without reference to the speaker (in the form of 'I') is contrastingly to distance the speaker from 'Love', and therefore to distance the speaker from the act of 'sharing'. At first glance it is 'Love', and not the speaker, who 'shares', and it is the speaker, and not 'Love', who comes to 'own' the good of the other—but on looking more closely it seems that both parties do both. The overall effect of this progression from non-identification to identification is, we read, that the speaker is initially dissociated from an act of sharing that he later turns out to perform, whilst 'Love' is initially dissociated from an act of receiving that it later turns out to perform. The denial of the passage can be described both in these terms – that is, in terms of an act of dissociating Love and the speaker from actions – and in

³⁶² *No Man Is an Island* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1955), p. 2. Hereafter *No Man*.

terms of the collapse of the identities of Love and the speaker into a single identity. And these two sets of denials are also linked: the initial denial of the association between the speaker and the act of sharing is undone by the denial of the speaker's separate identity from Love.

We can, as ever, describe these dynamics in terms of the four categories (modes, objects, ends, and, eventually, roots) from section two. Firstly, the mode of denial might be described in terms of volta's turn, or what Merton called 'turning away' in section two,³⁶³ with the specific addition that the object *from* which the passage turns also involves denial (dissociations from action), as does the object *to* which it turns (the collapse of identities). Taking this tri-part denial into account, we can further describe the passage as turning from the withdrawal of the agency of Love and the speaker to the loss of distinction between Love and the speaker—and in so doing we have evoked Merton's language of withdrawal and loss as modes through which to perform denials.³⁶⁴ Secondly, the objects of denial that can most compellingly be described in terms of a correlate from section two are the separate identities of the speaker and Love. Their collapse into one evokes Merton's commendation of the denial of 'disunity' (Love and the speaker are, in the end, united).³⁶⁵ Thirdly, the ends of the denial correspond to Merton's claim that a desirable result of the act of 'saying "no"' is 'true identity in the peace of God'.³⁶⁶ If the reader accepts that the good-sharing 'Love' in the passage from *No Man* bears a resemblance to, or shares an identity with, the loving God of Merton's Christian faith, the unification of identities in the passage embodies an identification between Merton and God.

This leads on neatly, and finally, to the *kenotic* roots of Merton's interest in denial. We read earlier in *Ascent* that 'the whole ascetical life' is rooted in the attempt to reproduce the life of Christ on earth, culminating in the emptying of the soul that leads to '[unification]

³⁶³ *Seeds*, p. 85.

³⁶⁴ See *What is Contemplation*, p. 93 and *Seeds*, pp. 33-34.

³⁶⁵ *Seeds*, p. 57.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

with God'.³⁶⁷ The passage under discussion, as we have seen, is a compelling embodiment of this vision: the end of the endeavour of the poetic denial, like the end of the *kenotic* pattern of self-emptying, is a form of unification with God. To bring these four aspects together: the passage as we have read it constitutes an act of turning away from disunity and a turning towards an experience of identification with God. This is our eighth and final example of a poetic correlation between Merton's content claims about denial and the literary form of his prose writings.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to argue that Merton's theologically-rooted attitude towards self-denial can be understood more fully when the content of his thoughts about self-denial are placed in relation to the literary form of his prose. As we made clear earlier, it has not been our aim to argue anything new concerning the character of Merton's content claims about self-denial. Instead, the purpose of section two above was to show that Merton's recommendation of self-denial, and his rooting of that recommendation in a theology of *kenosis*, are central themes throughout the Trappist's thoughts on the contemplative life. From there, and having gathered the tools necessary for our main analysis, we went on to conduct our argument, in the literary analysis of section four. To crystallise the nature and significance of this argument, we shall now conclude the chapter by placing the claims of section four in relation to the key related fields that were originally outlined in our 'Introduction' above.

The relation of our chapter to the recent incarnations of Formalist criticism is a broad but nevertheless important one. We showed earlier that critics such as Wolfson have made

³⁶⁷ *Ascent.*, p. 126.

the case for an ‘informed Formalist criticism’³⁶⁸—that is, close textual analysis placed in relation to the informing patterns of, for example, historical and philosophical contexts. Our chapter has created an informed criticism of that kind. Its central aim has been to place the intricacies of Formalist criticism in relation to a carefully structured account of the wider context of Merton’s work on self-denial, rooted in the theology of *kenosis*. Caesura, in our analysis, has not played the part of an isolated textual artefact on the page (*pace* New Criticism), but of a site through which Merton’s account of, for example, self-mastery and self-conquest can be understood more fully. The chapter has thus, at this more general level, offered an expansion of the Formalist project.

The more specific way in which the chapter has developed a Formalist poetics comes into focus when we place the analysis of section four above in relation to the other key related fields initially discussed in our introductory chapter. Tillich, Ward, and Pattison all claimed there that art is inherently theological, and to that thesis the present chapter has added highly specific readings that show some of the ways in which literary form can be read as embodying the acts of self-denial that spring from a background rooted in *kenotic* theology. In turn, Ricoeur and Wilder claimed in the introductory chapter above that narrative and parabolic form reveal something of the character of God, and to that thesis, similarly, we have claimed that a number of highly specific literary forms also reveal theological information, namely the ways in which Thomas Merton sought, through his writing, to enter into the *kenotic* pattern of Christ’s self-emptying on the Cross. As promised in our introductory chapter, we have contributed new, highly specific readings of the relation between the dynamics of theological content claims and the dynamics of literary form.

For those interested in the implications of close readings of mystical texts, too, the present chapter has offered a significant new development. Sells has already focussed upon

³⁶⁸ *Formal Charges*, p. 1.

the relation between fused antecedents and the experience of union, whilst Turner has already focussed on the relation between, for example, paradox and a particular epistemological account of the divine mystery; and to these theses we have added a series of relations between the theologically-rooted recommendation to perform acts of self-denial and many literary strategies. To name those strategies in the order in which we discussed them above will give a sense of the scope of our expansion of performative accounts of theological writings. Each of the following, we have shown, can be used in the embodiment by form of the theology of self-denial: capitalization, exclamation, one-word sentences, the juxtaposition of the description of an attitude with the embodiment of the same attitude, the juxtaposition of the reader's supposed attitude with the author's attitude, the reinforcement of an attitude through implication, the explicit semantic denial of X, the denial of not-X, the affirmation of both X and not-X, the denial of opposition between X and not-X, replacing one attitude with a different attitude, the destabilization of comprehensible meaning, negative labelling, ambivalence about an attitude, apology, ambiguity about the content of an apology, critical judgements, ambiguity about the relationship between multiple critical judgements, singular denials, reactive denials, and ambiguity over shared or separate semantic identities. Each of these can be read in relation to the theological recommendation of acts of self-denial. This has not been done before.

To the field of Merton studies, finally, we have added a further significant thesis. We showed earlier on that Merton studies has too often placed Merton as 'the final locus of study',³⁶⁹ and that our contrasting aim is to use Merton's prose as a tool for developing a poetics. One upshot of the poetics of the present chapter, however, is to contribute a new way in which to approach, and thereby to understand, Merton himself. The thesis underlying the

³⁶⁹ George Kilcourse, 'Introduction', in *The Merton Annual: Studies in Culture, Spirituality & Social Concerns*, ed. by George A. Kilcourse, Vol. 15, 2002 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), pp. 2-18, both p. 13.

endeavour of the whole chapter has been that a new key for the understanding of Merton's thought on *kenosis* is the act of paying minute attention to the literary form of his prose, and to relate the forms of his prose to the content claims he made about self-denial throughout his writings. For the Merton scholar keen to learn about Merton's attitude to self-denial, the present chapter has shown that the reader can access not only what Merton thought *about* denial, but how he *performed* self-denial in his writings. The result of using Merton's thought in order to generate a poetics of *kenotic* denial is thus the expansion of the horizons with which we can approach Merton's theology as a whole. We will see this expansion repeated in each of the remaining chapters of the thesis.

Our next task, to which we will now turn, will be to develop each of the areas of concern just discussed by focussing on Merton's theology of simplification, Merton's recommendations for how to simplify one's life, and the literary enactment of simplification in Merton's prose writings. In the ways just outlined, chapter two will contribute both to Formalist theologies of form, by discussing new relations between theological themes and literary forms, and to Merton studies, by expanding the material through which a Merton scholar can understand the Trappist's attitude towards the simplification of life.

Chapter Two: Simplification

1. Aims, Definition of ‘Simplification’, Field of Enquiry

If the commendation of denial is central to Merton’s theological writings, so too is the related commendation of the simplification of one’s way of life as a route through which to enter into the presence of God. The aim of this chapter, which closely resembles that of our first chapter above, is to outline that centrality by gathering representative content claims about simplicity from Merton’s key writings on contemplation, before arguing that his prose embodies those claims at the level of literary form. To give a foretaste: the form of the texts we shall analyse below in section four of this chapter each enact a ‘return’, in Merton’s words, ‘to simplicity of heart’;³⁷⁰ and they are each, as Merton puts it, sites where, to different degrees and through different literary modes, ‘all variety, all complexity, all paradox, all multiplicity cease.’³⁷¹ In the context of Merton’s theology, furthermore, we will see that each of these acts can be further read in relation to Merton’s belief that by simplifying our lives we come closer to unity with the undivided simplicity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The single purpose of the chapter, then, will be the task of reading a correlation between claims such as those just quoted and literary forms of simplification in the modes of Merton’s prose. In preparation for this task, it is the aim of this opening section to provide an initial definition of what ‘simplification’ will be taken to mean in the pages that follow, and to show that related work in the analysis of mystical and other discourses has not yet approached the topic in the way offered here.

In terms of the definition of our key term, the embodiment of Merton’s commendation of the simplification of life through the form of his prose is, we will show, a diachronic movement from a complex mode of writing, where ‘complex’ denotes ‘formed by

³⁷⁰ *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 82.

³⁷¹ *New Seeds*, p. 151.

combination’,³⁷² to a simple mode of writing, where ‘simple’ denotes ‘composed of a single substance’.³⁷³ This skeletal definition of the poetics of simplification will become clearer when we observe it in action in the concrete examples of section four below; but the examples will always conform to the given definition. There emerges, then, an overlap between our definition just given and the definition of denial given in chapter one, and to unpack this will help to clarify the dynamics and distinctiveness of the poetics of simplification. In the same way that, in our previous chapter, the act of denial involved ‘saying “no”’ to an object, the act of simplification similarly involves ‘saying no’ to a prior, more complex state, or at least to aspects of that state. We can thus apply the tri-part categorization used in the chapter on denials to assess the processes that occurs in simplifications. With respect to Merton’s words about simplification quoted above, for example, there are things denied (‘variety’, ‘complexity’, ‘paradox’, ‘multiplicity’), modes of denial (‘return’, ‘cessation’), and ends for which the denial takes place (‘simplicity of heart’). To identify these three parts of an act of simplification will continue to be useful throughout this chapter, but with a significantly different emphasis from that in our chapter on denials. Whereas the emphasis in chapter one was upon the mode in which Merton’s texts ‘said “no”’, the emphasis here will be upon the end for which an act of denial takes place, and specifically, the state of being simplified.

The task we are proposing to carry out is also distinct from existing work in the field; projects with initially similar characteristics tend to have different overall goals from our own. Comments about, for instance, the ‘heroic simplicity’³⁷⁴ of the mystics, and the requirement of ‘learning to live in simplicity and poverty’ as a prerequisite of the

³⁷² *SOED*, p. 468.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 2841.

³⁷⁴ McGinn, *Flowering*, p. 101.

contemplative life, are common enough,³⁷⁵ but the genre to which these kinds of observation nearly invariably contribute is the exposition of mystical theologies, or the mapping-out of events in mystical history, rather than the development of a close analysis contributing to a theological poetics. Similarly, and in spite of his being placed by Nelstrop *et al* within the emerging field of performative readings of mystical writings, and thus within a field that concerns itself with literary analysis,³⁷⁶ Denys Turner's most in-depth work on simplification contributes, like the majority studies of mystical discourse, to the exposition and criticism of theological content claims. Making a distinction between 'the knowing of love' in the writings of Pseudo-Denys and the 'bi-polarity of knowing and love' in the *Cloud*, for example, Turner warns against the 'possibilities of anti-intellectualism' in the latter, with its focus upon the 'simplification and reduction'.³⁷⁷ Turner's exposition of the content of Pseudo-Denys offers a critical contribution to the analysis of simplification in mystical theology, but his aims overlap little with the present ones, which concern the embodiment of simplification in the literary forms of Merton's prose.

Turner's thesis does, however, reflect a concern that predominates more widely in the study of mystical discourse, which at first glance might seem to call into question the validity of the analysis of a poetics of simplification at all. As we have already noted, and in conformity with Turner's focus upon the process of simplification that leads to a higher mode of mystical knowing, a number of the more literarily-inclined analysts of mystical writings have tended, perhaps problematically, to make claims about the correlation between the form of written language and a state of being that transcends the complexity of normal consciousness: the mystic's experience of union with God. Burcht Pranger's analysis of the 'simplicity and complexity' of medieval mystical writings, for example, is closely related to

³⁷⁵ Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 217.

³⁷⁶ *Contemporary Theoretical Approaches*, p. 4.

³⁷⁷ Turner, *Darkness*, pp. 193, 193, 194, & 198.

the present thesis in the sense that it performs a literary analysis (albeit very briefly)³⁷⁸ of literary forms in mystical writings that enact simplification; but Pranger enters theoretical territory with which the present thesis is not concerned when he claims, discussing the form of Eckhart's writings, that 'It is precisely [Eckhart's] simplicity which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to tell where and when the mystical stage of oneness sets in, or, for that matter, comes to a close.'³⁷⁹ The 'difficulty' Pranger identifies is a great one: it stems from the wider challenge of claiming that an act of reading or writing can embody the state of mystical oneness at all. It would seem, that is, that Pranger has sought to argue that literary form provides a correlate to an experience that, in many accounts, are said to transcend language altogether. Consider, for instance, three of Merton's early views on union, which he describes as 'a union of love',³⁸⁰ a 'DIRECT AND EXPERIMENTAL CONTACT WITH HIM [GOD]',³⁸¹ and as involving 'a real immediacy of union between the soul and God'.³⁸² The challenge for thinkers such as Pranger is to provide a satisfactory account of the compatibility of the performative function of mystical texts with these kinds of experience. It is not the aim here to attempt that contentious and perhaps impossible task.

Similarly, Michael Sells's work on 'performative apophysis'³⁸³ focuses upon a process of simplification in mystical prose that forms an analogue to an experience that only arguably belongs to the realms of language. As we explored in our introductory chapter, Sells associates his literary analysis of the shift in apophatic texts from 'discursive reason (*dianoia*)' to an 'open-ended process of *thēoria*'³⁸⁴ with the passage from the 'referential' to

³⁷⁸ See for instance Burcht Pranger, 'The Rhetoric of Mystical Unity in the Middle Ages: A Study in Retroactive Reading', in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 7, No. 1, March 1993, pp. 33-49, p. 37, which quotes Eckhart at length but offers no literary analysis.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 37.

³⁸⁰ *What is Contemplation*, p. 90.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

³⁸² *Ascent*, p. 61.

³⁸³ Sells, *Unsayings*, p. 5.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

the ‘preferential’ or ‘transreferential’.³⁸⁵ *Thēoria* comes specifically to mean ‘transreferential *thēoria*’,³⁸⁶ and is equated by Sells with an experiential oneness between subject and object.³⁸⁷ Sells’s aim, like Pranger’s, is consequently different from ours in that the object of correlation he seeks for the form of apophatic writing is a state of transreferentiality, rather than a return, in Merton’s words from earlier, to ‘simplicity of heart’. The end of the processes of simplification in Merton’s prose under the definition we have given needs to be a ‘single thing’, which could be a simple mode of *dianoia* (or discursive reasoning), whereas the end of *aphaeresis* is, for Sells, strictly ‘transreferential’. The aims of Pranger and Sells are different from our own in this way.

Aspects of the language with which Sells describes the process of simplification in apophatic texts will, however, remain useful to our analysis of Merton. Sells speaks of the object of the apophatic text being ‘pulled away through apophatic abstraction (*aphaeresis*)’;³⁸⁸ and, as was true in our discussion of denials, the same ‘pulling away’ will be a feature of Merton’s poetics of simplification. And Burrows, discussing Sells, labels the *aphaeretic* mode an ‘apophatic grammar’;³⁸⁹ this, again, will be a useful phrase when we scrutinise the grammar of simplification, or the grammar of pulling away layers of complexity. Within the world of Merton studies, phrases such as Cunningham’s about the tendency of Merton’s texts ‘to pare down, to reduce’,³⁹⁰ will serve as a useful confirmation that forms of simplification, when defined as the paring down or reduction of complex forms

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³⁸⁹ Mark S. Burrows, ‘Words that Reach into the Silence: Mystical Languages of Unsayings’, in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. by Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. 207-214, p. 208.

³⁹⁰ Lawrence S. Cunningham, ‘High Culture and Spirituality in Thomas Merton’, in *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 19, 1984, No. 3, pp. 283-288, p. 284.

of writing into simpler forms, have been noted as characteristic of Merton's prose style by close readers of the Trappist's *corpus*.

Closer to the mode of correlation that will be explored our analysis of Merton, but less concerned with the mode of literary analysis employed by Sells, is Daniel Jenkins's essay on the 'Protestant aesthetic' of Donald Davie.³⁹¹ For Jenkins's Davie 'there was such a thing as a Protestant Calvinist aesthetic', and that aesthetic 'expressed the virtues of simplicity, sobriety, and measure'.³⁹² 'Simplicity' Jenkins further takes to refer 'not so much to the plainness with which a Puritan style is traditionally associated, whether in preaching, conversation or dress, as to sincerity and purity.'³⁹³ In terms of the sites where the literary form of simplicity correlates with content claims about living a simple life, I have been able to find nothing closer to the concerns of the present chapter than Jenkins's essay. At the same time, however, Jenkins does not perform a literary analysis of the kind of writing that might be describes in the terms of Davie's Protestant aesthetic. As with Pranger and Sells, then, Jenkins's work overlaps with significant aspects of the concerns we will explore here, but does not perform the task that will be performed here.

2. Exposition: Merton's Language About Simplification

We have now given a preliminary definition of the theme in question, and noted its distinctiveness from related work in the field. Our next task is to gather the content claims with which the poetics of simplification will be described in section four, and to place them in relation to a theological background—namely Merton's view that the simplification of life brings us closer to God's own simplicity. As before, the sources from which these content

³⁹¹ Daniel T. Jenkins, 'A Protestant Aesthetic? A Conversation with Donald Davie', in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 2, No. 2, September 1998, pp. 153-162, p. 153.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 153.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

claims will be taken are the eight texts held by a key Merton scholar to form the heart of the Trappist's sustained reflections on the contemplative life.³⁹⁴ And as before, our aim is not to provide an exhaustive account of Merton's views on simplification, or to quote everything Merton said about simplification, but to gather a vocabulary sufficiently extensive and varied to describe the forms of simplification in Merton's prose to be discussed in section four.

Fittingly, Merton's content claims about simplification are not, for the most-part, complicated. They mainly consist of straightforward praise for a simple understanding of God, a simple mode of prayer, and a simple way of life, alongside descriptions of what that simplicity might consist of. In *What is Contemplation*, for example, Merton commends those who, 'by devoting themselves to self-sacrificing labour', come to 'lead lives of great simplicity'.³⁹⁵ Later in the same text Merton commends his reader to 'dwell in the silence of your own soul and rest there in the simple and simplifying light';³⁹⁶ and again, with more of an emphasis on what a simplified life might consist of, he describes the 'interior life' that, in becoming 'completely simple', rests upon 'one thought, one love: GOD ALONE.'³⁹⁷ Initially these three commendations of simplicity might appear disparate: a way of life, the light of God, and having a single thought are not the same thing. They will each contribute, however, to the vocabulary with which we will later describe Merton's prose forms. For a writer, living a life 'of great simplicity' might involve, we will show later, employing a simplifying grammatical form; to be a person who has been simplified by God's simplifying light can be brought forth in the paring down of syntactical structure as a passage of text proceeds; and to have an interior life focused upon 'one thought, one love' might similarly find expression in modes of elision and omission.

³⁹⁴ See page 47 for the list of texts.

³⁹⁵ *What is Contemplation*, p. 97.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

In *Seeds of Contemplation* Merton offers a number of more detailed descriptions of the contexts, modes and ends of living in a simple way. Living in ‘simplicity’ is the result, he claims, of a ‘perfect abandonment to the will of God’, and the result of such abandonment is that ‘in the simplicity of the things you do men will recognize your peacefulness and will give glory to God.’³⁹⁸ The relevant aspect of this formulation to our collection of content claims is that the simplicity in question results from *abandonment*. Is it possible, we will ask later, for a prose form to embody an act of abandonment that results in simplicity? With more of a focus upon the nature of simplicity, Merton also describes ‘a completely simple form of affective prayer’ which involves ‘few words or none’, and commends us, his readers, to ‘keep your prayer as simple as possible’.³⁹⁹ Our question with respect to this claim is: can prose be an ‘affective prayer’, and as such can it take on a ‘completely simple form’ that involves ‘few words’? And lastly from *Seeds*, Merton describes the Trappist life as one of ‘poverty and frugality and simplicity’.⁴⁰⁰ Can Merton’s prose, we will ask in section four, reflect the qualities of life around which the Cistercian Order is organised?

In *The Ascent to Truth* Merton nuances the claim about ‘GOD ALONE’ that we quoted above from *What is Contemplation*. ‘The whole spiritual life’, Merton now writes, ‘can be reduced in practice to one simple formula: doing the will of God’.⁴⁰¹ As before, this ‘simple formula’ correlates with a mode of action that might be embodied by a text: if the form of Merton’s writings were to reduce down its concerns to an attempt (somehow) to do the will of God, we would be dealing with an embodiment of Merton’s content claim from *Ascent*. Only slightly more complicated is the mode through which a text might embody Merton’s description of Aquinas’s view of contemplation as ‘a simple intuition of the

³⁹⁸ *Seeds*, p. 116.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 138 & 139.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁴⁰¹ *Ascent*, p. 138.

truth'.⁴⁰² Following the definition of 'simplification' as the movement from an object formed by combination to an object composed of a single substance, Aquinas's view of what contemplation is might be enacted if a text were to proceed from a complex process of seeking to discern the truth to a simple expression of having intuited some kind of truth. Merton's Aquinas thus contributes to the picture of what the enactment of simplification through form might look like by adding the notion that, if the simple mode to which a text leads were to be framed in terms of an intuition of the truth, we might describe the text as resulting in a mode of *contemplation*. We will return to this potential relationship later on.

Thoughts in Solitude continues to add nuanced ways in which we might read the embodiment of simplification by the form of a text. Merton claims that 'Without courage we can never attain to true simplicity, because cowardice keeps us "double-minded"—hesitating between the world and God'.⁴⁰³ This contributes especially to our definition of the *process* of simplification. What we have already defined as the progression from multiplicity of substance to singularity of substance is more specifically described in Merton's words as the movement away from being 'double-minded', in the sense of 'hesitating between the world and God', and towards the end result of a single-minded focus upon God, or, to borrow from Merton's words from earlier, 'GOD ALONE'. In order to embody Merton's content claim from *Thoughts in Solitude*, then, a text would be required to move from multiple focuses, upon God and the world, towards a single focus upon God. Much the same relationship of embodiment might occur between a text and Merton's commendation, also from *Thoughts*, this his readers 'rise above its [the world's] multiplicity and recapitulate it in the simplicity of a love which finds all things in God'.⁴⁰⁴ The question is: 'can a text rise above multiplicity in this way in order to focus instead upon love and, therefore, God?' And finally, in terms of the

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁴⁰³ *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 35.

⁴⁰⁴ *Thoughts*, p. 54.

state that results from the act of simplification, we can also take from *Thoughts* Merton's claim that 'The emptiness of the true solitary is marked by a great simplicity'.⁴⁰⁵ The aspect of this formulation to which a text might act as an analogue is the connection between simplicity and *emptiness*. Can a text's act of simplification be marked by emptiness, or a sense of emptying-out?

So far the modes of simplification we have quoted from Merton's writings have been figured as abandonment, reduction, and rising above, or in other words, processes of denial or 'saying "no"'. In *Inner Experience* this changes: Merton's commendation that you, the reader, 'bring back together the fragments of your distracted existence' inverts the widespread association in Merton's writings between simplification and the act of denial.⁴⁰⁶ Instead of renouncing all but one 'fragments', the recommendation now is to bring fragments 'together'; the act of rejection or denial is replaced, in other words, by the act of merging or gathering. To relate this specifically to our definition of simplification, Merton's commendation in *Inner Experience* might be embodied by a simplifying text if multiple fragments were gathered into a single, unifying concern. And besides this inversion of the process of simplification, *Inner Experience* also offers a number of new commendations and descriptions of simplicity. As was the case in *The Ascent to Truth*, Merton again describes 'contemplation' as 'simple',⁴⁰⁷ and later on as consisting of 'simplicity, sobriety, and humility'.⁴⁰⁸ At a basic level, both of these quotations flesh out the general picture of simplification as a praxis Merton recommends; but they also suggest that a simplifying text relates to a mode of apprehension that might tentatively be placed within the category of the 'contemplative'. We shall return to this contention in detail later on, in section four.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁴⁰⁶ *Inner Experience*, p. 4.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

In our exposition so far we have encountered several related ends to which the act of simplification leads, namely resting in the simplifying light of God,⁴⁰⁹ doing God's will,⁴¹⁰ glorifying God,⁴¹¹ not hesitating between God and the world,⁴¹² and being in the presence of God's simple love.⁴¹³ These ends are related because each of them involves drawing closer, in some way, to God. In *Inner Experience* this notion is taken a step further, in a set of claims about *why* the act of simplification might draw a person closer to God, or what we have been calling the theological roots of the mode of action in question. Merton describes in *Inner Experience* how 'the fall from Paradise was a fall from unity', and particularly how 'Man fell from the unity of contemplative vision into the multiplicity, complication, and distraction of an active, worldly existence'.⁴¹⁴ This fall from unity, says Merton, had two consequences: humankind comes to be 'exiled from God', he says 'and from his inmost self'.⁴¹⁵ The Christian life consequently involves the struggle to 'return to Paradise'⁴¹⁶ and to recover one's true identity.⁴¹⁷ Read in the context of this view of a fall into multiplicity leading to the possibility of a recovery of unity with God and the self, the claims about simplification we have already quoted from Merton's earlier works take on a new theological significance. It was clear already that Merton views simplification as an act that takes the actor closer to an end result that relates to God; now it is clear that the root of that view of simplification bears a close relation to Merton's view of the multiplicity of the world and the unity, oneness, or simplicity of God. Merton recommends simplification, claims that it brings us closer to God, and argues that such closeness has a root in the simplicity of God.

⁴⁰⁹ *What is Contemplation*, p. 106.

⁴¹⁰ *Ascent*, p. 138.

⁴¹¹ *Seeds*, p. 116.

⁴¹² *Thoughts*, p. 35.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁴¹⁴ *Inner Experience*, p. 35.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁷ The Christian, says Merton, 'must recover himself.' *Ibid.*

In discussing *Inner Experience* (first published 1988) at this stage we have momentarily departed from our method of discussing Merton's texts in chronological order. The reason for doing this is that the discussion from *Inner Experience* provides a helpful backdrop to earlier claims about the theological roots of his work on simplification. In 'Notes Towards a Philosophy of Solitude' (1960), Merton describes how the person called to solitude

has a mysterious and apparently absurd vocation to supernatural unity. He seeks a spiritual and simple oneness in himself which, when it is found, paradoxically becomes the oneness of all men—a oneness beyond all separation.⁴¹⁸

This oneness between people has a further root, says Merton, in 'the basic, invisible, mysterious unity which makes all men "One Man" in Christ's Church.' The sum claim of these quotations is twofold: firstly, the search for simplicity within oneself leads to oneness between human beings ('the oneness of all men'), and secondly, the oneness of human beings in turn issues from the 'mysterious unity' of Christ's Church. Such a vision builds on the claim Merton made above in *Inner Experience*, where simplification brings us closer to God because God is simple. In 'Notes' Merton makes the different claim that simplification brings us unity with other people because of a 'mysterious unity' that relates to 'Christ's Church'. As it stands, however, this new claim is underspecified. What is the 'mysterious unity' Merton mentions? To abandon chronology again by turning to *Zen and the Birds* will help to answer the question. There Merton claims that 'the distinction between Creator and creature does not alter the fact that there is also a basic unity *within ourselves* at the summit of our being where we are "one with God".'⁴¹⁹ To place this in conversation with the 'mysterious' claim from *Inner Experience*: acts of simplification unify us with other people, Merton seems to be saying, because they bring us oneness with God that that resides at the

⁴¹⁸ *Disputed Questions*, p. 168.

⁴¹⁹ *Zen and the Birds*, pp. 11-12.

summit of every human being. The claim that simplification brings us close to God consequently remains central, with the added notion that being close to God is something that brings us close to the heart of humanity as a whole. Each of these ideas will contribute to the background against which Merton's poetic enactment of self-denial in his prose writings is positioned in section four.

In *New Seeds* Merton asks God to 'possess my whole heart and soul with the simplicity of love.'⁴²⁰ The notion we can add to our vocabulary here is that of *possession*. Can a text, in becoming simple, appear to have been possessed by an outside force that can be associated with God? If Merton's language about gathering multiplicity into singularity inverted the act of 'saying no', this notion of being possessed similarly inverts the active agency of somebody who performs acts of (to borrow Merton's terminology from earlier) abandonment, rising above, and emptying. If a text were to form an analogue to Merton's description of God possessing a person in the simplicity of love, there would need somehow to be a sense that the text received, or was taken over by, the simplifying force in question—or in other words, a sense of passivity as opposed to activity. The same dynamic occurs in the following, also from *New Seeds*: 'He moves us with a simplicity that simplifies us. All variety, all complexity, all paradox, all multiplicity cease.'⁴²¹ We quoted this text at the opening of the present chapter in order to make clear the connection between the cessation of multiplicity and the process of simplification; its more specific use now is the phrase 'He moves us'. How might a text appear not to move itself towards simplicity, but be moved by an external force? Whether by possessing or by moving, we will explore this sense of God's action upon a simplified text in the literary analysis of section four.

⁴²⁰ *New Seeds*, p. 39.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

Contemplative Prayer repeatedly describes the specific context of *prayer* as a site of simplicity. ‘Monastic prayer’, Merton claims, ‘is, first of all, essentially simple’,⁴²² and involves ‘prayers made up of short phrases drawn from the Psalms or other parts of Scripture’.⁴²³ The kind of text that might embody this description of prayer, or at least contribute to a genre of writing closely related to it, would involve simplicity that stemmed from ‘short phrases’. Similarly, Merton’s description of ‘the essential simplicity of monastic prayer in the primitive “prayer of the heart”’ would find a textual analogue in prose that enacted a return to the ‘primitive’, and a movement away from cerebral process towards a mode of knowing that could be associated with ‘the heart’.⁴²⁴ In the same vein, Merton describes the prayer of the heart as ‘very simple, confined to the simplest acts and often making use of no words and no thoughts at all’.⁴²⁵ The contributions to our word pool in this case are the notions of *confinement*, and *simplest acts*. If a text were somehow to confine itself to the simplest of actions, we would be able to describe Merton’s literary form in terms he himself used with respect to the prayer of the heart. The same, finally, is true of Merton’s description of the prayer that is ‘short and pure’.⁴²⁶

We can briefly organise the different content claims about simplification now discussed into four categories. Firstly, there is a theological background to Merton’s recommendation of simplification. This can be summarised as the view that in becoming simple we come close to God,⁴²⁷ and that by coming close to God in simplicity we come close to the unity with God that resides at the summit of our humanity.⁴²⁸ Secondly, there are

⁴²² *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 20.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23. See also p. 54: For Merton, one must know when to go beyond ‘to a simpler, more primitive, more “obscure” and more receptive form of prayer’.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴²⁷ See *Inner Experience*, pp. 35-36.

⁴²⁸ See *Zen and the Birds*, pp. 11-12, and *Disputed Questions*, p. 168.

the contexts in which Merton has commended, in our exposition, different kinds of simplification. These include the way one leads one's life,⁴²⁹ the interior life,⁴³⁰ the whole spiritual life,⁴³¹ the Trappist life,⁴³² the solitary life,⁴³³ the act of contemplation,⁴³⁴ Monastic prayer,⁴³⁵ affective prayer,⁴³⁶ prayer in general,⁴³⁷ and the prayer of the heart.⁴³⁸ Thirdly, there are the modes through which Merton described the act of simplification taking place. These include devoting oneself to self-sacrificing labour,⁴³⁹ dwelling in silence,⁴⁴⁰ abandoning oneself to God's will,⁴⁴¹ acting without double-minded hesitation between the world and God,⁴⁴² rising above the world's multiplicity,⁴⁴³ emptying oneself,⁴⁴⁴ bringing fragments together,⁴⁴⁵ asking God to possess one's heart with simplicity,⁴⁴⁶ being moved by God,⁴⁴⁷ using short phrases from Scripture,⁴⁴⁸ and confining one's actions.⁴⁴⁹ And fourthly, there are the simple ends for which these modes, applied to the mentioned contexts, are enacted. These include thinking only of God,⁴⁵⁰ resting in the simplifying light of God,⁴⁵¹

⁴²⁹ *What is Contemplation*, p. 97.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁴³¹ *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 20.

⁴³² *Seeds*, p. 168.

⁴³³ *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 189.

⁴³⁴ *Inner Experience*, p. 76.

⁴³⁵ *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 20.

⁴³⁶ *Seeds*, pp. 138 & 139.

⁴³⁷ *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 21.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴³⁹ *What is Contemplation*, p. 97.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁴⁴¹ *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 116.

⁴⁴² *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 35.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁴⁴⁵ *Inner Experience*, p. 4.

⁴⁴⁶ *New Seeds*, p. 39.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁴⁴⁸ *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 21.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴⁵⁰ *What is Contemplation* p. 103.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

doing God's will,⁴⁵² glorifying God,⁴⁵³ not hesitating between God and the world,⁴⁵⁴ and being in the presence of God's simple love.⁴⁵⁵ We shall return to these claims in section four below.

3. Literary Terminology: Caesura, Volta, and Catharsis

Before reading examples of Merton's simplifying prose in terms of the content claims just gathered, we shall outline some of the existing literary terms that give a taste of the kind of forms with which we shall be concerned. In doing so it is helpful to re-acknowledge the relationship between simplification as defined in the present chapter and denial as defined in the previous chapter. We established earlier that the dynamics of simplification overlap with the dynamics of denial, but that the emphasis of simplification is upon the end rather than the mode of an act of 'saying "no"'. As such, two of the literary terms used in the 'Denial' chapter above will remain useful in our literary analysis of Merton's simplifying prose. It is the aim here to re-outline those two terms, and also to introduce a new term with which to emphasise the new focus on the *ends* of denial.

As before, then, we shall use the terms 'caesura' and 'volta' to specify the mode of denial that a simplifying text might enact. 'Caesura' will be useful for its description of a mode whereby text is 'cut off',⁴⁵⁶ and specifically as a description of texts that cut off multiple processes in order to leave a single and therefore simple process. 'Volta', similarly, will be useful as a description of simplifying texts that 'turn' from the complex and towards the simple.⁴⁵⁷ We will also, as before, discard the specific literary sites to which both of these

⁴⁵² *Ascent*, p. 138.

⁴⁵³ *Seeds*, p. 116.

⁴⁵⁴ *Thoughts*, p. 35.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁴⁵⁶ *Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 174.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1527.

terms apply – poetry generally in the case of ‘caesura’, and sonnets specifically in the case of ‘volta’ – and instead use them in order to describe modes through which Merton’s texts enact simplification by literarily cutting off and turning away. In the case of the third literary term we used in the ‘Denial’ chapter, however, a similar reapplication is not possible. ‘Hiatus’, which describes a ‘gap’, concerns an *end* of denial that has now been replaced by a concern with denials that lead specifically to *simplicity*, defined as ‘composed of a single substance’.⁴⁵⁸ The ‘gap’ of hiatus does not result from the processes of simplification discussed here, which result in a single thing rather than an absence of things.

Instead, Merton’s simplifying texts leave us with a qualified sense of ‘catharsis’, which the *Princeton Encyclopedia* defines as ‘purging’ (in a medical sense), ‘purification’ (in a religious sense), and ‘clarification’ (in an intellectual sense).⁴⁵⁹ It will become clearer how each of these terms relates to the specific processes of simplification in the literary analysis—but we can already see, looking back to section two above, that they cohere with Merton’s content claims about simplifying one’s life generally or a way of prayer specifically. One might use the language of *purging* one’s double-minded allegiance to both God and the world,⁴⁶⁰ *purifying* one’s focus until one seeks ‘GOD ALONE’,⁴⁶¹ and *clarifying* one’s focus on the simple formula of doing God’s will.⁴⁶² And as was the case for caesura and volta, it is because of its descriptions of these *actions* that catharsis will be useful in section four, rather than for the specific literary sites with which it is normally associated—namely, the close of a tragedy.

4. Literary Analysis: Merton’s Poetics of Simplification

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2841.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

⁴⁶⁰ See *Thoughts in Solitude* p. 35.

⁴⁶¹ See *What is Contemplation*, p. 103.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

Having gathered tools with which to perform our literary analysis, we shall now scrutinise six examples of the poetics of simplification in Merton's prose. Each of the six analyses will be structured around three questions that draw on the opening three sections of this chapter. Firstly, and with reference to our definition of 'simplification' given in section one: 'What composes the complex element of the text, and what composes the simple element?' Secondly, and with reference to the literary terms gathered in section three: 'Can the text be described in terms of the cutting off of caesura or the turning away of volta, and does it result in a cathartic sense of purgation, purification or clarification?' And thirdly, with reference to Merton's content claims from section two: 'How does the simplification of the text in question embody ideas from Merton's writings about simplicity?' In order to give further structure to the task of answering these three questions, the six passages discussed below are ordered in terms of the explicitness, in our readings, with which they embody a particular claim from Merton's content claims, concluding with examples where the correlation is especially explicit. The sense in which we use the word 'explicit' here will become clearer as we proceed.

Our first example, which is taken from Merton's 'Preface' to *Secular Journal*, consists of the transition from a complex process of justification to a simple observation. Merton is discussing why, as the editor of *Secular Journal*, he chose to retain 'youthful sarcasms' in the text.⁴⁶³ In answering this question he initially offers two justifications, before concluding with a simple observation. Firstly, to take the sarcasms out of the book, he says, 'would have been a falsification of the book'. Secondly, 'An indulgent reader ... [will] ... consider them [the sarcasms] funny.'⁴⁶⁴ And finally, Merton concludes by observing: 'In

⁴⁶³ *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977), p. ix. Hereafter *Secular Journal*.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

any case, here they [the sarcasms] are!’⁴⁶⁵ We can consequently organise the passage from *Secular Journal* into four stages, as follows:

- 1) Initial observation: Merton has kept the ‘youthful sarcasms’ in the book.
- 2) First justification of observation: to take the sarcasms out ‘would have been a falsification of the book.’
- 3) Second justification of observation: ‘An indulgent reader ... [will] ... consider them [the sarcasms] funny.’
- 4) Concluding observation: ‘In any case, here they [the sarcasms] are!’

It becomes clear, then, that there are two distinct modes in which Merton answers his initial question concerning why he retained the sarcasms. Firstly, he offers justifications for the results of his editorship (avoiding ‘falsification’ and making the book ‘funny’); and secondly, he offers a single observation of the fact that those results have been published, in the exclamation ‘here they are!’ In other words, a complex of justifications precedes a simplex of observations; the complex element of the passage as we have organised it is composed of the process whereby Merton seeks to persuade the reader that he has made good editorial decisions, which is made up of two justifications, and the simple element is composed of Merton’s single observation that, whether rightly or wrongly, he edited the journal in a particular way.⁴⁶⁶

We have now performed the task of identifying the complex and the simple elements in the passage. Our next task is to analyse the mode through which the movement between them occurs, with respect to our literary terms. One important key to this movement is the implied *rejection* of the process of justification by the simple observation. The phrase ‘In any

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁶ For a related observation, see Malits’s work on ‘Merton’s Metaphors’, and particularly his account of a shift in Merton’s focus from ‘apodictic statements’ to ‘conjectures’. Malits is not discussing complexity leading to simplicity, or reading the progression he notes in terms of specific content claims, but there is a similar focus on modes of text that might be described as opening up or loosening in some way, whether by abandoning processes of justification that seek clear answers or abandoning apodictic statements. Elena Malits, ‘Merton’s Metaphors: Signs & Sources of Spiritual Growth’, in *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1978, pp. 331-339, p. 337.

case', for instance, does not only mark a positive shift in Merton's approach to answering the question about editorial decisions, but also implies the insufficiency of his initial attempts at justification. Insofar as the two justifications sought to persuade the reader that Merton made good editorial decisions, those justifications have failed. Merton does not say, *and as a result of these justifications, I am confident that I have edited the book astutely*, but subverts the justifications, with the subtext, *and whether or not these justifications have persuaded you, here is the book, with the youthful sarcasms kept in*. This is an instance of a literary 'turn', or non-sonnet volta, and specifically of a turn from justification to subversive observation. Further, the movement from justifications to observation has a cathartic effect. Catharsis, in our definition given above, was associated with purgation, purification, and clarification—and the first and last of these can be connected with our reading of the passage. The text is purged of a failed process of justification and left with a successful observation of fact; a process that clarifies nothing because it fails in its task is replaced by a simple statement of fact that clarifies, not the value of the editorial decisions, but the bare fact that they have been made.

Identifying these characteristics of the mode through which the simplification occurs will now help us to read the passage in terms of Merton's content claims about simplicity.

- 1) Initial observation: Merton has kept the 'youthful sarcasms'.
- 2) First justification of observation: To take the sarcasms out 'would have been a falsification of the book.'
- 3) Second justification of observation: 'An indulgent reader ... [will] ... consider them [the sarcasms] funny.'
- 4) Concluding observation: 'In any case, here they [the sarcasms] are!'

In terms of its embodiment of one of the contexts Merton described in section two above, the passage functions at a more generalised level. For example, it is neither explicitly nor implicitly about the modes of prayer, whether monastic, contemplative, or affective, that Merton repeatedly described in section two as prime sites for the simplification of one's

actions. We can, however, broadly describe the decision-making process embodied by the passage in terms of Merton's commendation of those who 'lead lives of great simplicity'.⁴⁶⁷ Whilst the quoted text does not constitute a *life*, or perhaps an instance of *great simplicity*, it does constitute a textual moment in which the writer and the reader witness simplification, and so in some sense 'live simply'. It is on these broad grounds that the passage conforms to the contexts Merton described in section two as sites of simplification.

The mode of simplification in the passage maps more directly onto Merton's content claims. In section two Merton spoke about the 'abandonment' that results in simplicity, and the same term can be applied to the progression from justification to observation: Merton abandons the complicated process of justification in favour of a simple process of observation.⁴⁶⁸ Merton also spoke in section two above about being 'confined to the simplest acts' as a mode through which a person lives in simplicity, and the same can be said of the quoted passage.⁴⁶⁹ Had Merton abandoned faulty justifications of his editorial policy in favour of superior justifications, his attempt to justify his premise would have progressed, developed, expanded. As it is, however, Merton abandons his basic attempt to justify his editorial decisions, and as such his initial task ceases to progress. The passage thus confines Merton's enterprise; it is the embodiment of Merton's commendation that we confine ourselves to simple acts.

The *result* of the literary abandonment and confinement in the passage is a state of simplicity that can also be associated with content claims from section two. The 'prayer of the heart', as discussed by Merton in *Contemplative Prayer*, involves a return to the 'primitive', and so does the quoted passage, which returns to a basic stage of observation

⁴⁶⁷ *What is Contemplation*, p. 97.

⁴⁶⁸ *Seeds*, p. 116.

⁴⁶⁹ *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 50.

after the abandonment of a failed, more sophisticated process of justification.⁴⁷⁰ In other words, the text enacts a return to the primitive by calling into question a series of justifications that stem from a basic observation, before replacing the justifications with a reassertion of the basic observation. We might also note in the phrase ‘here they are!’ the movement towards an observational conclusion that is composed of (in Merton’s phrases from section two) ‘few words’⁴⁷¹ and which is ‘short and pure’.⁴⁷² Merton’s concluding observation brings the discussion rapidly to a close: ‘Here they are’, says Merton, without further commentary as to whether the sarcasms should have been left in the book or not.

At this stage any relation between the dynamics of literary form and a theological background concerning God’s simplicity remains implicit; but as was true in the earlier chapter on denial, we will see the relation between the theology and the poetics become more explicit in subsequent examples. For now it is enough to say that the theology of God’s simplicity coheres neatly with the characteristics of the passage as we have read it. The passage from *Secular Journal* abandons a complex task and returns to a primitive one; it confines its enterprise and concludes with a concisely-worded observation of fact; it is, overall, coherent with the aspect of Merton’s worldview in which simplification is desirable because it brings us closer to God. This is our first instance of the literary enactment of simplification in Merton’s prose.

Our second example is taken from *The Sign of Jonas*, and forms part of Merton’s three-paragraph diary entry for 15 April 1948. The passage follows a short description of Merton’s activities over the previous few days.

Thursday I went out and got a big blister on the palm of my hand digging mud out of a ditch along the west side of the upper bottom and everything was beautiful.⁴⁷³

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴⁷¹ *Seeds*, pp. 138 & 139.

⁴⁷² *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 56.

⁴⁷³ *Jonas*, p. 102.

The complex element here is formed by multiple descriptions of specific things: getting a blister, digging mud, digging in a ditch, and so on. The simple element is formed by the single description of a general situation: 'everything was beautiful'. The text shifts, then, in two ways: firstly, from specific description to general description, and secondly, from multiple descriptions of one type, to a single description of another type. The simplification enacted by the passage is generated by the latter shift from multiple elements to a single element.

As in the 'sarcasms' passage, the form of the simplification can be associated with the turn of volta. The cause of the turn, however, is less clearly a posture of *rejection* than was true in the case of the 'sarcasms'. Formulating some possible subtexts will make this clearer. It may be, for example, that the rapidity of the quoted sentence, with its lack of punctuation, its compression of events, and the sudden climax of those events, implies the subtext, *I am impatient of listing specific things, so let us proceed suddenly to the general*; or similarly, *there is no need to list anything further, because everything is unified by something more important, namely beauty*. It might also be that the reader views the specific descriptions as a necessary prelude to the general description: for instance, Merton's decision to hone in upon specific things can make emphatic by contrast the broad statement about 'everything'; or again, we might suppose that the final statement about 'everything' is saved from faceless generality by its reference back to particular objects such as the 'big blister'. We have, then, three possible subtexts that might be named Merton's impatience with specificity, Merton's belief in the higher importance of generality, and Merton's use of a complementary relationship between specificity and generality. In the case of the reading of Merton's impatience with specificity there is, as there was in the 'sarcasms' example, a sense of the rejection of specificity, which is the cause of impatience; in the case of the reading of

Merton's belief in the importance of generality there is, similarly, a sense of the rejection of specificity because of the importance of generality; but in the case of Merton's complementary use of specificity and generality there is no such sense of rejection. The specific blisters, ditch, and so on are integral to the effect produced by the description of the general beauty. For this reason the cause of the volta in this case is less clearly rooted in a posture of rejection than the sarcasms example was.

We have now identified the complex and simple parts of the passage, and pointed out one aspect of the literary mode of the passage—namely, the turn that may or may not be subversive depending on our reading. We shall now further read the passage in terms of Merton's content claims from section two.

Thursday I went out and got a big blister on the palm of my hand digging mud out of a ditch along the west side of the upper bottom and everything was beautiful.

As in the 'sarcasms' example, the passage can only be described in terms of one of the more general contexts through which Merton claims an act of simplification can be performed. The passage is not, for example, a prayer (whether affective, of the heart, and so on);⁴⁷⁴ but it could, as was true of the 'sarcasms', be described as an example of leading a life of simplicity.⁴⁷⁵ In this broad way it conforms as a context through which Merton's commendations of simplification can be carried out.

But it is with respect to the *mode* of the simplification, which we have already described in terms of a potentially non-subversive turn, that the passage performs a more specific and novel enactment of Merton's content claims. In *The Inner Experience*, speaking about simplicity of life, Merton exhorted his reader to 'bring back together the fragments of

⁴⁷⁴ For the content claims about simplifying one's way of prayer quoted in section two above, see *What is Contemplation*, pp. 20, 21 & 23.

⁴⁷⁵ *What is Contemplation*, p. 97.

your distracted existence’;⁴⁷⁶ now Merton’s specific experiences of blisters, digging, mud, and so on are similarly gathered – we might say *adjectivally gathered* – under the descriptive heading ‘beautiful’, because the specifics of the Thursday morning experience are brought together under the single assignation of beauty to the whole scene. Further, this adjectival gathering also brings to an end the descriptive task upon which the sentence had previously focused, again leaving us (in Merton’s phrase from earlier) with ‘few words’.⁴⁷⁷ The sentence thus amalgamates exhortations from different parts of Merton’s work. It acts out the commendation that we simplify our lives by gathering fragments together in order to be left with fewer words. It is our second example of the poetics of simplification.

As we noted in relation to our first example, the relationship of this second example to the theological background discussed in section two above remains implicit. Without a sense of the wider context in which the passage is situated, that is, it would have been plausible to assume that the two quotations were written by non-spiritual writers without any concern for a simple way of life, let alone a way of simplicity rooted in a theology of God’s simplicity and the Divinely-rooted unity of humankind. This by no means invalidates the passages discussed from the poetics in question; our purpose, with recent Formalists, is to read form in relation to context, and in this case in relation to the context of the discussion of Merton from section two. At the same time, however, and as we shall now see, there are also examples of literary form in Merton’s prose that not only cohere with the context of his theology of simplification, but also evoke or invite that context directly. More specifically, the four examples to which we now turn each give a more explicit sense of the body of thought to which Merton’s poetics of simplicity belongs, either (in the case of the first two) because of their description, as well as their embodiment, of the desire for simplicity, or (in the case of

⁴⁷⁶ *Inner Experience*, p. 4.

⁴⁷⁷ *Seeds*, pp. 138 & 139.

the latter two) because of an explicit focus upon what Merton earlier described as ‘GOD ALONE’.⁴⁷⁸ The rest of this section will be devoted to analysing those four passages.

The following, from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, describes the process of simplification that it enacts. In line with the sketchbook style of *Conjectures* as a whole, the passage is preceded and succeeded by three typographically centralized asterisms (or ‘*’ marks), and bears no clear relation to the text that surrounds it. The passage, which forms a paragraph in its own right, follows a discussion of Emerson and Thoreau, and is followed by a discussion of the Catholic Church’s obsession with ‘red tape’.⁴⁷⁹ It is semantically isolated, then, from the text that surrounds it.

Dark dawn. Streaks of pale red, under a few high clouds. A pattern of clothes lines, clothes pins, shadowy saplings. Abstraction. There is no way to capture it. Let it be.⁴⁸⁰

As in the ‘everything was beautiful’ example from earlier, the complex element here is composed of Merton’s descriptions of an environment, which involves five adjectives (‘Dark’, ‘pale’, ‘few’, ‘high’, ‘shadowy’), and six nouns (‘Streaks’, ‘clouds’, ‘clothes lines’, ‘clothes pins’, ‘saplings’, and ‘Abstraction’). Two separate simple elements follow this complex of grammatical parts. Firstly, there is the concluding reflection – ‘There is no way to capture it’ – which results directly from the observation of the described environment: Merton has perceived, amongst other things, ‘a pattern of clothes lines’ and *therefore knows* that ‘There is no way to capture it’. Secondly, there is the concluding recommendation: ‘Let it be’, which refers back to the scene Merton has initially described in the condensed form of the abstract pronoun ‘it’. At one level these two ‘simple’ elements are also connected by their joint contribution towards a line of reasoning: ‘There is no way to capture it’, *therefore* ‘Let it be’. In this way what we have called two distinct ‘simple’ elements can also be described as

⁴⁷⁸ *What is Contemplation*, p. 103.

⁴⁷⁹ *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Sheldon Press, 1966), p. 246.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

contributing to a functional complex. At the level of modes of discourse, however, the concluding reflection – ‘There is no way to capture it’ – is observational whereas the concluding imperative – ‘Let it be’ – is not. At the level of its mode of speech, the imperative to ‘Let it be’ remains single and simple; it results logically from an observation, but that observation differs from it modally. It is with the modal singleness or simplicity of both the imperative and the observation that we will be concerned in our reading of the passage.

We have now defined the complex and simple elements, and can go on to describe them in terms of our literary vocabulary.

Dark dawn. Streaks of pale red, under a few high clouds. A pattern of clothes lines, clothes pins, shadowy saplings. Abstraction. There is no way to capture it. Let it be.

Two features of the passage generate a *cathartic* strain in the movement between the complex of descriptions and the simple observation and imperative. The observation that ‘There is no way to capture it’, firstly, implies that the task of the initial descriptions has been aborted; ‘Dark dawn’ and ‘Abstraction’ have tried to ‘capture it’ (whatever this might mean), but have failed because ‘There is no way’. As such the imperative implies the cessation or purgation of a flawed task. And the imperative, secondly, goes a step further by offering a replacement task: that of letting it be. If the observation began a process of purgation, ‘Let it be’ thus represents the stage of what we might associate with purification, insofar as the passage implies leaving behind an action that is in some way lesser.

All of this describes the cathartic effect of the simplification, which is produced by a mode of simplification that can be further associated with *caesura*. The description of beauty in the passage from *Jonas* discussed above (‘everything was beautiful’) did not necessarily subvert the descriptions of blisters and ditches, but may have reinforced them; the claim that ‘There is no way to capture it’ in our present example, however, does subvert, or cut off, the task of description, which we have associated with the attempt to ‘capture it’. This is an even

more emphatic subversion than the one we read in the ‘sarcasms’ example earlier, in which the author implied his own failure to justify his editorial decision but not, as here, the failed task *as a whole*. Beyond the turn of the volta, then, and beyond the cutting off of a particular editorial task, the purging strain in the present passage lends itself to being described as a generalised caesura. The purged object is cut off, and should remain so, because ‘There is no way’ in which it can be completed.

The passage thus enacts a movement from the complex to the simple via a process of generalised caesura that results in a multifaceted cathartic effect. Having established this we can now read the passage in terms of Merton’s content claims about simplification, which will in turn prepare us to show that the passage relates more explicitly to the wider body of reflection on the theological dimension of simplicity than have the examples discussed above.

Dark dawn. Streaks of pale red, under a few high clouds. A pattern of clothes lines, clothes pins, shadowy saplings. Abstraction. There is no way to capture it. Let it be.

In relation to the modes of simplification Merton described in section two, the passage generates a sense of ‘abandonment’, as was also true of the ‘sarcasms’ example earlier on.⁴⁸¹ But whilst the mode through which the simplification of the present passage occurs overlaps with the abandonment enacted by the ‘sarcasms’, it also exceeds it in terms of scope and intensity. As we have already noted with respect to the caesura-like cutting away of descriptions by the concluding observation (‘There is...’) and imperative (‘Let it be’), the abandonment of a complex task in the present case is general rather than local. There is, as a result, an increase of scope in the act of simplification; and this scope, in our reading, is the first key to the strength of the passage’s conformity to Merton’s theology of simplification. There is a sense in the passage of the simplification of one’s *whole* perspective of a scene, and this corresponds more closely than any of the other examples we have discussed before

⁴⁸¹ *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 116.

with Merton's belief that the simplification of life as a whole is a necessary part of coming closer to God.⁴⁸² To the reader unfamiliar with Merton's wider work, the 'sarcasms' passage would not strongly suggest a theology of simplifying one's life in order to return to the simplicity of God; the present passage is more evocative of that kind of broader framework, however, because it recommends a mode of perception that corresponds closely with a more general, widespread desire for simplification.

As well as widening the scope of the act of abandonment in this way, the imperative to 'Let it be' enacts a further mode of simplification that relates to Merton's theology of the simplicity of God. We have already noted the purifying effect of the imperative and the general caesura that brings the purification about, and to this we can add that the nature of the purification involves a process of withdrawal whereby Merton moves from being amongst the scene he describes to watching it in its totality. There is a movement, that is, from particular descriptions of aspects of the 'dawn', to a purified state of letting 'it' be, where 'it' refers to the whole scene, which was previously only described in part, in terms of the dawn and the clothes lines and so on. The passage progresses towards what we might call a birds-eye view, then, and therefore a perspective that has (in Merton's words from earlier) '[risen] above' the specific task of description and simply allowed the natural world (or 'it') be.⁴⁸³ This, placed in relation to the totality of the act as discussed a moment ago, is again evocative of Merton's theological claims about simplification. Merton wrote in section two about the Christian's calling to go beyond the multiplicity of the postlapsarian world in order to reach oneness with God, and also about that act of going beyond as a journey to the '*summit* of our being'.⁴⁸⁴ We might say, then, that the passage's act of rising above complexity enacts Merton's claim that we could forgo multiplicity in order to reach a summit, a higher point. The passage embodies

⁴⁸² See *Inner Experience*, pp. 35-36.

⁴⁸³ *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 54.

⁴⁸⁴ *Zen and the Birds*, pp. 11-12.

not only the sense of totality that we discussed earlier, but also the sense of gaining height over multiplicity in the search for simplicity. This is our third example of the poetics of simplification. The passage is an instance of total abandonment, of rising above in the sense both of gaining a general view and withdrawing, and as such it is the most evocative of the theological framework within which it is situated than any of the other examples discussed so far.

Our fourth example, which is taken from *Dancing in the Water*, shares structural elements with the ‘Let it be’ passage, but emphasises the simple end to which we are led to a greater degree. The passage was written on 28 September 1963 and forms a paragraph in its own right.

Yesterday went up to the hermitage and sat on the grass and in the tall trees. The house quiet and cool. A few birds. And nothing. Who would want to live in any other way?⁴⁸⁵

In all of the examples analysed so far we have identified one complex element followed by one or two distinct simple elements. In this latest example, contrastingly, there is a sliding scale, whereby the sentences grow simpler as the passage proceeds. Counting the parts of speech will make this clearer. The first sentence reports a temporal noun (‘Yesterday’), three further spatial nouns (‘hermitage’, ‘grass’, ‘trees’), a verbal connection between Merton and the environment (‘sat’), and a single adjective to describe an aspect of that environment (‘tall’); the second sentence has more adjectives than the first sentences (‘quiet’ and ‘cool’) but besides this has fewer grammatical parts: there is only one spatial noun (‘house’), no temporal noun, and no verbs; the third sentence again has one spatial noun (‘birds’), but only one adjective (‘few’), and no temporal noun or verb; the fourth sentence has only one spatial noun (‘nothing’), and no adjectives, temporal nouns, or verbs. Overall, then, at least in terms

⁴⁸⁵ *Dancing in the Water*, p. 20.

of nouns, verbs and adjectives, there is a steady decrease in the number of parts of speech. It is also important to note that, with the exception of the final sentence of the passage, all of the sentences describe the scene that Merton saw ‘Yesterday’ at the ‘hermitage’. The process of simplification in this case is generated, not by a numerical decrease of elements that contribute to two separate processes (such as describing a scene and letting it be, as we saw earlier), but by the numerical decrease of elements contributing to the same process (that is, describing what happened ‘Yesterday’).

Given this continuous scale of simplification, the metaphors of caesura’s cutting off and volta’s turn are less suitable here than before. The former implies a radical shift or discontinuity, whereas the passage gradually simplifies a continuous process; and the latter speaks directly of turning away, whereas the passage continues to focus upon, or face towards, a single scene. More suitable metaphors, which we have used several times before now, include Sells’s of ‘speaking away’,⁴⁸⁶ which he uses to describe *aphaeretic* discourse, and McGinn’s, in his exposition of Vanneste, of ‘clearing aside’.⁴⁸⁷ Overall, and in distinction from the ‘Let it be’ passage from earlier, the speaker of the passage metaphorically stays in the same place, looking at the same object, and paring it back, culminating in the sentence ‘And nothing’. Such a culmination is, we should note, ambiguous: it could mean *and nothing in addition*, or it could mean *and now, having cleared everything aside, there is nothing left*. We shall return to this ambiguity, which alters the content claims of Merton’s with which we might describe the passage. For now the point being made is that the continuous scale of the simplification remains in place, in the unchanging sense that ‘And nothing’ describes the scene that Merton perceived ‘Yesterday’.

So far, in our discussion of the placement and mode of the simplification process, we have referred only to the first four sentences of the passage. For a sense of cathartic

⁴⁸⁶ Sells, *Unsayings*, p. 2.

⁴⁸⁷ McGinn, *Foundations*, p. 174.

purification or purgation the reader must review those sentences in the light of the final sentence.

Yesterday went up to the hermitage and sat on the grass and in the tall trees. The house quiet and cool. A few birds. And nothing. Who would want to live in any other way?

Two basic assumptions are necessary if the rhetorical question is to be regarded as generating a cathartic effect. The first is that the implied answer to the question is either *nobody*, or *not me*. Possible subtexts for these two related answers run: *it would be strange if anybody wanted to live in any other way*, and, *I like living this way, and therefore would answer 'Nobody' to my own question*. In both of these cases the rhetorical question has the effect of implying that the passage describes a desirable way of living; and for two reasons we shall accept such a reading here. Firstly, whilst it is not possible to associate positive associations with 'grass', 'tall trees', and 'a few birds' *per se*, there is a subtle desirability implicit in the adjectives 'quiet' and 'cool', in a way there would not have been had the scene been, for instance, 'noisy' and 'hot'. Secondly, by outlining the task of finding a person who would *not* want to live the life Merton describes, the rhetorical question implies that the sought-out person is rare rather than common. If the passage implied that few people would want to live amongst the 'grass and in the tall trees', Merton would not need to ask the question in the first place.

All of this constitutes our first assumption about the rhetorical question. Our second concerns an ambiguity that will inform our reading of the passage as being describable in terms of Merton's content claims about simplification. The ambiguity concerns the relationship between the verb phrase 'to live' and the four descriptive sentences that open the passage. We assume that 'live' refers in some way to the four sentences; in the rhetorical question Merton is, in effect, asking: *who would want to live in any other way than sitting on*

the grass in the tall trees by the hermitage? This seems uncontroversial: to read otherwise would be to assume a disjunction between the sentences that the text does nothing to suggest. The following question, however, is less easy to answer: ‘To which aspect of the opening four sentences does “to live” refer?’ There are at least three ways to answer this question. Firstly, ‘to live’ might refer to the scene in its totality; the desirable way of life in this case consists of sitting beside a hermitage on a quiet afternoon. Secondly, ‘to live’ might refer to the process of simplification enacted by the opening four sentences; in this case Merton desires a life whereby objects are (to re-borrow from Sells) *aphaeretically* ‘spoken away’, leaving ‘nothing’. Or thirdly, ‘to live’ might refer to the end of the process of simplification; in this case Merton desires the state described by ‘And nothing’, whether in the sense of *nothing additional* or *nothing at all*.

The latter two of these readings both lend themselves to being further described in terms of Merton’s content claims about simplification. With respect to the reading of ‘to live’ as referring to the *process* of simplification, the term *confinement*, which we also applied to the sarcasms example earlier on, is particularly apposite. In full, Merton described the ‘prayer of the heart’ as being ‘very simple, confined to the simplest acts and often making use of no words and no thoughts at all’, and this formulation can be read as a description of the passage’s enactment of simplification.⁴⁸⁸

Yesterday went up to the hermitage and sat on the grass and in the tall trees. The house quiet and cool. A few birds. And nothing. Who would want to live in any other way?

The ‘confinement’ that occurs in the passage involves an inversion of what we have been calling ‘clearing aside’ and ‘speaking away’. In the case of the latter two the action of the metaphor of confinement focuses upon the denial of the complex objects; the emphasis is

⁴⁸⁸ *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 50.

upon the act of clearing or speaking that gets rid of the objects of denial. In the case of the term ‘confinement’, the emphasis is upon the thing confined. The parts of speech gradually hone in or are reduced to the summit of the passage’s confinement of speech in ‘And nothing’. Such a reading is taken to its furthest extreme when we read ‘And nothing’ as denoting *and nothing at all*. The complex sentence starting ‘Yesterday’ has been confined in the simpler sentence about the ‘house’, which in turn has narrowed in upon ‘A few birds’, until we are left with the description of a total absence, or speech confined so fully as to say ‘nothing’ at all.

Our final reading of ‘to live’, which understands ‘And nothing’ as a state in itself without relation to the process of simplification (whether figured in terms of confinement or not), can also be read in relation to Merton’s description of the prayer of the heart. For Merton that prayer, as we have seen, ‘often [makes] use of no words and no thoughts at all’⁴⁸⁹ —and this formulation describes both sides of the ambiguity generated by the phrase ‘And nothing’. In the reading where ‘nothing’ denotes *nothing additional*, the passage adds ‘no words and no thoughts’ to the complex sentences that precede it, and in the reading where ‘nothing’ denotes *nothing at all*, the passage points to an experience where there simply *are* ‘no words and no thoughts’. Without seeking to argue that the passage is itself an instance of the ‘prayer of the heart’, then, we can nevertheless conclude that the overlap between the prayer and the passage is considerable. In both there is a sense of confinement resulting in simplicity, and both point towards a state where there are few or no words.

These readings of ‘to live’ both lend themselves to varying modes and ends that Merton wrote about in section two; and they can also be read as relating to the theological roots of Merton’s views on simplification, and specifically his view that the act of simplification extends to the whole of life. Whether ‘to live’ refers to the process or the end

⁴⁸⁹ *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 50.

of the simplification, it describes explicitly a way of living one's life, rather than (as in the 'sarcasms' example) embodying a local example of simplification that may extend no further. As was true of the 'Let it be' passage, the 'And nothing' passage is evocative of the scope to which Merton's theology points us: the theology says *God is simple, therefore simplify your whole life*, whilst the passage says, *simplify the whole of your life*, and for this reason we read the latter statement as an evocation of the underlying theological system that is made explicit in the former. Placing the statement of Merton's theology alongside the statement embodied by his literary strategies also makes clear the contribution made by the latter to the former: the intricacies and ambiguities of the literary form as we have just analysed it show forth, in some of its richness, the ways in which Merton's theology can be lived out. We shall return to this richness later on; for now we have finished analysing our fifth example of Merton's poetics of simplification.

The following, from *Bread in the Wilderness*, generates a sense of the few words to which previous passages have also led us, but with the additional characteristics of an explicit focus upon Christian themes, and therefore a more specific relationship to the theological ground of Merton's writings about simplification. The passage forms the opening sentence of the fourth chapter of *Bread in the Wilderness*.

We have only one Master of the spiritual life, one Master in the ways of prayer:
Christ.⁴⁹⁰

The complex element here is composed of the two functions of the 'Master', which are to govern both 'the spiritual life' and 'prayer'. The simple element is the revelation that the 'Master' is 'Christ'. In short: there is a procession from multiple descriptions of a function to

⁴⁹⁰ *Bread in the Wilderness* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1954), p. 36. Hereafter *Bread in the Wilderness*.

the single revelation of a name.⁴⁹¹ As in the ‘Let it be’ example, where the two simple elements shared a function, there is also an overlap between the elements. The simple element is the revelation, or semantic unveiling, of the identity of the key figure in the complex element (that is, the ‘Master’). This overlap is heightened by the repetition of the description of Christ as being the ‘only... one’ in the complex element, which describes the sense of singularity embodied in the single-word simple element: ‘Christ’. Part of the emphatic simplicity of the lone word ‘Christ’ in the passage, then, is generated by the complex element itself. ‘Christ’ is simple in itself, as a single name that alone performs the act of revealing the name of the ‘Master’, but also because the complex commentary has explicitly commented upon that very singleness—his being the ‘only one’.

Given this, and as was true in the case of our previous example (‘And nothing’), the application of our literary terms to the passage – whether *volta*, *caesura*, or *catharsis* – is unsuitable here. In fact, the description of the simple element by the complex element involves the opposite to an act of ‘cutting off’, ‘turning away’, or ‘purging’. More obviously suitable descriptions of the relationship include the act of development, supplementation, or reinforcement: ‘Christ’ reinforces, that is, the description of the ‘only one’ by revealing what that ‘one’ is. Yet there is also, we shall now read, a way of responding to the passage that emphasises both the development of our understanding of the simple ‘Christ’ via the complex description of Christ’s function as the ‘one Master’, and also the singularity of Christ as a genuinely simple element in the sentence that is cut off (with *caesura*) or turned away (with

⁴⁹¹ Sells describes an equivalent form in these terms: ‘A statement in dualistic terms... is followed by a fusion of the two terms.’ Sells is primarily concerned here with the fusion of content, rather than with the simplification of form; the initial ‘statement’ he described might, for instance, be simpler than its subsequent fusion. The present analysis consequently complements Sells’s, and *vice versa*. Sells defines the simplification of content, which applies to the shift from ‘Master’ to ‘Christ’, whilst the present analysis defines the simplification of form, which can, as the ‘Christ’ example shows, work in tandem with Sells’s account of content. See Sells, *Unsayings*, p. 96.

volta) from the preceding description of the 'Master'. The combination of these characteristics will lead us in turn to the application of new content claims from section two.

In order to reach this reading of the passage as embodying caesura, hiatus, and catharsis, it is first useful to consider what the difference is between the following two sentences, only the latter of which was written by Merton.

Christ is the only Master of the spiritual life, and the one Master in the ways of prayer.

We have only one Master of the spiritual life, one Master in the ways of prayer: Christ.

The key difference between the two sentences with respect to our aims is that the former tells us that Christ is the 'only Master', but does not also *show* that fact, whereas the latter passage both tells us at the level of content that Christ is the 'only one', and also shows it at the level of form. We have already noted some of the ways in which the latter passage shows forth such singleness: for example, we have described 'Christ' as a 'lone word', and can add to this that his aloneness is both syntactic ('Christ' alone follows the colon) and grammatical ('Christ' alone performs the function of revealing a name). Clearly the 'Christ' of the former sentence is grammatically simple in a similar way; it, too, is alone in performing the function of naming within its sentence unit. But the grammatical singleness of the latter sentence is influenced, as we read it, by its syntactical singleness, which alters the task of *naming* in the former sentence to the task of *revealing* in the latter. The 'Christ' of the former sentence does not emphasise a sense of revelation because the reader never has the chance to suppose that 'Christ' might be hidden; the latter sentence, however, describes characteristics of a 'Master' whose name we do not know prior to his being revealed as 'Christ'.

The combination of syntactical and grammatical singleness further leads to the sense that 'Christ' is cut off from the rest of Merton's sentence in a way that is not generated by the

other sentence. The movement from the description of there being ‘only one Master’ to the singleness of ‘Christ’ is akin, we read, to a movement from talking about an event to the event itself; or, in words already used in our analysis, a movement from talking about something to revealing something. This act of revelation puts to an end all discourse about the thing revealed, in the same way that speech about an event might cease during the event itself. The reader is left with ‘Christ’, who is single and simple because of his syntactical and grammatical role, and also because he has been described previously as the ‘only one’; yet the descriptive language about the singularity of Christ comes to an end as soon as he is revealed. We are left with ‘Christ’, not ‘Christ the only one’. The ‘cutting off’ of caesura is present, then, in the movement between the description and embodiment of ‘Christ’. What we earlier called a relationship of supplementation or reinforcement is also a relationship of replacement. And this in turn generates a cathartic effect in the passage. The embodiment of Christ’s singleness puts an end to language about such singleness, with the implication that the embodiment cuts off, replaces, and exceeds the description. *There is no need to continue describing Christ as the only one*, the passage says, *because he has been shown forth as such*.

We are now in a position to relate our reading of the passage to Merton’s content claims about simplification.

We have only one Master of the spiritual life, one Master in the ways of prayer: Christ.

The first thing to note is that, unlike the other passages discussed so far, the context of the present passage can be related more specifically to Merton’s contexts for simplification. In section two Merton wrote that ‘The whole spiritual life’,⁴⁹² ‘Monastic prayer’,⁴⁹³ ‘affective

⁴⁹² *Ascent*, p. 138.

⁴⁹³ *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 20.

prayer'⁴⁹⁴, and 'prayer'⁴⁹⁵ are all contexts in which simplification takes place—and we can directly relate each of these to the present passage, with its explicit reference to 'spiritual life' and 'the ways of prayer'. If Merton spoke *about* prayer and the spiritual life as places where simplification takes place, he *shows forth* simplicity in relation to prayer and the spiritual life in the passage under discussion. This is not to argue that the 'Christ' passage is itself a prayer, or a part of the spiritual life (although it would be possible to do so), but rather that the passage shows that prayer and the spiritual life are led (or mastered) by the simplicity of 'Christ'. Even more directly, there is no need in the case of the 'Christ' passage to provide a reading of the coherence of the passage to a possible theological root concerning God's simplicity, or even to show some of the subtle ways in which the passage evokes the wider theological context of Merton's work. Such a context is clear: the point of our reading has been to show that 'Christ' is simple, in the same way that Merton wrote about the simplicity we must cultivate in order to know the simplicity of God in section two.⁴⁹⁶ For the first time, the theological roots of the passage are amongst the most prominent features of the passage's correspondence to Merton's claims from section two.

The theological character of the poetics of the passage can be developed further with reference to the modes and ends of the simplification. The mode of the simplification in the passage amalgamates two different content claims that we have previously used in isolation to describe the four passages discussed above. Firstly, the noted relationship between an initial description and a concluding showing-forth, and the silencing by the word 'Christ' of language about his being the 'only one', both recall Merton's now familiar exhortation that we 'rise above its [the world's] multiplicity and recapitulate it in the simplicity of a love

⁴⁹⁴ *Seeds*, pp. 138 & 139.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁶ See *Inner Experience*, pp. 35-36; *Zen and the Birds*, pp. 11-12; and *Disputed Questions*, p. 168.

which finds all things in God'.⁴⁹⁷ The same claim was quoted earlier in relation to the 'Let it be' passage; and here the application is even more compelling than before, because the 'Christ' passage embodies not only the sense of *rising above*, which is brought about by the replacement of description by performance, but also of the sense of rising in order to find 'all things in God' (or in the terms of the passage, in 'Christ'). Secondly, an exhortation quoted earlier in relation to the 'everything was beautiful' passage can be reapplied here—namely, Merton's exhortation that his reader should 'bring back together the fragments of your distracted existence'.⁴⁹⁸ The cutting off by performance of description is, as we have shown, the development or reinforcement of description by performance, or, in terms of Merton's content claim, the gathering together by performance of the event to which the description pointed. The 'Christ' passage thus represents an instance, unique amongst the texts discussed in this chapter, of a mode of simplification that can be described both as a gathering together and a rising above.

The ends of the simplification are similarly unique amongst the passages discussed in this chapter. Merton earlier described the 'interior life' that, in becoming 'completely simple', rests upon 'one thought, one love: GOD ALONE';⁴⁹⁹ and we might say that the *whole* of this claim is embodied in the passage. Not only are we brought, through the process of simplification, to the 'one thought'; we are also brought to a thought that is about 'GOD ALONE', or, in the terms of the passage, about 'Christ'. Unlike the previous passages, then, the present passage is explicit both in terms of its context and in terms of the ends to which it brings the reader. To summarise: our fifth example of the poetics of simplification simplifies prayer and the spiritual life by rising above and unifying, with the end result of focussing the reader's attention on God alone.

⁴⁹⁷ *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 54.

⁴⁹⁸ *Inner Experience*, p. 4.

⁴⁹⁹ *What is Contemplation*, p. 103.

Our sixth and final example of a form of simplification in Merton's prose is taken from *The Sign of Jonas*. Like the 'Christ' passage, the example is an explicit embodiment of Merton's content claims, especially with regard to the ends of the simplification. It does so, however, through a different mode from the gathering-rising mode of the 'Christ' example. The passage, which is part of Merton's diary entry for 25 March 1947, follows a very brief description of the previous day's weather and the report that 'Father Alberic died Saturday night'.⁵⁰⁰

While I have been writing this, the snow has stopped. Now there is a bright sky full of clouds, chased by a wind that lashes the building and sounds cold. I have not been out in it yet. Queen of heaven, I love you.⁵⁰¹

The complex element here, as in the 'everything was beautiful' example and the 'Let it be' example, is the description of an environment: snow, sky, clouds, wind, buildings, and so on. As in the 'Let it be' example, there are also two distinct simple elements, in the form, firstly, of the description of Merton's relationship to the initial complex of descriptions ('I have not been out...'), and, secondly, the apostrophe to the 'Queen of heaven' ('...I love you'). There is no clear relation between these two simple elements, as there was between 'There is no way to capture it' and 'Let it be' in our earlier passage: they are both modally distinct (one is a report of action, the other is an apostrophe) and functionally distinct (the one concerns Merton's actions, the other concerns Merton's love for Mary).

The effect brought about by these distinct simple elements can be described in terms of all three of our key literary words: volta, caesura, and catharsis. With respect to volta, there is a turn in the movement from Merton's description of nature to his description of what he has done ('I have not been out...'). The perspective shifts, from Merton looking outside to Merton looking, so to speak, at his own memory. This turn is not particularly significant in

⁵⁰⁰ *Jonas*, p. 33.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*

relation to our wider aims: it consists of a natural turn between related subjects, rather than an emphatic instance of the kind of simplification Merton described in section two. This is not true, however, of the simplifying effect of the final sentence of the passage, which we shall now read in terms of both caesura and catharsis.

The relation between the complex and the simple in the ‘Queen of heaven’ passage is ambiguous. It is not clear what the relationship between the descriptions and the apostrophe is, and the reader is asked to formulate his or her own possible subtexts. For example, we might read an implicit sense of Merton’s impatience with writing about worldly things, with the subtext, *enough! Let us get away from the snow and sky, and back to the real business of expressing love for Mary!* To build on this reading: there might also be an implicit sense of the difference between Merton’s distance from the weather (he has ‘not been out in it yet’) and his immediate experience of adoration (‘I love...’), with the subtext, *the weather is far away, but love for Mary is at hand*; or conversely, of the closeness and immanence of the weather and the invisibility and transcendence of the object of Merton’s adoration, with the subtext, *Mary is far away, but the weather is at hand.*⁵⁰² Both of these subtexts, furthermore, generate the impression that the complex of descriptions with which the passage begins is insufficient and should be brought to an end: the first in the sense that there has been *enough* description, and the second in the sense that the immediacy of Merton’s love for Mary in some way *exceeds* the intensity of Merton’s descriptions of what is external—snow, sky, buildings, and so on.

Read in this way, the final sentence of the passage can be described in terms of both caesura and catharsis. The task of description is *cut off* by the task of expressing love for

⁵⁰² Elena Malits has discussed the related phenomenon of a shift in Merton’s texts from ‘apodictic statements’ (which are by nature logically incontrovertible) to ‘conjectures’ (which are by nature controvertible). The feature uniting Malits’s reading with the present one is the shift from the uncontroversial to the controversial, or the commonly perceivable to the personal and subjective. See Malits, ‘Merton’s Metaphors: Signs & Sources of Spiritual Growth’, in *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1978, pp. 331-339. p. 337

Mary, with an implicit sense that Merton has (to employ the verb associated with *volta*) turned towards the expression of love because it is in some way superior, either because of its immanence in comparison with the weather outside, or, conversely, its transcendence in comparison to the worldly weather. The ambiguity concerning the *reason* for the replacement of the description by the apostrophe is not important here; the key point is that the simplification process always implies, in the given readings, the purgative aspect of catharsis. The implication in our given subtexts for the passage is not, that is, only of an arbitrary shift from the complex to the simple, but of a movement characterised by the willed replacement of one element by another.

Read in this way, the passage lends itself to being described in terms of a wide set of Merton's content claims, all of them in close relation to the theological character of his claims about simplification. To begin with, the apostrophe to Mary is clearly itself a form of prayerful adoration. Given this, the passage embodies one of the contexts Merton repeatedly described in section two. Earlier on, in a quotation from *Seeds*, we read Merton exhorting his reader to 'keep your prayer as simple as possible', and to employ 'a completely simple form of affective prayer' which involves 'few words or none'⁵⁰³—and the 'Queen of heaven' passage could be described as the direct enactment of this exhortation, because it involves 'few words', and is therefore, under our definition, 'simple'. In the same vein, the apostrophe is one of those instances of 'prayers made up of short phrases'⁵⁰⁴ about which Merton spoke in *Contemplative Prayer*.

This direct enactment by the passage of a simple prayer is made more emphatic by the mode of simplification that leads to it. The passage is not only a simple prayer in isolation; it is a simple prayer that ambiguously cuts off a complex process of nature writing. In the case of, firstly, the reading (given earlier) whereby the love for Mary transcends, or goes beyond,

⁵⁰³ *Seeds*, pp. 138 & 139.

⁵⁰⁴ *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 21.

the description of nature, the present passage can be described in terms of Merton's insistence that we 'rise above its [the world's] multiplicity and recapitulate it in the simplicity of a love which finds all things in God'.⁵⁰⁵ The love for Mary, too, performs an act of rising above, which we have thus far described as an act of transcendence—and we can further note a correlation between rising above 'the world' in order to find 'God' with rising above the 'snow', 'sky', and 'buildings' in order to find (or 'love') the 'Queen of heaven'. There is a comprehensive correlation here between the 'Queen of heaven passage' and Merton's content claims about simplification. The thing simplified (the world), the mode of simplification (rising above), and the end of the simplification (a simple prayer) can all be traced back to Merton's claims from section two. In contrast to the 'sarcasms' passage, with which the literary analysis of this chapter began, our sixth and final passage is explicit about all four of the parts of the simplifying process—namely theological roots, contexts, modes, and results.

5. Conclusion

The conclusion of our chapter on 'denial' need not be repeated here. Suffice it to say that, like chapter one, the present chapter takes Formalism in the direction of theology, and the theology of form in the direction of a set of new relations between theological claims and literary forms. The mentioned theological claims have already been summarised, at the end of section two of the chapter; the literary forms in question can also now be presented in list form. Each of the following literary forms, that is, have been used in the embodiment by form of the theologically-rooted *praxis* of simplification: the replacement of multiple justifications with a single observation, the replacement of specific descriptions with a general description, the description of multiple objects with a single adjective (we called this 'adjectival gathering'), the description of the insufficiency of a complex description, commanding a

⁵⁰⁵ *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 54.

complex description to cease, decreasing the number of parts of speech in consecutive sentences, the grammatical and syntactical isolation of a single word, and the replacement of descriptions with apostrophe. For a more detailed account of the originality of our particular way of bringing these forms into relation with Merton's theology of simplification, the reader should turn to our introductory chapter, and the conclusion to chapter one.

As well as consolidating our now familiar claims about the originality of a Formalist theological poetics, the present chapter can also be used to take us into new territory. We have already hinted on a number of occasions that the benefit of a Formalist approach to Merton's theological poetics is that it aids our understanding of Merton's theology, and we can now begin to reflect on some of the ways in which that has happened in chapters one and two. The first thing to say in this regard is that the act of recognising and analysing the dynamics of a theological claim in the literary form of Merton's prose has enabled us to see his theology in action. For example, we read Merton's claim that 'we have only one Master of the spiritual life, one Master in the ways of prayer: Christ',⁵⁰⁶ as the embodiment of three of Merton's calls to action: 'rise above its [the world's] multiplicity and recapitulate it in the simplicity of a love which finds all things in God';⁵⁰⁷ 'bring back together the fragments of your distracted existence';⁵⁰⁸ and '[seek to have] one thought, one love: GOD ALONE'.⁵⁰⁹ By reading a literary form in terms of these calls to action (or, to use the technical term, instances of 'psychagogic' language), we have seen the calls to action exemplified, shown forth, embodied. The reader has been given a sense of what seeking to have one thought might look like. This is a relatively straightforward benefit of the work we have done. It gives us examples of actions Merton commends his readers to do.

⁵⁰⁶ *Bread in the Wilderness*, p. 36.

⁵⁰⁷ *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 54.

⁵⁰⁸ *Inner Experience*, p. 4.

⁵⁰⁹ *What is Contemplation*, p. 103.

This is not the only thing, however, to be said on this line of thought. Our extended reading of the ‘Christ’ passage was not only the act of giving an example, but rather an extended exercise in exploring some of the complexity and subtlety of what Merton means when he commends his readers to simplify their lives. To appreciate the full force of the simplicity of ‘Christ’ in our reading, for example, was to place the grammatical and syntactical isolation of a word in relation to the labelling of that isolation by a wider semantic field. This was not the mere exemplification of Merton’s commendation that we simplify our lives; it was an act of dwelling deeply with an instance of simplification, of trying to understand its dynamics, and thereby of coming to understand something new about the character of Merton’s attitude towards the idea of simplifying one’s life, namely that the revelation of a simple thing can replace and exceed the description of it. If the first benefit of reading literary form in terms of theological claims was that the form exemplified the claims, the second benefit is that the literary form provides original material for understanding theological claims in a way that would not have been possible if we only had the claims alone. A content claim can encourage a reader to set one’s thoughts on ‘GOD ALONE’; an instance of literary form can invite a reader to apprehend numerous complex dynamics within that act. Form has not only exemplified Merton’s theology; it has deepened and broadened it.

We shall return to this notion that form is a rich site for the excavation of original theological material when we come to the close of chapter three, by which time we will have a further set of theologically-informed readings of Merton’s prose forms. For now the point to be made, by way of a reflection on the work that has been done in the present chapter, is that our Formalist poetics of simplification has not only exemplified Merton’s theology, but also uncovered new material about it. It will be our aim to repeat this task in our next chapter, which is about the literary embodiment of Merton’s theology of ‘thereness’.

Chapter 3: Thereeness

1. Aims, Definition of ‘Thereeness’, Field of Enquiry

Our readings of Merton’s poetics of denial identified various modes through which passages of text actively ‘said “no”’ to a particular object, and described that act in terms of content claims about denial in the wider Merton *corpus*. Our readings of simplifying forms in Merton’s prose similarly discussed examples that enacted the replacement of complex processes with simple elements, also with reference to acts of simplification that could, for the most part, be described as acts of denial. The present chapter is concerned with a further relative of forms of denial and simplification.⁵¹⁰ The passages of Merton’s prose that we will here be reading as embodiments of Merton’s commendation of ‘thereeness’ will be read as inviting a mode of perception that, as Merton puts it in *The Inner Experience*, ‘simply “sees” what it sees’,⁵¹¹ or again, ‘simply sees what it sees. It sees only what is there’.⁵¹² Like the poetics of denial and simplification, we will read Merton’s poetics of thereeness as springing from a theological root: in this case, Merton’s view that acts of simply seeing bring us closer to God by paring back various kinds of distraction. And like the poetics of denial and simplification before it, the embodiment by literary form of this theologically-rooted mode of perception will involve, at times, an act of ‘saying “no”’. More specifically, the texts under analysis in section four of this chapter will each invite the reader to adopt a perception of ‘thereeness’ by granting precedence to a particular object’s presence, or thereeness, in opposition to, or *denial of*, its function in relation to wider scheme of meaning, for instance inter-textual or symbolic. Before going further into the specifics of this performative action, the aim of the opening section of this chapter is to define the key term with which we shall

⁵¹⁰ The nature of the relationship between our accounts of ‘denial’ and ‘thereeness’ is outlined in more detail in section two below.

⁵¹¹ *Inner Experience*, p. 20.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, p. 126.

describe the poetics in question – namely, the term ‘thereness’ – and to outline key work already done in the field.

There being no entry for ‘thereness’ in the *SOED*, one must turn to the full-length edition of the dictionary to find it. There the word is defined as ‘The condition or quality of being there; existence in a defined place. (Sometimes opposed to *hereness*.)’⁵¹³ The first clause of this definition will be the most relevant to our aims in the pages that follow. Indeed, we will be focussing on a particular understanding of ‘The condition or quality of being there’, which we shall further take, with entries from the *OED*’s definition of ‘there’, to mean the quality of being in a ‘position’,⁵¹⁴ or ‘at or in the place in question’,⁵¹⁵ with the further qualification that this quality of position or placement overrides any further characteristic, such as the function of the object that is there, in a particular place. To make this emphasis clearer we can italicise the *OED*’s definition of ‘thereness’: it is with ‘The condition or quality of *being* there’ that we are interested, where ‘to be’ is defined as ‘to have or take place’,⁵¹⁶ in distinction from *doing*, where ‘to do’ is defined as ‘to perform, execute, achieve, carry out, effect, bring to pass.’⁵¹⁷ As ever, the quality of thereness in Merton’s poetics will become clearer when we see it exemplified in his texts in section four; but they will always be definable in terms of having, or being in, a place or position, rather than performing, executing, carrying out, or otherwise doing.

Analyses of texts that display thereness as just defined have been done before, and to outline some of them will clarify some of the literary forms with which we will be concerned in section four below. Wolosky’s account, for example, of Samuel Beckett’s ‘apotropisms’,

⁵¹³ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edn., Vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). Hereafter *OED*.

⁵¹⁴ *OED*, ‘there’, entry 1a.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, ‘there’, entry 12a.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, ‘be’, B I. nos. 1 and 2.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, ‘do’, B I. 6.

or ‘turning away from figures’, has parallels with our present concerns.⁵¹⁸ Wolosky shows that there is a ‘tendency in Beckett to pure denotation’,⁵¹⁹ to the ‘sustained elimination of any sense not confined within the spatial motion it [the text] alone admits’,⁵²⁰ and to the ‘delimiting of his words to an unmitigated literalism’.⁵²¹ All ‘intertextual gestures’, for Wolosky’s Beckett, ‘remain suspended’.⁵²² Similarly, Stanley Cavell describes Beckett’s ‘strategy of literalization’, whereby ‘you say *only* what your words say’.⁵²³ The terms used by both Wolosky and Cavell will inform our analysis of Merton’s poetics of thereness later on, which, we will read, invites the reader simply to see what is there by (in Cavell’s words) saying only what it says, rather than explicitly gesturing to a wider scheme of meaning, and (in Wolosky’s) eliminating sense exterior to the spatial moment of the text, and instead prioritising the being-in-position of a particular sentence, clause, or word. Also similarly, Wynands has described one of the aims of the aesthetics of the Dada Movement as ‘returning an object, or in the case of poetry a word, to its “fundamental form”’ by ‘freeing it from... contexts’.⁵²⁴ Without meaning to compare Merton’s contemplative theology with the philosophies of Dada, it will become clear in this chapter that the Trappist also uses forms that generate (in Wynands’s words) freedom from contexts and a sense of fundamentality by prioritising the being-in-place of a passage of text over its performance of an action. We will continue to note similar overlaps between our own work and that of critics such as Wolosky, Cavell, and Wynands as the chapter proceeds, in aid of clarifying our own distinctive project of developing a Formalist theological poetics.

⁵¹⁸ Wolosky, ‘Figural Evasions’, both p. 165.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁵²³ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 126.

⁵²⁴ Sandra Wynands, ‘Zürich Dada and Mysticism’, in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 15, No. 1, March 2001, pp. 70-84, both p. 74.

Unlike the focus on denials enacted in the works of, for instance, McGinn's Eckhart (see chapter 2, section three), an equivalent to the poetics of there-ness has not yet taken a prominent place in contemporary accounts of the performativity of mystical writings. McGinn's discussion of the classical distinction in mystical theology between 'two term propositions' and 'three-term propositions' does point out a specific literary form with which we could describe the poetics of there-ness, but in a way that points out the limitedness of the field as it currently exists.⁵²⁵ As McGinn puts it, a 'two-term proposition [such as *God is*]...

is one in which the verb stands as the second term and denotes that the action is really taking place (the existential *est*), while in a three-term proposition (e.g., Socrates is a man) the verb stands as the copula between two terms indicating their logical compatibility without directly affirming actuality...⁵²⁶

In the same way that the literary forms of embodiment to be discussed in this chapter could be described in terms of the claims made by Wolosky, Cavell, and Wynands above, they could be described in terms of McGinn's account of a two-term proposition. The object upon which the reader is invited to gaze by the poetics of there-ness, we shall show, is affirmed at the level of actuality ('the existential *est*') rather than at the level of what McGinn calls the 'compatibility' between terms in a three-term proposition, or indeed of any kind of relation to a wider matrix of text, whether compatibility, incompatibility, reinforcement, subversion, and so on. As ever, however, and in continuing distinction from McGinn's work, it is the aim here to perform a close analysis of various forms (not necessarily two-term propositions) that lead the reader to gaze upon the *est*-ness of a textual object, rather than to perform an exposition of the place of that form in the history of mystical thought.

The above discussion offers a cursory glance at some of the existing landscapes to which the poetics of there-ness contributes. As ever, our distinctive task is to perform literary

⁵²⁵ McGinn, *Harvest*, p. 136.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 136.

analyses of the kind noted by Wolosky, Cavell, and Wynands in order to substantiate the thesis of scholars of mysticism such as Bernard McGinn, as a contribution to the study of mystical performativity and the analysis of the prose writings of Thomas Merton. The next stage of this task is the gathering of content claims about thereness from Merton's writings with which the prose forms will later be described.

2. Exposition: Merton's Language About Thereness

Merton's language about thereness is mainly developed in the latter part of his writing life, especially in *The Inner Experience* and *Zen and The Birds of Appetite*. *What is Contemplation* and *Seeds of Contemplation* display trains of thought to which the systematiser of Merton's theology might relate his later emphasis on thereness, and a number of sections in *Ascent*, particularly those on 'passive purification',⁵²⁷ could also be argued to bear a close relation to the posture of interpretative passivity that the reading of Merton's poetics of thereness is invited—but the creation of a theological system, and the analysis of Merton's development as a thinker, are not our aims here. Our aim is, as before, to gather claims with which the poetics of thereness will later be described in section four. Given this, there is little from Merton's early texts that we can use to build up a set of content claims about thereness.

It is in *Thoughts in Solitude* that such content claims begin. 'We begin our renouncement of creatures', Merton asserts, 'by standing back from them and looking at them as they are in themselves.'⁵²⁸ Merton develops this further shortly afterwards when he claims that

⁵²⁷ See *Ascent*, p. 118.

⁵²⁸ *Thoughts in Solitude*, pp. 19-20.

We cannot see things in perspective until we cease to hug them to our own bosom. When we let go of them we begin to appreciate them as they really are. Only then can we begin to see God in them.⁵²⁹

In the terminology of our chapters on Merton's poetics of denial and simplification, these quotations provide us with material relating to the modes, objects and results of the act of perceiving things in their thereness. The modes are renouncing, standing back, ceasing to hug; the objects of the perception of thereness are creatures and things; and the results of the perception are seeing things in themselves, seeing things in perspective, appreciating things as they really are, and seeing God in things. This now familiar distinction between contexts, modes, and results of acts of denial will be applicable to many of the content claims to which we will turn in section four, with the qualification that the focus here is not on the thing denied or the mode of the denial, but on a specific form in which the result appears—that is, the form of something that is there, in a position, rather than something that performs an action in a certain way.

There is little else in *Thoughts* to add to the thereness word pool, excepting the comment that 'The desert was created simply to be itself, not to be transformed by men into something else.'⁵³⁰ We can infer from this that, as 'men', our relationship to the desert if we are to adhere to the purpose for which it was 'created' should be one, not of transforming it, but of leaving it 'to be itself'. Merton picks up on the same theme in 'Notes Towards a Philosophy of Solitude', where the hermit's solitude 'is neither an argument, an accusation, a reproach or a sermon. It is simply itself. It *is*.'⁵³¹ The sense of the thing denied here – 'argument', 'accusation', 'reproach', 'sermon' – is particularly strong, and will apply later to instances where the thereness of a textual object exists, as we read it, in distinction to an

⁵²⁹ *Thoughts*, p. 20.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵³¹ *Disputed Questions*, p. 184.

argument or train of logic that precedes it. Both the hermit in ‘Notes’ and the desert in *Thoughts* thus share characteristics with objects that display ‘thereness’.

The Inner Experience reinforces the sense, already noted in relation to *Thoughts*, that thereness is not only a characteristic of hermits and deserts, but a quality of perception that Merton recommends on theological grounds. The discussion revolves mainly around notions of personal identity. The ‘inner self’, Merton claims, ‘simply sees what it sees. It sees only what is there.’⁵³² Unlike the ‘exterior “I”’, which ‘manipulates objects in order to take possession of them’, this ‘interior “I”... has no projects’.⁵³³ The denied acts of doing in this case are ‘manipulation’ and having ‘projects’, and the result of this act of denial, Merton goes on to say, is that the one who performs it ‘only seeks to be’,⁵³⁴ and comes closer to a self which is ‘not so much something that we ourselves have, as something that we are’,⁵³⁵ and which is a ‘quality of our living being’.⁵³⁶ The self with which the denier of projects and manipulations is left is ‘simply ourself and nothing more’,⁵³⁷ and acts ‘without affirmation or denial’.⁵³⁸ And again, perhaps most simply and with the greatest sense of the theological nature of Merton’s writings on the inner self, Merton claims at the opening of the book that the contemplative self is ‘contented to *be*, and in its being it is fulfilled, because its being is rooted in God.’⁵³⁹

To organise these passages in terms of roots, modes, objects and results: the objects of denial are having something, being more than the thing that we are as ourselves, and affirming or denying, and the thereness that results from the denials is described as being, being what one is, and being fulfilled because one’s being is rooted in God. Crucially, the

⁵³² *Inner Experience*, p. 124.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, both p. 5.

⁵³⁴ Both *Ibid.*

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

prioritization of simply being in Merton's claims from *Inner Experience* do not only correlate with the characteristics of a particular object, such as a desert or a hermit, but to ways of perceiving that Merton commends as an aim of the spiritual life, and rooted, as we saw in the last quoted passage, in the view that by simply being we come to fulfilment because our being is rooted in God. In reading texts that generate thereness by (somehow) having no projects and leaving passages of text simply to be, then, a reader would be perceiving in a mode that embodies what Merton calls the eye of the inner self, rather than making an apparently arbitrary comparison between a literary mode and the characteristics of, for instance, a hermit.

Discussions of Zen and the act of reading from *Inner Experience* also contribute to Merton's language about the perception of thereness. 'Zen seeks the direct, immediate view',⁵⁴⁰ Merton claims, which has traditionally resulted from the discipline of Zen Masters who 'frustrated all attempts of their disciples to slip an abstract doctrine in between the mind and the "this" which was right before their nose'.⁵⁴¹ To our word pool concerning the mode of denial we can add the act of *frustrating* the addition of a function to an object that is there. To our language about the action or mode of doing that is denied in order to leave such thereness we can add the attempt to *slip in abstractions*. To our descriptive vocabulary concerning the object that displays thereness we can also add a sense of immediacy, of the object being 'right before [our] nose', and of the object simply being 'this', which is here, before us now. A similarly rich selection of new words can be taken from the following passage, which is also from *Inner Experience*.

Reading becomes contemplative when, instead of reasoning, we abandon the sequence of the author's thought in order not only to follow our own thoughts

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*

(meditation), but simply *to rise above thought and penetrate into the mystery and truth which is experienced intuitively as present and actual.*⁵⁴²

As before, this passage conforms to our tri-part classification of denial, and results in a mode of perception that, under our definition, we can describe as the perception of an object's thereness. The denied objects Merton mentions are reasoning and following sequences of thought; the (now familiar) modes of denial are abandonment and rising above; and the characteristics of the object that displays thereness are its being '*present and actual*'—or, in the terms of the present chapter, its being there in its *est*-ness.

In the same vein as the descriptions of the desert in *Thoughts* and the hermit in 'Notes' (both discussed above), *New Seeds* also describes several objects in terms of their thereness. In a chapter on 'Things in Their Identity'⁵⁴³ Merton describes how 'A tree gives glory to God by being a tree',⁵⁴⁴ how a mountain 'is alone in his own character',⁵⁴⁵ and how 'to be a saint means to be myself'.⁵⁴⁶ Merton also claims that

the special clumsy beauty of this particular colt on this day in this field under these clouds is a holiness consecrated to God by his own creative wisdom, and it declares the glory of God.⁵⁴⁷

The poetics of thereness, as we shall see, involves an act of reading that apprehends literary objects that, like the colt in the field, exist by being themselves, by becoming alone amongst textual relationships that surround them, and by occupying a space that we can read as being just 'this', in this place, under these conditions, without mention of the external significance of what this is, what this does, and so on. And in the passages from *New Seeds* we can also see the relationship between, on the one hand, Merton's description of objects, such as trees,

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 60. (Merton's italics.)

⁵⁴³ *New Seeds*, pp. 30-34.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

mountains, and colts, and, on the other hand, a recommended praxis. In the same way that Merton commended the perceptions of the interior self or the Zen mind earlier on, in *New Seeds* he commends seeing, not just a hermit or a mountain, but (to quote the title of Merton's chapter) '*Things in Their Identity*'—that is, things in general, all things. Gathered under that chapter heading, it is clear that, for Merton, the glory given to God by the thereness of a thing, and the entrance into mystery and truth that result from perceiving the thereness of things, belong together. Later in *New Seeds* Merton also describes a more general mode of perceiving – 'pure awareness, simple attentiveness'⁵⁴⁸ – that is exemplified or put into practice in his descriptions of mountains, hermits, and colts. To bring the recommended practice and Merton's example of the practice together: by simply being aware that a tree is there we see it 'being a tree', and thus, for Merton, giving 'glory to God'. Similarly, by rising above thought and perceiving simply that a colt is there, at this moment, we perceive a scene that, for Merton, is 'a holiness consecrated to God'.⁵⁴⁹ For this reason our analysis of the varied objects (not just colts and trees) that Merton's poetics make into objects that display thereness can be connected directly back to his claims about seeing with pure awareness.

The collapse of the two orientations of Merton's language about thereness – that is, the description of objects and the recommendation of a praxis – is most marked when he describes *himself* in terms of thereness, as he did in the discussion of the 'interior self' in *Inner Experience*. The same occurs again in another passage from *New Seeds*. 'Contemplation', Merton claims, is

the experiential grasp of reality as *subjective*, not so much "mine" (which would signify "belonging to the external self") but "myself" in existential mystery. To contemplate is consequently to experience a shift towards, not *cogito* or *ergo*, 'but only SUM, "I AM"'.⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁵⁴⁹ See the most recent indented quotation above.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

There is a shift here towards thereness at the level both of the perceiver and the perceived object. That the object ('reality') is no longer grasped or placed in a relationship of 'belonging' leads directly to the 'existential mystery' that is the speaker's simply being-thereness, or 'SUM, "I AM"'. The point need not be laboured: throughout Merton's work on thereness, it has now emerged, there is a close relationship between, on the one hand, perceiving in the mode of thereness earlier defined by the discussion of the 'interior self' and here defined as dwelling as a 'SUM', and, on the other hand, the glory given to God by objects in their simple thereness. Both of these orientations will apply when we come to analyse Merton's poetics of thereness in section four. In generating objects that are simply there, Merton's texts invite a mode of perception that simply sees, in pure awareness.

In *Zen and the Birds*, finally, Merton repeats and develops some of his earlier language about thereness, with a specific focus on the perceptions of Zen practitioners. Half-echoing his earlier language about 'affirmation and denial' from *Inner Experience*, and speaking about 'structures and forms', Merton claims that Zen

neither denies them nor affirms them, loves them nor hates them, rejects them nor desires them... If Zen has any preference it is for glass that is plain, has no color, and is "just glass."⁵⁵¹

We can distinguish one aspect of this observation from our present concerns. Merton's Zen not only seeks to perceive the thereness of 'glass' without super-adding an interpretation of love or hate to it, but also the thereness of glass that has 'no color'. To elaborate on this image: we are less concerned here with the colour of the glass than with the mode of perceiving it, or any other object, as 'just glass', just a mountain, just a hermit, and so on. There is a similarly partial relationship between the poetics of thereness and Merton's description of Dr John Wu, who 'simply takes hold of Zen and presents it without

⁵⁵¹ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 4.

comment.’⁵⁵² Whether in relation to Zen or not, the mode of presenting an object without comment, or in other words simply denoting that an object is there, will be a key feature of the poetics of there-ness in section four.

A little later on in *Zen and the Birds* Merton formulates some of his most developed descriptions of there-ness, all in relation to Zen.

Zen... seeks not to *explain* but to *pay attention*, to *become aware*, to *be mindful*, in other words to develop a certain *kind of consciousness that is above and beyond deception* by verbal formulas—or by emotional excitement. Deception in what? Deception in its grasp of itself as it really is. Deception due to diversion and distraction from what is right there—consciousness itself.⁵⁵³

And later:

We quickly forget how to simply *see* things and substitute our words and our formulas for the things themselves, manipulating facts so that we see only what conveniently fits our prejudices. Zen uses language against itself to blast out these preconceptions and to destroy the specious “reality” in our minds so that we can *see directly*. Zen is saying, as Wittgenstein said, “Don’t think: Look!”⁵⁵⁴

The denied objects in these two passages are explanation, distraction from what is there, the manipulation of facts, prejudices, and preconceptions; the modes of denial are using language against itself, blasting out, and destroying; and the ends of the denials are paying attention, becoming aware, being mindful, being conscious in a way that is beyond description, simply seeing things, seeing directly, and looking rather than thinking. All of these can be added to the word pool with which the poetics of there-ness will be described below, as, finally, can Merton’s more laconic claim that ‘Zen explains nothing. It just sees.’⁵⁵⁵

In *Zen and the Birds* Merton also offers a theological root for his commendation of there-ness, namely the view that going beyond explanation leads us to be more like God.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 38. (Merton’s italics.)

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49. (Merton’s italics.)

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Discussing the thought of Eckhart, Merton claims that, ‘beyond the thinking, reflecting, willing and loving self, and even beyond the mystical “spark” in the deepest ground of the soul, is the highest agent, “at once pure and free as God is and like him it is a perfect unity”’.⁵⁵⁶ We can add this claim to the picture of thereness that we will apply to Merton’s poetics below, and in particular we can couple it with Merton’s view that our being is rooted in God. In sum, the act of stripping away explanation and commentary in order to generate a perception of what we are describing as ‘thereness’ not only brings us closer to God, who resides in our simply being, or our simply being there, but also makes us more like God, who is pure and free.

The purpose of this exposition has not been to suggest that the various kinds of thereness outlined are the same, or that Merton thought they were the same. It has instead been an exercise in gathering descriptions that each conform to the definition, given at the start of this chapter, of ‘thereness’. Whether or not the perceptions of Zen and the perceptions of the interior self are the same thing is not at issue, because our purpose has been to gather a word-pool with which a particular literary phenomenon in Merton’s prose can be described, as a continuing preparation for our literary analysis. The word-pool in question can be split into four parts, as follows. Firstly there are the theological roots of Merton’s views on thereness. These include the rooting of our being in God, and therefore our coming closer to God when we simply are,⁵⁵⁷ and becoming like God in his freedom, specifically freedom from reflection and thought.⁵⁵⁸ Secondly there are the objects that are denied in order to lead to a perception of thereness. These include creatures,⁵⁵⁹ the exterior self,⁵⁶⁰ manipulation,⁵⁶¹

⁵⁵⁶ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 11.

⁵⁵⁷ *Inner Experience*, p. 2

⁵⁵⁸ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 11.

⁵⁵⁹ *Thoughts in Solitude*, pp. 19-20.

⁵⁶⁰ *Inner Experience*, p. 5.

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

‘projects’,⁵⁶² reasoning,⁵⁶³ following sequences of thought,⁵⁶⁴ explanation,⁵⁶⁵ distractions’,⁵⁶⁶ and the manipulation of facts.⁵⁶⁷ Thirdly there are modes through which the perception of thereness is brought about. These include renouncement,⁵⁶⁸ frustration,⁵⁶⁹ abandonment,⁵⁷⁰ rising above,⁵⁷¹ using language against itself,⁵⁷² blasting out,⁵⁷³ and destroying.⁵⁷⁴ Fourthly there are Merton’s descriptions of the perception of thereness itself, as well as what the object perceived in its thereness is like. These include seeing things in themselves,⁵⁷⁵ not transforming things into other things,⁵⁷⁶ leaving things to be,⁵⁷⁷ only seeking to be,⁵⁷⁸ having a direct and immediate view,⁵⁷⁹ being simply oneself,⁵⁸⁰ things becoming present and actual,⁵⁸¹ things being themselves,⁵⁸² having pure awareness and simple attentiveness,⁵⁸³ things being just what they are,⁵⁸⁴ paying attention,⁵⁸⁵ being aware,⁵⁸⁶ being mindful,⁵⁸⁷ being aware in a way that is beyond description,⁵⁸⁸ simply seeing things,⁵⁸⁹ seeing

⁵⁶² *Inner Experience*, p. 5.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁵ *Zen and the Birds.*, p. 38.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵⁶⁸ *Thoughts in Solitude*, pp. 19-20.

⁵⁶⁹ *Inner Experience*, p. 20.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷² *Zen and the Birds*, p. 49.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁵ *Thoughts in Solitude*, pp. 19-20.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁸ *Inner Experience*, both p. 5.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁵⁸² *New Seeds*, pp. 30-34.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁵⁸⁴ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 4.

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

directly,⁵⁹⁰ and looking rather than thinking.⁵⁹¹ Many of these descriptions from Merton's prose will be used in section four to describe the literary modes of his writing. Before then, however, and as a final preparation for our literary analysis, we shall outline the key literary terms with which we shall describe the forms of Merton's poetics of thereness.

3. Literary Terminology: Autotelic and Concatenation

Despite the broad scope of the *Princeton Encyclopedia* there is no single literary term that defines the kinds of forms on which we shall focus in section four. The terms 'autotelic' and 'concatenation', however, suggest features of the poetics of thereness, and will be useful tools when we perform our close readings. It is the aim of this section to outline the meaning of 'autotelic' and 'concatenation', and to show their relation to our definition of thereness.

An 'autotelic' text, firstly, has 'no meaning or purpose outside itself'.⁵⁹² It is

an idea, a structure, or a work of art that derives meaning and justifies its existence through its own resources rather than through external factors such as morality, religion, politics, or the economy.⁵⁹³

The term is now heavily associated with the New Criticism,⁵⁹⁴ and, with the emergence of structuralisms and poststructuralisms, has largely been linked with the Kantian aesthetic outlined above in the introduction to this thesis. The debate concerning whether art itself can be 'autotelic' goes on, and it is not the aim here to contribute to it. Rather, the sense in which 'autotelic' will be used here is in a sense that puts aside the wider aesthetic theory to which it

⁵⁸⁹ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 49.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹² *Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 109.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁴ See, for instance, Lentricchia's account of the 'Kantian autotelism generally associated with the New Critics' and the 'New critical norms of irony and autonomy'. *After the New Criticism*, both p. 322.

has often been aligned, and borrows its terms to describe what will later form our readings of Merton's poetics of thereness. The aim is not to claim, that is, that a given passage of Merton's prose has 'no meaning or purpose outside itself', but to show that aspects of its literary form invite us to *read* it as having no meaning outside itself. Indeed, our aim is not, with the *Encyclopedia's* definition of 'autotelic', to claim that the poetics of thereness derives no meanings from external factors such as morality or religion, but contrastingly to show that the text that we read as displaying thereness embodies the external content claims gathered in section two above.

'Concatenation', secondly, is defined by the *Encyclopedia* as 'to connect together like the links of a chain'.⁵⁹⁵ There is no need to alter the theoretical status of this term's use, as there was with autotelism, because it contributes to the literary-critical terminology with which we might describe prose form, rather than to aesthetic theory. The form it defines, however, is precisely the *opposite* of the form displayed in examples of the poetics of thereness. As section one above began to show, we are concerned with passages of text that are characterized by their *not* having links to wider matrixes of meaning, or chains of sense, but rather by their being in a position, or, more accurately, *being* in a position. Antonyms of 'concatenation' include 'disconnection', 'disjuncture', 'division', and 'separation', but no direct equivalent of these antonyms can be found in the *Encyclopedia's* list of literary forms. We will thus coin the term 'de-concatenation' to describe the process by which the form of Merton's texts dissociate themselves from semantic chains, and leave us with texts that are, at the level of form but not theory, autotelic.

4. Literary Analysis: Merton's Poetics of Thereness

⁵⁹⁵ *Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 288.

We have now defined the term to which our poetics of thereness will always relate back, gathered the content claims to which it will form an analogue, and outlined two terms with which to describe the process by which Merton's prose generates the sense of thereness. Using these terms and claims, our task now is to offer readings of the poetics of thereness in Merton's writings. As in our chapter on simplification, in each of our readings there will be three main stages. These are, firstly, the identification of an object or objects that display thereness, as defined in section one above; secondly, an account of the mode through which the thereness in question is brought about (in other words, the mode through which function is denied), using the literary terms gathered in section three; and thirdly, a discussion of how the passage forms a poetic analogue to particular claims from the exposition of section two. There is no decisive way to quantify the 'strength' of one instance of the poetics of thereness in relation to another, but the passages that follow are roughly ordered in terms of the intensity of their emphasis on an object's simply being there, alone in its own character, without textual interrelationships. We will conclude with examples that are particularly emphatic.

Our first example, which is taken from *Asian Journal*, generates thereness simply by eliding the relationship between subject and object. Taken from Merton's diary entry for October 15, 1968, and describing his flight to Honolulu, the passage forms a paragraph of *Asian Journal* in its own right.

The moment of takeoff was ecstatic. The dewy wing was suddenly covered with rivers of cold sweat running backward. The window wept jagged shining courses of tears. Joy. We left the ground – I with Christian mantras and a great sense of destiny, of being at last on my true way after years of waiting and wondering and fooling around.⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹⁶ *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1973), p. 4. Hereafter *Asian Journal*.

The object that displays there-ness here is the single-word sentence ‘Joy’, and the mode through which the sense of there-ness is generated revolves around the grammatical form of the single-word sentence. Before coming to this, however, we should point out that the there-ness of ‘Joy’ is partially called into question by a network of wider textual relations to which the word is bound at the level of content. It is relatively uncontroversial, for instance, to read that ‘Joy’ describes and is described by the speaker’s ‘ecstasy’ at take-off, or in other words that the ‘Joy’ and the ‘ecstasy’ both contribute to the impression of (to insert a further synonym) the speaker’s *delight* as the plane takes off. The same is true of the relation between ‘Joy’ and the speaker’s feeling a ‘great sense of destiny’. It is plausible that the feeling of being destined to do something might also be a joyful feeling. And again, albeit a little more interpretatively, we can read a content-relation between the ‘jagged shining courses of tears’ and ‘Joy’ by viewing the former as a symbol for an outcome of the latter—in other words, the jagged tears on the window symbolise the speaker’s ‘Joy’, which has brought tears to his eyes.

Such synonymic and symbolic content-relations surrounding ‘Joy’ should be kept in mind when making the further argument that ‘Joy’ displays the characteristics of there-ness, or that there are various factors that might lead us to read it, as Merton put it in *New Seeds*, as being ‘alone in [its] own character’.⁵⁹⁷ They do not, however, undo our reading of ‘Joy’ as an object that is simply there.

The window wept jagged shining courses of tears. Joy. We left the ground...

The there-ness here stems, we read, from three related aspects of grammar: firstly, that ‘Joy’ is alone as a single word within its sentence-unit; secondly, that the singleness of ‘Joy’ marks it out as distinct from the sentences that surround it, which adds to the impression that it can be

⁵⁹⁷ *New Seeds*, p. 31.

read on its own; and thirdly, that the single-word sentence communicates the fact or being of ‘Joy’, rather than its appraisal or characterisation. The combination of this singleness, separateness, and factness, we shall now read, is the source of the de-concatenated thereness of ‘Joy’.

At the level of the factness of the sentence, or its offering of the existence of ‘Joy’ without further comment, there is, to re-quote Merton’s language about the denied objects that lead to thereness, no ‘explanation’⁵⁹⁸ or ‘manipulation’⁵⁹⁹ of ‘Joy’ within its sentence-unit. ‘Joy’ is characterised, as Merton put it earlier in *Inner Experience*, by being ‘*present and actual*’ rather than by its performing a particular action.⁶⁰⁰ ‘Takeoff’ is ‘ecstatic’; ‘Joy’ simply *is*. We are confronted with a grammatical form that, in its own right, generates the characteristics of thereness. The elision of the verb and object, or, depending on how it is read, the subject and the verb,⁶⁰¹ is necessarily a grammar of the *est*, because all the subject (or object) is given to do is to exist, with nothing added. As we have seen, however, this is only true within the localised sphere of the single sentence unit, because ‘Joy’ is also clearly a speaker’s ecstatic, tearful joy as a plane takes off on a journey for which he feels destined. It is only when we ignore, forget, or in some other sense put out of mind these wider content-relations that ‘Joy’, as a single sentence, or, in Merton’s words from earlier, as ‘alone in its own character’, can be read as prioritising *est* over action.⁶⁰²

But there is reason, we read, momentarily to forget the wider context, and thereby to de-concatenate ‘Joy’ from the sentences surrounding it. Had Merton described the factness of the speaker’s joyfulness in a sentence that, like those surrounding ‘Joy’ in the actual passage,

⁵⁹⁸ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 38. (Merton’s italics.)

⁵⁹⁹ See *Inner experience*, pp. 5 &10, and *Zen and the Birds*, p. 49, both quoted in section three above.

⁶⁰⁰ *Inner Experience*, p. 60. (Merton’s italics.)

⁶⁰¹ **For a more detailed account of this distinction see the discussion at Note xx in chapter 1 of the present essay.**

⁶⁰² *New Seeds*, p. 31.

employed a grammatical form closer to the traditional subject-verb-object pattern, the sense of wider content-relations would have been undiminished. For instance, in a passage that runs

The window wept jagged shining courses of tears. There was joy. We left the ground...

the superadded preposition ('There') and verb ('was') place 'joy' in a relationship with the surrounding sentences. That is, there are now clear subtexts concerning the situation in which 'joy' exists: for instance, *There, where the window wept tears, was joy*, and *There was joy in this plane, just before it left the ground*. The effect of the altered grammar is to place the factness of joy into a narrative context, or, in other words, to concatenate the kind of relations we discussed earlier, which were drawn from content-based parallelisms between, for instance, 'ecstasy' and 'Joy'. In this sense 'Joy' is no longer 'alone in its own character', then, but positioned in relation to the character of events that are external to it.

Further: 'Joy' is not only alone in the sense of having no verb or object, and therefore no explanation or description to accompany its factness; it is also alone in the sense that its singleness as a one-word sentence unit elides any explicit grammatical positioning within the passage of narrative to which it forms a part.

The window wept jagged shining courses of tears. Joy. We left the ground...

Without suggesting that 'Joy' was inserted into the passage at random and is thus alone in the sense of contributing nothing to the wider picture of the speaker's being tearfully delighted, the differentness (or separateness) of 'Joy' as a one-word sentence contributes to its momentarily becoming a vehicle of pure *est*-ness. The lack of predicates to imply the sentence's contribution of describing the scene of the plane, or of a verbal phrase to imply its contribution to a series of events that we assume are occurring on a plane, enable a reading whereby the content-based relationship between 'Joy', 'ecstasy', 'destiny', and so on, are

undone, leaving only the separateness of the factness of 'Joy'. This is the basis for our reading of the passage as an act of what Merton earlier describes as *abandonment*,⁶⁰³ and specifically the abandonment of *a sequence of thought*.⁶⁰⁴ 'Joy' is left, in Merton's words, '*simply to be, without being transformed into anything else*'.⁶⁰⁵ And for this reason it coheres with Merton's wider theories about the point and purpose of perceiving the thereness in the way that the earlier examples from chapters one and two cohere with their respective roots in Merton's theologies of denial and simplification. The passage shares the characteristics of actions that Merton commended in section two, namely the endeavour to see things in themselves and therefore to see God,⁶⁰⁶ and the task of simply being and therefore coming into contact with the God in Whom our being is rooted.⁶⁰⁷ It is this basic coherence, rather than anything more explicit within the passage itself, that places the literary form in conversation with the theology. For this reason the passage takes its place as our first example of the poetics of thereness.

In our second example, which is also taken from *Asian Journal*, the relationship between the object that displays simple *est*-ness and the text surrounding it is less clear. Merton has just quoted a passage from Tucci's *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala* and continues as follows.

I have a sense that all this mandala business is, for me, at least, useless. It has considerable interest, but there is no point in my seeking anything there for my own enlightenment. Why complicate what is simple. [*sic*] I am reading on the balcony outside my room. Five green parrots, then eight more fly shrieking over my head.⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰³ *Inner Experience*, p. 60.

⁶⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁶⁰⁵ *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 20.

⁶⁰⁶ See *Thoughts*, p. 20.

⁶⁰⁷ See *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶⁰⁸ *Asian Journal*, p. 59.

The sentence-units to which we shall assign the label of thereness from this passage are the final two, concerning the ‘balcony’ and the ‘parrots’. As with the ‘Joy’ passage from earlier, we will begin by noting the possible interrelations between these sentences and the passage that precedes them, and then go on to offer readings of the aspects that cut the passage away from its surroundings, or de-concatenate it, leaving an object that is simply there. Firstly, then, one possible relation between the ‘mandala business’ at the opening of the passage, and the ‘balcony’ and the ‘parrots’ at the end of the passage, is that the former leads to a conclusion that is embodied by the latter. There might, for instance, be the subtext: *by observing my surroundings and actions I cease to complicate what is simple, as I did when I sought enlightenment in the mandala business*. On a different interpretative line we might also read that the ‘parrots’ embody a hoped-for conclusion to which the speaker is yet to come. In this reading the subtext might be: *I am still here reading about mandalas on the balcony, seeking enlightenment in an area that is, for me, useless, whereas the parrots simply fly overhead, thus transcending the complication of the simple*. These two readings have quite distinct senses from one another – the site of the embodied conclusion shifts between them, from the speaker to the parrots – but in both there is a logical connection between the four sentences of the passage. The ‘parrots’ are not simply there, but perform a function in relation to their textual surroundings.

One of the effects of having (at least) two ways in which to read a connection between the ‘mandala business’ and the ‘parrots’ is the sense of a *profusion* of possible interpretative links. One possible effect of this is that the parrots come to be seen as having multiple connections to the mandalas, and therefore of serving multiple wider functions. Another effect of the same multiplicity, however, is the withdrawal of any clear connection between the mandalas and the parrots. De-concatenation in this case results from an excess of different possible concatenations. It would be an unsubstantiated interpretative jump to say that the

ambiguity of the link between the mandalas and parrots leads, in its own right, to the dismissal of any link at all between the two, but in our reading the ambiguity of the link is an initial factor in the overall impression of thereness to which a reader might be brought, in momentary isolation from the sense of a wider link between the four sentences. And there is further material that can be added to this reading. In the lines

Why complicate what is simple. I am reading on the balcony outside my room. Five green parrots, then eight more fly shrieking over my head

there is nothing communicated that supports the reading just given concerning the parrots as offering a conclusion to the problem of mandalas. Such a reading must be superadded. In the moment of reading, as in the moment of reading about ‘Joy’ earlier on, we are given nothing but the factness of the flight of the parrots.

This lack of an explicit link between the four sentences is only the first dimension of the thereness of the passage. In addition, the question ‘Why complicate what is simple[?]’ acts as a hinge-point that dissolves the connection between the mandalas and the parrots because the question implies the subtext: *I shall now leave behind the topic on which I have been focussing*. The nature of the ambiguous links between the first and last two sentences thus becomes clearer: they are ways of viewing a clear progression away from a previous task, and are consequently ways in which the speaker changes direction. This does not alter the fact that, in the two suggested readings given earlier, the parrots are related to the mandalas in some way; but it does reveal an aspect of the passage that lends itself to the poetics of thereness. Had the parrots embodied the conclusion to a worthwhile task, they would necessarily have belonged to that task and functioned in relation to it. For instance, had the passage lent itself to the subtext, *watching parrots is the best way of understanding mandalas*, the act of watching parrots would have contributed to the wider context of what Merton calls ‘this mandala business’. As it is, the relation of the parrots to the mandalas is

one of breakage. The parrots do not, so to speak, *belong* to the ‘mandala business’, but move away from it. We are being asked to forget mandalas, and to focus instead upon parrots.

In summary: both the ambiguity of the mandala-parrot link, and the explicit turn (*pace volta*) from the mandalas and towards the parrots, contribute to the de-concatenation of the parrots from the rest of the passage. To this we can add a discussion of the last two sentences read in their own right.

I am reading on the balcony outside my room. Five green parrots, then eight more fly shrieking over my head.

The mode of the mandalas sentence was discursive: it appraised the value of an object in relation to the goals of the speaker. The mode of the two last quoted sentences is observational: we are simply shown something. There is (to quote Merton’s content claims from earlier) no ‘reasoning’⁶⁰⁹ added to the fact of the speaker’s balcony reading, or ‘explanation’⁶¹⁰ of the flight of parrots, but rather an instance of the speaker’s ‘standing back’⁶¹¹ and simply seeing that something is happening. This lack of appraisal reaches its culmination in the final sentence. The ‘Five green parrots’ can fairly clearly be linked, once the whole sentence is read, to the action of ‘[flying] overhead’, but the initial moment of their presentation as a subject, which lacks accompanying verbs until the clause subsequent to it, delays their link to a mode of action. There is even the possibility (albeit a small one) that the ‘Five green parrots’ do not contribute to the same kind of narrative action as the ‘eight more’. The eight fly and shriek but the five are simply there, without characteristics beyond number, colour, and species. The five bear a relation to the eight insofar as all thirteen are parrots, but nothing more. Only in this sense does the word ‘more’ connect them.

⁶⁰⁹ *Inner Experience*, p. 60

⁶¹⁰ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 38.

⁶¹¹ *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 19.

The mode through which the thereness of the passage is brought about might thus be described in terms of a number of Merton's modes of denial from section two above, for instance the act of renouncing the mandala discussion in favour of the observation of parrots,⁶¹² the act of frustrating the attempt to discuss mandalas by replacing that task with the observation of parrots,⁶¹³ and the act of rising above the task of discussing mandalas by turning one's eyes towards parrots.⁶¹⁴ All of this maps back onto our earlier discussion of the turn, and the observational nature of the latter parts of the passage. The character of the thereness, too, might be described in terms of Merton's words about looking rather than thinking.⁶¹⁵ Overall we might describe the passage as an act of rising above the task of discussing mandalas in order to leave reasoning behind and simply look, without thinking, at parrots.

All of this is sufficient, we argue, for us to read the passage as the enactment of Merton's commendation of the perception of thereness, and therefore as the enactment of a commendation that springs from a theological background,⁶¹⁶ namely a view about the rooting of our being in God, and a view about becoming like God by going beyond reflection.⁶¹⁷ By merit of the modes and ends of the literary action of the passage, we have suggested that the passage implicitly coheres with the wider theological background outlined in section two. The passage also, however, evokes the theological content explicitly. Merton ceases to focus on the mandalas because they do not aid his 'enlightenment', and the reason for this appears to be that they 'complicate what is simple'; inversely, it is clear that the parrots, which Merton chooses to focus on instead of the complicating mantras, are comparatively simple. Overall, then, there is the sense that the simplicity of watching the

⁶¹² For language about 'renouncing' see *Thoughts in Solitude*, pp. 19-20.

⁶¹³ For language about 'frustrating' see *Inner Experience*, p. 20.

⁶¹⁴ For language about 'rising above' see *Inner Experience*, p. 60.

⁶¹⁵ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 49.

⁶¹⁶ *Inner Experience*, p. 2

⁶¹⁷ *Zen and the Birds*, 11.

parrots aids Merton's enlightenment more than the complexity of the mandalas did, and that an act of what we have shown to consist of going beyond reflection and analysis is conducive to the spiritual path; the act of watching things simply being there aids the search for meaning. Without needing to go into the specifics of the overlap between Merton's account of 'enlightenment' and his account of coming closer to God, which was one of the theological roots explored in section two, it becomes apparent that the passage explicitly evokes the wider picture of a spiritual pathway towards enlightenment. This is our second example of the poetics of there-ness.

Our third example, which Merton wrote six weeks before his death, is taken from *Asian Journal*. Merton was in Calcutta when he wrote it, visiting the home of the painter Jamini Roy. In the preceding paragraph Merton has described the drive to Roy's house, the 'cool tiles' inside, the 'Formalized little icons' that are 'the most lovely treatment of Christian subjects I have ever seen', and his wish that he 'could afford to buy a dozen canvases'.⁶¹⁸ The second, concluding paragraph of the diary entry reads:

Jamini Roy himself a warm, saintly old man, saying: "Everyone who comes to my house brings God into it." The warmth and reality of his hand as you shake it or hold it. The luminous handsomeness of his bearded son, who is, I suppose, my age. Marvellous features. All the faces glowing with humanity and peace. Great religious artists. It was a great experience.⁶¹⁹

Unlike the two other passages discussed so far in this chapter, the mode of denial through which there-ness is generated in this case does not concern the insertion of a description that in some way seems not to relate to the surrounding text. In the 'warmth and reality' sentence of the passage, for example, the word 'his' acts as a determiner, whereby the male being referred to can be equated with a character mentioned previously—in this case, Jamini Roy. 'His' therefore refers to a host of further characteristics: 'his hand' belongs to a man with a

⁶¹⁸ *Asian Journal*, all p. 32.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

house with ‘cool tiles’, who paints ‘lovely’ artwork, who believes people bring God into his house, and so on. The fourth sentence – ‘Marvellous features’ – also clearly refers to Roy’s son, and therefore to a handsome, bearded man of, Merton supposes, about fifty. The emphasis on thereness does not, as before, centre on the breakage of such links.

Instead, thereness in this case is generated by the repeated elision of predicates. In the first sentence, no ‘is’ describes the relationship between ‘Roy’ and ‘a warm, saintly old man’. If it did, ‘a warm, saintly old man’ would without question become the object of the sentence, and the act of ‘saying’ would hold the position of a subordinate verbal clause. Given that this inference of an ‘is’ requires only the small interpretative leap of inserting a verb between ‘Roy’ and the characteristics that immediately follow the mention of his name, we can also say that the first sentence of the passage is close to being grammatically complete in the traditional sense. In the second sentence, however, ‘The warmth and reality of his hand as you shake or hold it’ acts as a subject without either verb or object, whether inferentially or otherwise. In the third sentence, the verb ‘is’ describes the pronoun ‘who’ in a subordinate clause without accompanying the subject of the main clause—that is, Jamini Roy’s ‘son’ is not directly described as being ‘my age’. In the fourth sentence, as in the second, the subject ‘Marvellous features’ acts without a verb or object; and the same is true of the fifth and sixth sentences, in which ‘All the faces’ and ‘Great religious artists’ act as subjects without predication. Only the final sentence of the quoted passage functions as what traditional grammar calls a complete sentence: ‘It was a great experience’ straightforwardly describes a series of events in which, in Merton’s prose, the structures of grammar are consistently elided.

The effect of the passage’s elisions is to leave the reader with a series of grammatical subjects that, like ‘Joy’ in the example discussed above, prioritise the sense of being in place over function. The inferential verb connecting ‘Jamini Roy’ and the ‘saintly old man’ is easy

to posit, but inference is nonetheless required. ‘The warmth and reality of his hand’ even more emphatically functions at the level of *est*, because there is no mentioned verb or object to which it may be inferred to have a relationship; and the same is true of the ‘features’, the ‘faces’, and the ‘artists’ of the following three sentences. In the terms of Merton’s content claims from earlier, no reasoning, explanation, manipulation or arguing accompanies these subjects.⁶²⁰ Or in other words, apt as a descriptive correlate to the form of Merton’s description of an Indian household because they are taken from *Asian Journal*, the sentence grammatically embodies ‘non-doing’ and ‘non-action’ by eliding verbal relations between subjects and their environment.⁶²¹

Two further things can be said about the thereness of the passage.

Jamini Roy himself a warm, saintly old man, saying: “Everyone who comes to my house brings God into it.” The warmth and reality of his hand as you shake it or hold it. The luminous handsomeness of his bearded son, who is, I suppose, my age. Marvellous features. All the faces glowing with humanity and peace. Great religious artists. It was a great experience.

Firstly, the grammatical subjects that display thereness in the passage are not, as Merton put it earlier on, ‘alone in [their] own character’ in the sense of being marked out in isolation, as the thereness of ‘Joy’ was.⁶²² Instead, Merton presents numerous instances of thereness in a series, and each of those instances is connected by their contribution to an overarching narrative about the visit to Roy’s house. Thereness in this case is not generated, as it was for ‘Joy’, by a rupture in the concatenation that builds a narrative, but in the elided grammar of parts that remain concatenated at the level of narrative. And it is this very repetition, secondly, that generates the strength of the passage’s thereness. The single-word sentence ‘Joy’ from earlier on demanded the reader to perceive its simple thereness because of its

⁶²⁰ See *Inner Experience*, p. 60, and *Zen and the Birds*, pp. 38 & 49.

⁶²¹ *Thoughts on the East*, p. 22.

⁶²² *New Seeds*, p. 31.

distinctiveness in the context of the grammatically-complete sentences that surrounded it; the verb-less subjects in the sentences about Jamini Roy demand the same perception because of the sense that the speaker through whom we hear about them perceives the world as a whole, or at least Roy's home as a whole, in terms of what is there, in its *est*-ness. We are invited 'to simply *see*',⁶²³ as Merton put it earlier, or to perceive all of our surroundings with 'simple attentiveness'.⁶²⁴ It becomes an interpretative norm to gaze upon 'The warmth and reality of his hand' without further question, because the world to which the hand belongs consistently invites the same kind of gaze.

As before, then, the passage coheres implicitly with the theological background against which Merton wrote by merit of the modes through which it generates thereness and the ends to which those modes have led our reading; but again, also as before, there is a more explicit link to be made between the poetics and the theology. The thereness in the passage revolves, that is, around descriptions of what turn out to be 'Great religious artists'. In our previous passage concerning mandalas and parrots the thereness was clearly connected to the search for 'enlightenment'; here, similarly, it may well be connected to the *religiosity* of the subject matter it shapes. The question to be asked is: "Does the thereness generated by the form of the passage actually describe the religiosity of the artists?" If we answer 'no' to this question, the passage belongs to our poetics by merit of its coherence with the modes and objects describes in section two; if we answer 'yes', the passage belongs to our poetics by merit of its being an instance of the perception of thereness rooted in the religiousness of the objects being perceived. The only difference made by choosing either reading is the strength of the passage's embodiment of Merton's content claims, as opposed to its status as the third example in our poetics of thereness.

⁶²³ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 49.

⁶²⁴ *New Seeds*, p. 162.

The following, again from *Asian Journal*, is a more complicated instance of thereness. Prior to the passage, Merton has been describing a dream about being a Zen monk.⁶²⁵ Directly after the quoted passage, Merton copies out a paragraph from a book by E. C. Dimock.

Other recent dreams, dimly remembered. Strange towns. Towns in the South of France. Working my way along the Riviera. How to get to the “next place”? I forget what the problem is, or if it is solved. Another: I’m in some town and have a small, silvery toy balloon, but it has a dangerous explosive gas in it. I throw it in the air and hope it will float completely away before anything happens. It rises too slowly, departs too slowly—but nothing happens. The dream changes.

Two white butterflies alight on separate flowers. They rise, play together briefly, accidentally, in the air, then depart in different directions.

E. C. Dimock, Jr., on Vaishnava poetry...⁶²⁶

Until now we have focused upon what might be called the grammatical denial of verb-based relationships between objects and the environment surrounding them. In this passage the sense of thereness contrastingly hinges on the way in which the text progresses from one thought to another. This will lead us to reading a particularly emphatic sense of thereness in the paragraph beginning ‘Two white butterflies’.

The relationship between the descriptions in the first quoted paragraph is clear enough. Merton describes a dream about France followed by a dream about balloons. The former is distinguished clearly from the latter by the pronoun ‘Another’, which introduces the dream about balloons. Marked as distinct in this way, both dreams nonetheless clearly function as descriptions under the unified heading ‘Other recent dreams’. This is relatively straightforward. There is no equivalent clarity of purpose and structure, however, in the shift from the balloons to the ‘Two white butterflies’. On the one hand, the balloon and butterflies are connected by two key parallelisms: like the balloon, the butterflies ‘rise’, and in contrast

⁶²⁵ *Asian Journal*, p. 107.

⁶²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

to the balloon, which ‘departs too slowly’, the butterflies ‘depart in different directions’ after playing ‘briefly’. Noting this parallelism, we might then read, for example, that the two ‘Two white butterflies’ contribute to a dream sequence, initiated by the slow-rising balloon, about different kinds of departure—and in this way we can read a connection between them. On the other hand, the butterflies are placed in a new paragraph with a line space on either side. The purpose of this typography in the shift from the ‘butterflies’ to ‘E. C. Dimock’ is more clearly to introduce a new topic, but the purpose with respect to the butterflies is more ambiguous. Either the relationship of the butterflies to the balloon is accidental, or the parallels between the balloon and the butterflies are of a nature, somehow, that also requires the separateness implied by the passage’s typography.

In either of the given readings of the balloon-butterfly relationship there is a strong sense of thereness. Assuming that the butterflies are unrelated to the balloon, the butterflies stand alone within the journal entry and perform no function other than being there. They are the kind of simple description ‘without comment’⁶²⁷ that Merton spoke of in the exposition in section two above.

Two white butterflies alight on separate flowers. They rise, play together briefly, accidentally, in the air, then depart in different directions.

If the elision of a verb and object earlier on generated what we called a grammar of thereness, the possible lack here of any relation to a wider scheme of meaning generates a genre of prose in which thereness is prioritized over any kind of function. We could more simply describe this genre as non-evaluative descriptive writing. Within the realm of the semantics of the written text, we are given nothing more than the factness of the action of the butterflies, and to read this factness of in own terms is to be led towards what Merton

⁶²⁷ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 33.

described earlier in *New Seeds* as ‘pure awareness, simple attentiveness’.⁶²⁸ This is amongst the most straightforward kinds of literary thereness that we will witness Merton using in this chapter.

To read the butterflies as contributing, alongside the dreams about France and the balloon, to Merton’s description of ‘recent dreams’, is to complicate the picture. On the one hand the sense of thereness is lessened because the butterflies contribute to the broader theme of dreams about departure; on the other hand the sense of thereness is made more distinctive, because the concatenated reading is only ever ambiguous at best. Unanswered questions continue to undermine the reading of connectedness: ‘Why are the butterflies separated from the balloons by the same typographical space as the one that separates the butterflies from E. C. Dimock?’ ‘Why is the dream about France separated from the dream about the balloon by a smaller typographical space than the one that separates the balloon from the butterflies?’ The thereness in this reading is generated by the sense of a *vague* concatenation; there is a simultaneous sense of things standing on their own and things bearing nebulous relations to one another. To apply Merton’s own words from the passage: the connection between the butterflies and the balloons is as though ‘dimly remembered’; there is something ‘strange’ about the connection; we ‘forget’ what it might be. Vincent Gillespie, performing literary analysis of English Medieval texts, has similarly noted the denial of concatenations (or ‘imagistic chain reactions’) as a feature of mystical writings, and has claimed that they contribute to a specifically apophatic strategy;⁶²⁹ our aim is to describe a similar literary phenomenon in different terms, namely the terms of a perception of thereness that dwells on the hinge-point between concatenations and consistent themes on the one hand, and, in Merton’s words from section two, leaving things to be without transforming them into other

⁶²⁸ *New Seeds*, p. 162.

⁶²⁹ Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross, ‘Apophatic Image’, p. 281.

things on the other.⁶³⁰ Though the passage does not evoke the wider theological context at the level of content, its compelling mode of generating the kind of thereness wrote about repeatedly in section two warrants it a place in our theological poetics. It is our fourth example of the poetics of thereness.

Our fifth example, again from *Asian Journal*, also generates thereness by calling into question the semantic connection between sentences, in part through typography. The passage is part of Merton's diary entry for 31 October 1968, a little over a month before he died in Bangkok.

“Twofold is the aspect of Divinity, one, subtle, represented by the *mantra* and the other coarse, represented by an image.”

—from the *Yamala*, quoted in Tucci, *op. cit.*,
page 60.

Air-condition mantra. Tibetan base of the machines.

For the Tibetans, every conceivable sound is both music and mantra. Great brasses. Trumpets snoring into the earth. They wake the mountain spirits, inviting canyon populations to get a solemn rite of life and death. The clear outcry of gyelings, (shawms), the throb of drums, bells and cymbals...⁶³¹

The object that displays thereness in this case, we will read, is the paragraph beginning ‘Air-condition mantra.’ As in the butterflies example, there is a possible concatenation between the ‘Air-condition’ section and the text surrounding it, and, as before, the thereness of the passage functions in opposition to those possible concatenations. For example, the first section’s mention of ‘the *mantra*’ is a clear precursor to the ‘Air-condition mantra’ of the second section, and the third section can be read as an explanation of the second section: the

⁶³⁰ *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 20.

⁶³¹ *Asian Journal*, p. 68.

sound of air-conditioning in the second section, that is, is an exemplification of those ‘conceivable sound[s]’ that Tibetans perceive, according to Merton, as ‘both music and mantra’. The sound of ‘the machines’ makes a similarly ‘Tibetan’ music, and is consequently also an exemplification of the explanation that follows it. The final two paragraphs of the passage could thus be organised into three sections: firstly, the introduction of a theme by its mention (*‘mantras’*); secondly, the development of that theme in an obscure formulation about air-conditioning; and thirdly, the explanation of the theme in the claim that, for Tibetans, all sound is a mantra.

Such a progression is fragmented, however, because nothing beyond the mention of the ‘mantra’ connects sections one and two, and the explanation in section three of the point which section two embodies (all sound is a mantra) comes only retrospectively, so that the reader’s initial reading of ‘Air-condition mantra’ is decontextualized beyond its being about a ‘mantra’, as the text immediately preceding it was. If the interpretative link we have suggested between sections two and three holds, it is possible that this de-contextualisation or fragmentation has its roots in Merton’s own thought-process when composing the journal entry, which could have progressed as follows: firstly, Merton copied out the passage from Tucci; secondly, he learnt that, for Tibetans, all sound is a mantra; thirdly, he summarised the result of this learning by writing the ‘Air-condition mantra’ section; and fourthly, he wrote an explanation of what he had learnt about sound-as-mantra. Regardless of whether this was or was not Merton’s thought process, the point remains that the reader is faced with a text that proceeds by offering an obscure exemplification of a point that has not, at the point when it is exemplified, been made.

The fragmentation with respect to ordering would have been enough to generate a strong sense of there-ness on its own; but two further factors compound the sense that the

‘Air-condition mantra’ is to be gazed upon simply as it is, without relation to a wider scheme of meaning. The first of these is typographical.

Air-condition mantra. Tibetan base of the machines.

If in the ‘Joy’ example from earlier we read a verb-less subject as an isolated unit of meaning because of the distinctiveness of its grammar, the far more explicit causes of isolation here are the asterisms preceding and succeeding the alphabetic text. Such typography strongly implies that the ‘machines’ are to be read as a section in their own right, in opposition to being the misplaced exemplification of a point that is linked seamlessly to a subsequent argument. The already strained link between exemplification and explanation is thus called into question by typography. Whichever way we read it, the ‘Air-condition’ is de-contextualised: either it is the exemplification of a point which, in the initial moment of reading, we do not yet know, or it is an obscure formulation that is separated by asterisms from the surrounding text.

The second factor that compounds the de-contextualisation implied by the ordering of the passage is the elision of predicates in the ‘Air-condition mantra’ section.

Air-condition mantra. Tibetan base of the machines.

Like the objects that, for Merton, one comes to perceive after the ‘renouncement of creatures’, the mantra and the machines, in being separated from verbs and objects and thus conforming to the elided grammar displayed earlier in ‘Joy’, are simply ‘themselves’ at a grammatical level,⁶³² without additional commentary or even a particular activity with which

⁶³² *Thoughts in Solitude*, pp. 19-20.

they can be identified. But more than this, and in relation to our readings of order and typography, they form a text that, as we have seen, and again in Merton's words, 'is alone in its own character' in the sense of being divorced from the wider schemes of meaning in the text surrounding it.⁶³³ When adding to this the argument, made earlier with respect to the 'Two butterflies', that the link between the thereness of the 'Air-condition' and the section subsequent to it actually strengthens by opposition the emphasis on the isolation and *est*-ness of the 'mantra' and the 'machines', it becomes clear how complex and compelling an instance of thereness the passage displays; and as in our previous example ('butterflies), it is the strength of the passage's generation of a mode of thereness, rather than its evocation of a theology at the level of its content, that warrants it a place in our theological poetics. It is our fifth, and penultimate, example of the poetics of thereness.

The following, which is the final example to be discussed in this chapter, is taken from *Dancing in the Water*. It offers a distinctive grammar of thereness, as well as what we shall read as a gradual deepening or intensifying of thereness as the passage proceeds. The passage forms Merton's entire diary entry for 2 July 1964.

Meadowlark sitting quietly on a fence post in the dawn sun, his gold vest – bright in the light of the east, his black bib tidy, turning his head this way. This is a Zen quietness without comment. Yesterday a chic, black and white butterfly on the whitewashed wall of the house.⁶³⁴

So far in this chapter we have, on several occasions, associated thereness with the elision of verbs and objects. Here, in the first quoted sentence, a sequence of similar elisions generates a cumulative sense of thereness, in a way similar to the Jamini Roy passage discussed earlier. In the clause between 'Meadowlark' and 'sun', firstly, the elided article and verb de-position the subject and subtly call into question the relationship between the 'Meadowlark' and the

⁶³³ *New Seeds*, p. 31.

⁶³⁴ *Dancing in the Water*, p. 123.

act of ‘sitting’. The clause is, clearly, a truncated version of the present continuous tense, and we can simply fill in the article ‘A’ before ‘meadowlark’ and the verb ‘is’ before ‘sitting’; but the grammar of the clause as it is written nonetheless has the effect of withdrawing a sense of the explanatory or observational voice. Had the passage run, ‘A meadowlark is sitting quietly on a fence’, there would have been a stronger sense of the relationship between the perceiver (Merton) and the perceived (meadowlark). There would, that is, have been a stronger sense of an observer reporting what is happening, with the subtext *I am observing a meadowlark that is sitting quietly*. By eliding the article before ‘meadowlark’, however, Merton withdraws this sense of observation by de-positioning his subject; this is not a particular meadowlark positioned in a particular scene, but simply ‘meadowlark’. And by eliding the verb between ‘meadowlark’ and ‘sitting’ Merton similarly withdraws the sense that the meadowlark’s activities are being observed, and thus labelled by an observer. Instead we are presented with ‘meadowlark sitting’. This might be described, in Merton’s words from earlier, as a ‘direct, immediate view’ of the subject at hand.⁶³⁵

The following clauses elide parts of grammar to the same effect.

...his gold vest – bright in the light of the east, his black bib tidy, turning his head this way.

Present simple verbs continue to be absent here, though as before it is not difficult to add them in order to render the passage an instance of the present simple tense: clearly the vest *is* bright and the bib *is* tidy in the same way that the meadowlark *is* sitting. Again, though, the straightforwardness of adding the simple verb does not undo the effect of its absence. As

⁶³⁵ *Inner Experience*, p. 20. A further set content claims from Merton’s wider prose might also describe the ‘Meadowlark’ sentence. Merton’s claim in *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, for example, that ‘The unitive knowledge of God in love is not a knowledge of an object by a subject’ could be embodied in a similar grammar to the elided articles and verbs of the ‘Meadowlark’ passage. See *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969), p. 104.

before, there is the sense, not of a perceiver perceiving the existence of an object in a voice that says 'there is' or 'it is', but of a rawer gesture towards an object, the existence of which is posited only implicitly. The dash between 'vest' and 'bright', which replaces the 'is' we have added by interpretation, makes this particularly clear: instead of predicating being as an action connecting 'his gold vest' and 'bright in the light', Merton has simply gestured towards the factness (or thereness) of his gold vest, bright in the light. The clause 'his black bib tidy' continues this grammar of the gesture without recourse even to the dash, before the return of the passage to a newly elided version of the present continuous tense in the clause 'turning his head this way'. As in the 'meadowlark' clause, there is a lack here of the present simple verb to position the act of turning in relation to a subject. The only subject posited by the sentence as a whole remains the 'meadowlark', which would make the complete clause: 'Meadowlark sitting quietly on a fence post in the dawn sun, turning his head this way'.

This appears, at first sight, to be a satisfactory way to fill in the grammatical gaps left by the sentence; but we can note two further complicating factors. Firstly, the passage continues to lack a present simple verb, and thus generates the same grammar of factness, rather than an observer-observed relationship, that the initial clause of the sentence did in our reading given above. Secondly, the given interpretation is questionable due to a syntactical ambiguity. The dash following 'vest', that is, implies that the text between 'bright' and 'this way' belongs to a different sentence, or at least different clause, from that between 'Meadowlark' and 'vest'. When coupled with the grammatical incompleteness of our interpretation of the relationship of 'turning' to the subject 'meadowlark', we are left with an act of 'turning' that is even rawer in its factness or *is*-ness than the 'meadowlark sitting'. Not only does it lack a present simple verb; it also lacks a *subject*. This is the first instance in the quoted passage of a deepening or intensifying of the poetics of thereness.

Such intensification continues at the level both of content and of grammar in the last two sentences.

This is a Zen quietness without comment. Yesterday a chic, black and white butterfly on the whitewashed wall of the house.

The former of these sentences is the closest we have come, in the passages of Merton's prose that have been selected for literary analysis in this chapter, to a content claim about thereness of the kind quoted in section two earlier on. That 'This' is something 'without comment' chimes with the mode of observation Merton described earlier as functioning without 'explanation'⁶³⁶ or 'manipulation',⁶³⁷ which we associated with a definition of thereness that prioritises being over doing. Again, and to re-quote Merton's words about the experience of 'Zen', the experience of 'quietness without comment' chimes with the mode of perception that 'seeks not to *explain* but to *pay attention*'⁶³⁸ and 'to simply *see* things.'⁶³⁹ It is significant, then, that 'This' seems likely to refer to the sentence that precedes it, and thus to the mode of perception or experience of nature that, in our analysis, embodied thereness at a grammatical level. The second sentence describes at the level of content what the first sentence performed at the level of form: the elisions that led us to view the 'meadowlark' and the act of 'turning' as a subject and an action perceived in terms of their raw factness is shown, in Merton's own words, to be an experience of 'quietness without comment'. Our analysis of the first sentence makes specific what this 'comment' might have been: there is, as we have seen, no comment upon the observer of the scene, of the mode of the meadowlark's existence, or the subject that performs the act of turning. In terms of the theological background against which we positioned Merton's writings about thereness in

⁶³⁶ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 38. (Merton's italics.)

⁶³⁷ See *Inner Experience*, pp. 5 & 10, and *Zen and the Birds*, p. 49.

⁶³⁸ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 38. (Merton's italics.)

⁶³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49. (Merton's italics.)

section two, it is also significant that the ‘quietness without comment’ that is embodied in the form of the passage is associated with ‘Zen’. Earlier Merton described his own literary forms of thereness in terms of ‘enlightenment’, and the phenomenon is similar here. Implicitly evocative of the wider theology discussed in section two by merit of the dynamics of its literary forms, the passage also describes those forms in terms of a spiritual journey towards ‘Zen’.

The final sentence of the passage performs the same function as the first, by embodying the ‘quietness without comment’ that the second sentence describes.

Yesterday a chic, black and white butterfly on the whitewashed wall of the house.

More contextualizing information is given here than in the ‘Meadowlark’ sentence; the adverb ‘Yesterday’ does, at least, position the ‘butterfly’ temporally. To the given reading about the elision of a ‘there is’ and thus of a posited existence in the ‘Meadowlark’ sentence we now can add, looking back, that there was also a lost sense of temporal positioning. The use of ‘there is’ in the ‘Meadowlark’ sentence would have posited existence (something *is*) but also that something is happening in the present tense (something is happening *now*). This does not occur the sentence beginning ‘Yesterday’, which posits a clear temporal location. But at the same time, the juxtaposition of a temporal context with the continuing lack of a verb serves to generate a new sense of thereness. We know clearly *when* the butterfly was, but we still need to infer *that* it was. The unrelenting de-contextualisation of time and existence in the ‘Meadowlark’ sentence is replaced, in this instance, by a grammar of thereness that hinges on the tension between positioning and de-positioning. We know, in sum, that ‘yesterday a butterfly’, but not that ‘yesterday there was a butterfly’.

We have already described the ‘Meadowlark’ passage in terms of two main content claims from section two, namely the act of seeking to pay attention without explanation and

the act of simply seeing. To this we can add that the passage, by the mentioned modes of elision, performs an act of what Merton earlier called *frustration*.⁶⁴⁰ The ‘Yesterday’ sentence hints, that is, at what a grammatically-complete version of itself might look like, but frustrates the full realisation of the completion. The result is the ‘direct, immediate view’ Merton discussed earlier,⁶⁴¹ and specifically, a view whose directness and immediacy stems from the freedom of the meadowlark and butterfly from surrounding information about location, relation to an observer, or (in the case of the meadowlark) temporal position. This is our sixth and final example of Merton’s poetics of thereness.

5. Conclusion

The main analysis of this thesis so far has led us to two main conclusions. Firstly, a Formalist theological poetics responds to and develops several key fields of enquiry (see the ‘Introduction’ above, and the conclusion to chapter one, for details); and secondly, the result of a Formalist theological poetics is the generation of new material with which to understand Merton’s theology (see the concluding section of chapter two for an initial account of this claim). The aim of this section is to clarify the latter of these two conclusions further by condensing the arguments that were put forward at length in the main body of the chapter. By reiterating in concise form the claims about Merton’s theologically-rooted literary forms that we have already made, the nature of the new theological material we have uncovered will become clearer. In doing so we shall be subtly developing our perspective on the literary analysis performed above. Having already asked how literary forms can be described in terms of theological claims, we shall now go on ask what new information we have gained by reading Merton’s prose forms in terms of his theology.

⁶⁴⁰ *Inner Experience*, p. 20.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*

In the first passage ('Joy'), for example, a basic relation became clear between the elision of grammatical parts and Merton's content claims about ceasing to explain and manipulate. We saw that one simple way in which to leave analysis and reflection on an object behind is to elide the parts of speech that normally constitute analysis and reflection. This is a fairly simple example of the kind of information we have gathered: Merton commends the perception of thereness, enacts it in his prose forms, and in doing so shows that one specific way in which to perceive things simply as being there is by eliding everything but the subject, or conversely, positing a subject and adding nothing further to it. All of our examples follow this pattern in various ways. Further, we also saw that the sense of what Merton calls non-explanation and non-manipulation, which we also figured in terms of Merton's words about things standing alone in their own character, can be heightened through what we called grammatical singleness. In other words, one way in which Merton carries out his own recommendation of allowing things to stand alone in their own character is by presenting a grammatical subject in an isolated form, for instance as a single word. Similarly, Merton carries out his recommendation that we observe things simple as being there, in their *est*-ness, by juxtaposing the mentioned modes of elision and concision with sentences that do not display these qualities. One of the ways in which Merton emphasises the thereness of an object, then, is by placing it in close proximity to sentences that elide neither grammar nor length.

In the second example ('parrots') we read that one of the ways in which Merton enacts his recommendation of the frustration of links between an object of thereness and the interpretative world surrounding it is by offering a profusion of possible links between the two. In our reading this resulted in ambiguity about the nature of the link between a discursive passage and an observation of parrots that led to what Merton elsewhere calls the abandonment of attempts to analyse an object beyond seeing that it is there. Conversely, we

saw that another way in which Merton generates the same frustration of links is by describing the object of thereness itself in such a way that there seems to be no link between it and the textual landscape surrounding it. Like the elision of grammatical parts, this basic lack of positing anything about an object of thereness beyond its own existence or thereness is common to all of the examples discussed in this chapter. More unusual was Merton's use of a question ('Why complicate what is simple?'), which acted as a hinge-point, or preparation, for the being-thereness of the parrots. One of the ways in which Merton enacts his commendation that we stand back from objects is by beginning to call the analysis of objects into question: 'Why complicate?' leads to the actual object of thereness by preparing the reader to stop complicating the simplicity of the object that is simply there. Finally, we have seen that one of the ways in which Merton embodies his commendation that his readers let go of reasoning is by moving from a discursive mode of thought (in this case, concerning mandalas) to an observational one. We might synthesise this last claim by saying that Merton commends letting go of reasoning about an object and replacing the act of reasoning with pure observation.

In the third example ('Jamini Roy') we learnt that Merton enacts his commendation of non-doing and non-action and the act of simply seeing things in pure attentiveness by making use of a form of elision that is distinct from the separateness and singleness of 'Joy' in the first example. Beyond isolating a single word amongst more traditionally complete sentences, Merton's description of Jamini Roy built up an overall grammar of elision; and again, beyond eliding all parts of speech other than a single subject, Merton elided various parts of speech in a number of consecutive sentences. We learnt, then, that there are both ways in which to generate sudden, isolated modes of the perception of thereness, and more all-encompassing ones, where numerous objects are viewed in terms of their *est*-ness.

The fourth example ('butterflies') developed the mode of embodiment already described in relation to examples one and two, where it was unclear what the relation between sentences was. In the fourth example we similarly read that the dream about butterflies bore an ambiguous relation to the text surrounding it, but in a novel way. Merton's commendation that we view objects without comment was embodied here in a form of juxtaposition where the relationship between the object of there-ness and the surrounding text was vague and strange, both because of the ambiguity of the possible semantic links, and because of the use of asterisms to separate the parts of text. Merton thus generates simple attentiveness by generating a link between the object of there-ness and the wider world that is unclear, and which in turn leads to the possibility of abandoning the possible links in favour of a reading centred on there-ness.

The fifth and sixth examples built on the two major ways in which Merton enacted his claims about there-ness in the previous four examples. In example five ('Air-condition mantra') we observed act of renunciation or abandonment of links that was generated by an ambiguity over whether the object of there-ness could be connected semantically to the surrounding text, the use of asterisms to imply separateness, and the elision of predicates. One of the ways in which Merton performs the action of frustration that he also commends at the level of content is through this unique combination of now familiar literary strategies. And in example six ('Zen quietness'), similarly, Merton enacted his theology of simply seeing and simply paying attention by gradually intensifying the extent of grammatical elisions as the passage proceeded.

All of these specific conclusions summarise the distinctive contribution of our thesis to the major fields of enquiry outlined at length in our introductory chapter. To Formalism we have contributed an account of the expansion by form of the material available to theologians; to the theology of form we have six detailed examples of the way in which

literary form can enact theological claims; and to Merton studies we have contributed an account of the relationship between the Trappist's recommendations of the perception of thereness and the literary modes in which he writes. It will be our aim to offer a similar contribution in chapters four and five, both of which focus on a new area of Merton's theology: the perception of the obscure presence of God.

Chapter Four: Aporetic Obscurity

1. Aims, Definition of ‘Obscurity’, Field of Enquiry

The notion that God is known obscurely, in darkness and blindness, recurs throughout each of the books Merton wrote on the contemplative life. Using the same structure as our previous chapters did, the aim of this chapter is to argue not only that such a view is commonplace in Merton’s theology, but also to analyse examples where the form of Merton’s prose *shows* the reader that the object of his contemplations is apprehended in the kind of obscure darkness that he also wrote about at the level of content. In full our line of argument will be that Merton gives a reason for the obscurity of our knowledge of God, namely that God is both transcendent and immanent; that Merton describes the resulting obscurity of our apprehension of God in numerous different ways; that Merton’s prose forms embody many of those modes of obscure apprehension; and finally that said literary forms reveal new information about how we might understand obscure apprehension. As in our chapters on denial, simplification and thereness, the aim of this opening section is to define our key term, and to outline some of the existing work on related topics.

The sense in which ‘obscurity’ will be used throughout this chapter is taken from entry 1b given for the word in the *SOED*: ‘Lack of clarity of expression; uncertainty of meaning, unintelligibility’.⁶⁴² Entry 2 – ‘Absence of light; darkness, dimness; indistinctness’ – will also be of use, but as a metaphor for entry 1b.⁶⁴³ The ‘lack of clarity of expression’ in the texts discussed in this chapter will be figured later on as lacking ‘light’, or as embodying the ‘darkness’ metaphor that Merton himself frequently uses to describe the obscurity of his

⁶⁴² *SOED*, ‘obscurity’ entry 1b.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.*, ‘obscurity’, entry 2.

knowledge of God,⁶⁴⁴ but entry 1b comprehensively describes the semantic phenomenon to which the light / dark trope refers metaphorically. As ever, the sense of Merton's poetics of obscurity will become clearest when it is quoted and analysed in section four below, but it can always be described in the terms of 'Lack of clarity of expression; uncertainty of meaning, unintelligibility'.

Given this, it should immediately be noted that a great deal of work in the world of literary analysis has already been done on 'obscure' texts. If, as David Tracy claims, 'It has become a truism by now that modernism, whatever else it is, prefers the unfinished, the syntactically unstable, the semantically malformed', then the preferences of 'modernism' also describe two of the key features (syntactic instability and semantic malformation) that characterise the examples of obscurity in Merton's texts that will be analysed below.⁶⁴⁵ And putting 'modernism' aside, the breadth of interest in texts that lack clarity, clear meanings, and intelligibility extends to diverse fields of enquiry. For example, the Russian Formalist, the New Testament scholar, and the post-structuralist philosopher will each be referenced as the present chapter proceeds wherever they have discussed literary forms that relate closely to the strategies that, in our reading of Merton, embody the notion of apprehending God in darkness and obscurity.

At the same time, however, and as we discussed at length in the introduction to this thesis, the wealth of existing work on the literary modes with which we are interested can only, for the most-part, be used as a descriptive tool to aid the wider purposes of formulating a specifically *theological* poetics. Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, for instance, is helpful here only up to a point. It remains a supreme example of an analysis of texts with uncertain meanings, but it does not seek, as here, to claim anything theological about the

⁶⁴⁴ See, for instance, the account of *Seeds* given in section two of this chapter.

⁶⁴⁵ David Tracy, 'Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times', in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. by John D. Caputo and Michael J Scanlon (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 170-180, p. 178.

results of its analysis.⁶⁴⁶ In the same way that the present thesis appropriates the methodologies of Formalism in order to develop a Sellian theological poetics, it also concerns itself with the widespread interest in literary obscurities in order to further a highly specific theological aim.

Similar partial overlaps with our concerns can also be found within the world of Merton studies. Williams has noted that ‘Merton’s expressions are often obscure’;⁶⁴⁷ Poks and Lentfoehr have both analysed the breakages in coherence and comprehensibility in Merton’s later poetry;⁶⁴⁸ and Kilcourse has provided an in-depth account of Merton’s ‘war on conventional language’, also in the later poetry.⁶⁴⁹ Each of these thinkers will be useful here wherever the literary strategies they identify in Merton’s poetry are also found in Merton’s obscure prose. But again, it is not the aim of Williams, Poks, Lentfoehr or Kilcourse to develop a poetics in which literary obscurity enacts a particular set of theological content claims. Jacob Sherman’s close attention to modes of ‘dismantling’, ‘dispersal’ and ‘radical dissipation’ in ‘The Fire Watch’ (Merton’s poetic prose ending to *Jonas*)⁶⁵⁰ perhaps comes closest to the work attempted here in terms of its attentiveness to the obscure form of Merton’s prose; but again Sherman’s aim is not, finally, to claim that Merton’s dismantling of intelligibility is the enactment of a particular set of theological ideas. At root Sherman’s thesis concerns the affinity between the thinking of ‘The Fire Watch’ with that of Gilles Deleuze, and to point out Merton’s use of ‘theological tools that Deleuze refuses to use.’⁶⁵¹

⁶⁴⁶ See Empson, *Seven Types*.

⁶⁴⁷ Williams, *Silent Action*, p. 112.

⁶⁴⁸ See Poks, ‘Endless Inscription’, and Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence*.

⁶⁴⁹ Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, p. 172. For Kilcourse’s full account of Merton’s anti-poetry, see pp. 155-198.

⁶⁵⁰ Jacob Holsinger Sherman, ‘No Werewolves in Theology? Transcendence, Immanence, and Becoming-Divine in Gilles Deleuze’, in *Modern Theology*, Vol. 25, Issue 1, January 2009, pp. 1-20, pp. 15, 15, & 16.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

The contrasting aim here is to analyse the *enactment* of Merton's 'theological tools' in his prose.

As we have noted before, the field to which our chapter seeks to contribute can also be clearly defined, amidst the wealth of critical interest in literary obscurity and its relatives, as that towards which Bernard McGinn has gestured in his history of Christian mysticism, and to which Michael Sells took a significant step in *Languages of Unsayings*.⁶⁵² A similar claim to the one being made here about Merton, for instance, can be found in McGinn's observation that the *Meditations* of Roger of Provence

contain often obscure and frequently ungrammatical "considerations" that at times seem to be experiments in trying to express ecstatic speech, matching their insistence on the ineffability and inexpressibility of God.⁶⁵³

In a similar vein McGinn has also commented on Mechthild of Magdeburg's 'dialogic practice', which involves 'reversals, dislocations, and fragmentations, along with ambiguities and mergings of voices.'⁶⁵⁴ These descriptions remain, however, a gesture, because McGinn's primary aim is not to substantiate his claims with the literary-critical analysis that will form the heart of our analysis in section four. Meanwhile, Michael Sells does devote close analysis to literary phenomena of the kind that will be described here as 'obscure', for instance the occasions in apophatic writings when 'reference is split, referring back to two possible antecedents',⁶⁵⁵ but as we have noted before Sells's aim is to argue that split reference is 'the semantic analogue to the experience of mystical union',⁶⁵⁶ whereas the aim here is to show that split reference, amongst many other literary strategies in Merton's prose, can be described in terms of Merton's writings about apprehending God in obscurity, and not

⁶⁵² See Sells, *Unsayings*.

⁶⁵³ McGinn, *Flowering*, p. 133

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁶⁵⁵ Sells, *Unsayings*, p. 25.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

as an analogue to an experience of *union* (whatever that word might mean). Whilst working within the literary-mystical field identified by McGinn and Sells, then, the aims here are, as ever, also distinct within the field to which they contribute.

The present chapter is structured as the previous chapters of this thesis were. Section two will outline some of the main ways in which Merton figures the obscurity of our knowledge of God, and thus gathers the content claims to which Merton's poetics will form a descriptive correlate; section three will outline literary-critical terms that will help to describe the texts of Merton's that embody the ideas of section two; and section four will perform a close literary-critical analysis of texts that, in our readings, embody the claims of section two by employing the literary strategies of section three.

2. Exposition: Merton's Language About Obscurity

Merton's contention that God's presence can be apprehended in obscurity can be sub-divided into three aspects. These are, firstly, theological reasons behind why our apprehension of God might be obscure, namely that God is both hidden to us as a result of the Fall and yet present to us as a result of the coming of Christ; secondly, the mode through which God is apprehended as obscure, such as interior solitude, the way of faith, or simply seeking God; and thirdly, the description of what the obscure knowledge in question is like, for instance darkness, a state in which one must qualify everything that one says, and bafflement. The aim of this section is to quote various ways in which Merton describes the mode and character of the obscure apprehension of God that will, in our readings, be embodied in the form of Merton's prose later on. As before, we will discuss Merton's texts in the chronological order of their publication.

What is Contemplation, firstly, offers various modes through which God is known obscurely that might less contentiously include the act of writing. 'Do not lament', Merton

writes, ‘when your prayer is empty of all precise, rational knowledge of God and when you cannot seize Him any longer by clear, definite concepts’.⁶⁵⁷ The passage only slightly modulates the *SOED*’s definition of ‘obscurity’ as the ‘lack of clarity’ into the lack of ‘clear, definite concepts’; and the mode for such experience of obscurity is ‘prayer’, which might conceivably include any act of writing that were framed as a prayer. In other words, if Merton’s prose were ever framed as a prayer, and demonstrated the inability to conceptualise God, we would not only have, with Sells, a ‘*semantic analogue* to the experience of mystical union’, but an *embodied example* of the obscure knowledge of God in prayer, as Merton described it in *What is Contemplation*. It is with this kind of correlative relationship between acts of writings and content claims concerning obscurity that the present chapter is concerned.

In *Seeds* Merton repeatedly discusses a mode of obscurely apprehending God to which he would return throughout his writing career. ‘Contemplation’ (which we will define later, with Merton’s help) becomes the mode in which God is found, following the tradition begun at Sinai, in ‘darkness’,⁶⁵⁸ and in which the contemplative learns to ‘accept Him as He comes to us, in His own obscurity, in His own silence’.⁶⁵⁹ The latter of these quotations mentions obscurity explicitly; the former figures ‘obscurity’ as ‘darkness’, as did entry 2 of the *SOED*’s definition. In *Seeds* it is also through ‘contemplation’ that we are led to ‘inarticulate praise, praise and glory’⁶⁶⁰ and to a state where ‘all adjectives fall to pieces’.⁶⁶¹ Again, there is a close relationship here between, firstly, the inarticulacy described in *Seeds*

⁶⁵⁷ *What is Contemplation*, p. 104.

⁶⁵⁸ *Seeds*, p. 49. As McGinn shows, the ‘language of darkness (*skotos*, *gnophos*), cloud (*nephelē*), and silence (*silē*)’, each of which is ‘drawn from the account of Moses’ ascent to meet God on Sinai’ are used by cornerstone figures in the history of Christian mysticism such as Dionysius, for whom each of those modes of speech signifies God’s transcendence. See McGinn, *Foundations*, p. 175.

⁶⁵⁹ *Seeds*, p. 149.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

and our definition of ‘obscurity’ as ‘unintelligibility’, and secondly, between the falling-to-pieces of adjectives and the ‘lack of clarity’ that results from obscurity. When Merton goes on in *Seeds* to claim that ‘contemplation can only be expressed in poetic language that tends to sound strange and dramatic’,⁶⁶² the mode becomes both ‘contemplation’ and the ‘language’ through which it is strangely expressed, and the terms to which ‘obscurity’ needs to be associated are ‘strange’ and ‘dramatic’. As it stands, the relationship to our definition of ‘obscurity’ is weaker in this last example than in the other examples taken from *Seeds*: an example of the strange, dramatic obscurity of Merton’s texts is required to substantiate the relationship. We shall return to this kind of relationship in section four below.

We should note that the mode of ‘contemplation’, which is repeatedly described in relation to obscurity in *Seeds*, should not be confused with ‘infused contemplation’, which resembles a phenomenon not dissimilar to that which Sells described earlier on as ‘union’, and which we have been keen to distance the present thesis from.⁶⁶³ Unlike the clear characteristics of unmediated union associated, in Merton’s writings, with contemplation of the infused variety, ‘contemplation’ contrastingly refers in *Seeds* to ‘the religious apprehension of God, through my life in God’.⁶⁶⁴ This is more clearly an action or state that does not exclude the act of writing, insofar as writing can be a site through which God can be apprehended. As we will see in section four, it is possible to read that Merton’s writings *can* do just this.

Beyond contemplation, *Seeds* also imagines ‘faith’ as a mode that ‘leaves the intellect suspended in obscurity’.⁶⁶⁵ The quest ‘to find God’ similarly becomes the mode in which we

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁶⁶³ See the discussion of ‘infused contemplation’ on p. 99 above, particularly the references to *Ascent*, p. 61, and *Inner Experience*, p. 70.

⁶⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

‘enter into darkness’ and find ‘a loving identification with God in obscurity’.⁶⁶⁶ A ‘deep and vital experience’ of God also becomes the site of an ‘experience which is beyond the reach of any natural understanding’.⁶⁶⁷ This third quotation needs a little more explanation than the former two with respect to our aims because it does not use the word ‘obscurity’ explicitly. The relationship for which we shall look when we develop a poetics of obscurity occurs between Merton’s writing in a way that lacks clarity, *pace* our definition of ‘obscurity’, and Merton’s writing about an experience that is beyond the reach of the ‘natural understanding’. Put like this, the relationship in question is fairly straightforward: the transcendence of the experience of God would *lead*, via the poetic embodiment of Merton’s claim, to a mode of writing that is obscure. In sum, the requirement of Merton’s prose, if it were to enact the modes and descriptions of obscurity in *Seeds*, would be to become a site for the production of ‘faith’, the quest ‘to find God’, or a ‘vital experience’ of God, and to suspend the intellect in obscurity, to identify with God in obscurity, or to seem to go beyond natural understanding by writing in an obscure mode.

In *Ascent* Merton repeats the claim that the mode of ‘contemplation’ leads to the knowledge of God in darkness: ‘contemplation... advances beyond the range of concepts into a darkness’,⁶⁶⁸ and leads to ‘a darkness that is above concepts’.⁶⁶⁹ It is also ‘contemplation’ that ‘obscures the clear knowledge of divine things’.⁶⁷⁰ These claims add little that has not been mentioned already, but they do show the continuing importance of contemplation as a mode and darkness as a description of apprehending obscurity. *Ascent* also emphasises that the mode of faith leads *inevitably* to obscurity – ‘The way of faith is *necessarily* obscure’⁶⁷¹ –

⁶⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁶⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁶⁶⁸ *Ascent*, p. 9.

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁶⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁶⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 114. (Merton’s italics.)

and figures that ‘way’ in a new darkness metaphor: ‘We drive by night.’⁶⁷² Regarding a similarly necessary relationship between knowledge and obscurity, Merton also claims that ‘what is most certain is most obscure’,⁶⁷³ and adds that, through the assent of faith, ‘the understanding is blinded, yes, but it is also enlightened.’⁶⁷⁴ Following these formulations, a text that enacts the claims of *Ascent* would need to imply a relationship between obscurity and certainty, or between blind understanding and enlightenment.

Ascent also contains one of Merton’s more developed accounts of the theological reason for the obscurity of our apprehension. Merton outlines, firstly, that the very effort to ‘attain’ to God generates the kind of darkness we have already been discussing.

If our conceptual knowledge of God is true and certain, then, by our very thoughts, we attain to Him, we touch Him. Yet He is untouchable and unattainable... All other certitude terminates in a clear, definite possession of the thing known. Our certitude about God lays before us a wide-open chasm of darkness.⁶⁷⁵

Later on Merton reiterates a similar paradox: ‘God is beyond the grasp of every concept we can have of Him. And yet our concepts about Him are true.’⁶⁷⁶ The former of these quotations introduces a new description of the obscure apprehension itself (‘a wide-open chasm of darkness’), but more novel with respect to our aims is the emphasis of both quotations on a tension between the truth of concepts about God on the one hand, and the untouchable-ness of God by our concepts on the other. The first quotation above describes this tension in a way that places the truth and the untouchable-ness in a particularly close relation: it is in the moment that we attain certitude about God that the ‘chasm’ opens up. We will return to a more developed account of this idea later on, in Merton’s descriptions of a similar tension in terms of the relationship between the distortion of our post-lapsarian

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*, p 115.

⁶⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁶⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁶⁷⁵ *Ascent to Truth*, 77.

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

knowledge of God and the immanence of God in the Word. For now suffice it to say that behind Merton's descriptions of the obscurity of God lies a tension whereby God is known and unknown, and, furthermore, unknown in the very moment when He is known.

Compared with the works that come after them, *Thoughts in Solitude* and 'Notes Towards a Philosophy of Solitude' offer relatively few developments of Merton's descriptions of how God is known obscurely, perhaps because Merton had claimed a few years prior to writing them that 'I have said enough about the business of darkness and the "experimental contact with God in obscurity"'.⁶⁷⁷ Merton does write about obscurity in *Thoughts* and 'Notes', but not in strict relation to our theme. For example, in *Thoughts* Merton writes, concerning those who live lives of 'sanctity', that 'If you use a category in speaking of them you have to qualify your statement at once, as if they belong to some completely different category',⁶⁷⁸ and in 'Disputed Questions' the one who renounces diversion 'takes upon himself the lonely, barely comprehensible, incommunicable task of working his way through the darkness of his own mystery'.⁶⁷⁹ Whilst the evocations of language that continually qualifies itself, and especially language that is 'barely comprehensible', chime with our definition of 'obscurity' as lacking a clear meaning or exhibiting unintelligibility, neither of these passages bears a specially close relationship to the obscurity of a contemplative's knowledge about *God*. The mode in question in the quoted passages is consequently irrelevant to the present study's aims. Both the shifting of categories and the notion of barely comprehensible language will appear in the analysis of Merton's obscure texts later on, but always in relation to an object associated with God, and not, as in *Thoughts* and 'Notes', in relation to a kind of person or the darkness of a person's mystery. That said, 'Notes' does mention the mode of 'contemplation' as a site of 'losing the shape of

⁶⁷⁷ Jonas, p. 203.

⁶⁷⁸ *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 72.

⁶⁷⁹ *Disputed Questions*, p. 182.

words'.⁶⁸⁰ If a passage of Merton's text were metaphorically to 'lose the shape of words' in such a way that the result was the lack of clarity and uncertainty of meaning associated here with obscurity, then the quotation from 'Notes' would form the backdrop to an aspect of Merton's mystical poetics.

Thoughts also repeats and develops the theological paradox that serves as a background to Merton's many descriptions of what the obscure apprehension is like. In a similar vein to the quotations from *Ascent* discussed above, Merton writes that

[the] twenty-eighth chapter of Job (and also Baruch 3) tells us that the wisdom of God is hidden and impossible to find—and yet ends by assuming that it is easily found, for the fear of the Lord is wisdom.⁶⁸¹

In *Ascent* Merton claimed that our concepts attain to an untouchable God; here Merton claims that God is impossible to find yet easily found. One question that results from these two paradoxical claims is: 'But what is it about God, and God's relationship with the world, that generates this paradox between the hiddenness and accessibility of God's wisdom?' Merton offers a partial answer to this question later on in *Thoughts*. Why are we able to experience 'the great mystery of our being in God and God in us'? Because God,

bending over the abyss of his own inexhaustible being, has drawn forth from himself, and has clothed us in the light of his truth, and purified us in the fires of his love, and made us one, by the power of the cross, with his only begotten Son.⁶⁸²

This makes clear one side of the tension Merton described in *Ascent* and earlier on in *Thoughts*. The side of the 'mystery' that enable us to do what Merton earlier called attaining to God and finding God stems, Merton says here, from the action of God in the Son on the

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁶⁸¹ *Thoughts*, 56.

⁶⁸² *Ibid.*, 68-9.

cross. We shall return to this in a moment, in a discussion of how Merton places the root of God's attainable-ness in relation to his hiddenness.

New Seeds contributes more to our word pool. In *Ascent* Merton wrote about the relationship between blindness and enlightenment, and a set of similar relationships emerges in Merton's re-write of *Seeds*. 'Contemplation' is not, for Merton, 'something', and not 'knowledge', but rather 'awakening, enlightenment, and the amazing intuitive grasp by which love gains certitude of God's creative and dynamic intervention.'⁶⁸³ The relationship between this claim and the 'obscurity' theme will become concrete below in instances where the removal of clear knowledge about 'something' generates an unclear or unintelligible (i.e. 'obscure') passage of text that, at the same time, implies an 'intuitive grasp' of God's action (whatever this might mean). Similarly, in relation to Merton's claim that 'He who is infinite light is so tremendous in his evidence that our minds only see him as darkness', a corresponding theological-poetic text would show that the root of an instance of textual obscurity (describable metaphorically as 'darkness') appears to be the overwhelming (or 'tremendous') presence (or 'evidence') of God.⁶⁸⁴ Again, when Merton claims, concerning the 'obscurity of faith', that 'It is darkness to our minds because it so far transcends their weakness',⁶⁸⁵ the student of mystical poetics is led to seek texts in which an instance of obscurity also points to the transcendence of its object. And finally, when Merton asserts that 'this bafflement, this darkness, this anguish of helpless desire is a fulfilment of meditation'⁶⁸⁶ we are bid to find texts in which lack of clarity, uncertainty of meaning or unintelligibility generates a sense of bafflement, darkness, anguish, or helplessness, but also fulfilment. The overall dynamic to which each of these formulations from *New Seeds* points can be

⁶⁸³ *New Seeds*, all p. 15.

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, both p. 94.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁶⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

summarised as a direct relationship between different kinds of obscurity and different ways in which God's presence can be apprehended.

The Inner Experience provides further material we can add to our vocabulary. The familiar mode of 'Contemplation' now becomes the site of 'communion with a hidden God in His own hiddenness'.⁶⁸⁷ To the metaphor of blindness from *Ascent* we can thus add the metaphor of hiddenness as a possible description of obscurity. *The Inner Experience* also describes how contemplative experiences 'tend toward an obscure, experiential contact with God beyond the senses and in some way even beyond concepts'.⁶⁸⁸ The way in which the contemplative knows God is also a 'paradoxical "knowledge" without knowing' which 'lacks clarity and intellectual precision.'⁶⁸⁹ Two questions that arise from these last two quotations. How might a text enact, not just obscurity itself, but a tendency towards obscurity? How might the obscurity of the text (i.e. its lack of clarity and precision) invite the paradoxical sense of knowing without knowing? The former of these questions leads us into territory that we have not yet encountered in our exposition of Merton; the latter offers a development of the relationship between obscurity and clear apprehension that was repeatedly outlined in *New Seeds* earlier on.

Inner Experience also offers a vision of the theological background to the obscurity of our apprehension that develops the claims we explored earlier from *Ascent* and *Thoughts*. Merton approvingly describes Philoxenus of Mabbug's

original and rather subtle view of original sin as a perversion of faith in which a false belief was added to the "simple" and unspoiled view of truth, so that direct knowledge became distorted by a false affirmation and negation'.⁶⁹⁰

⁶⁸⁷ *Inner Experience*, p. 65.

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁶⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Earlier on we learnt that Merton roots the possibility of our attaining to the mystery of God in the purification and ‘clothing in truth’ that took place on the cross; here we see the other side of the attainable-untouchable paradox. We attain to God through his action on the cross, but our knowledge remains ‘distorted’ because of original sin, which adds complexity to ‘the “simple” and unspoiled view of truth’. Later on in *Inner Experience* Merton develops this idea further, in a way that accounts for both sides of the tension that we have not seen before.

If Christ has left the world and gone to the Father, how do we “see” Him, or bridge the gap that remains between us and the transcendental remoteness of His mystery in heaven? The answer is that the Word, in the Father, is not only transcendently removed at an infinite distance from us, but also and at the same time He is immanent in our world... in a special dynamic and mystical presence as the Saviour, Redeemer, and Lover of the world’.⁶⁹¹

Here we are offered a new theological reflection on both God’s unattainable-ness and his immanence. To Merton’s account of the distortion of our simple view of truth through original sin we can add that God is ‘remote’ and ‘mysterious’ because he is no longer present in the way that Jesus was present when he walked the earth: ‘Christ has left the world and gone to the Father’. And to the possibility of our attaining to or finding God because of our being clothed in truth through the cross we can add that God remains ‘immanent in our world’ through the ‘mystical presence’ of the Word. Earlier on in *Ascent* Merton described how the truth of our concepts about God somehow also opens up a chasm of darkness; here the tension between knowing and not knowing is explained through a theology of God’s both having left the world and being in the world. We shall return to this later on when discussing the theological roots of Merton’s poetics of obscurity.

In *Contemplative Prayer* the mode of ‘our knowledge of God’ is described as ‘knowledge not of him as the object of our scrutiny, but of ourselves as utterly dependant on

⁶⁹¹ *Inner Experience*, p. 44.

his saving and merciful knowledge of us'.⁶⁹² In itself this does not relate to our theme, because it does not mention obscurity or a metaphorical description of obscurity. Merton's theological claim could relate to a poetics of obscurity, however, if a text were to remove God as an object of its scrutiny in such a way as to leave the text lacking clarity or intelligibility, whilst also highlighting our dependence on God. Little else from *Contemplative Prayer* adds to our mystical-poetic search, and we will also take only one content claim from *Zen and the Birds*. Discussing a passage from Eckhart, Merton writes that, 'From the point of view of logic this poetic development simply does not make sense, but as an expression of the inexpressible insight at the core of life, it is incomparable'.⁶⁹³ Putting the validity of Merton's appraisal of the passage from Eckhart aside, the equivalent to 'obscurity' here is the text's not making sense at the level of logic, and the mode in which the obscurity occurs is a 'poetic development' that expresses the inexpressible. In relation to Merton: how can a text that lacks logic seem to express the inexpressible? It will be the aim of section four below to find the kind of 'poetic developments' that Merton found in Eckhart, in the writings of Thomas Merton himself.

As in our previous chapters, the purpose of this exposition has been to gather a vocabulary with which we will later describe the forms of Merton's prose. That vocabulary might be concisely summarised as follows. Regarding the theological roots of the obscurity of our apprehension of God, Merton wrote that the moment of attaining to God is also the moment when he is unattainable,⁶⁹⁴ that the wisdom of God is both impossible and easy to find,⁶⁹⁵ that we enter the mystery of God because we have been clothed in truth by Christ's death on the cross,⁶⁹⁶ that original sin distorted our unspoiled view of truth,⁶⁹⁷ and that Christ

⁶⁹² *Contemplative Prayer*, pp. 103-4.

⁶⁹³ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 11.

⁶⁹⁴ *Ascent to Truth*, p. 77.

⁶⁹⁵ *Thoughts*, p. 56.

⁶⁹⁶ *Thoughts*, 68-9.

has both left the world to be with the Father and remains immanent in the world as the Word.⁶⁹⁸ Regarding the modes through which one might apprehend God in obscurity, Merton wrote about ‘prayer’⁶⁹⁹, ‘contemplation’⁷⁰⁰ (by which we take it to mean ‘the religious apprehension of God, through my life in God’),⁷⁰¹ ‘faith’,⁷⁰² a ‘deep and vital experience [of God]’,⁷⁰³ ‘meditation’,⁷⁰⁴ ‘experiential contact with God’,⁷⁰⁵ and ‘our knowledge of God’.⁷⁰⁶ In terms of the description of the obscure knowledge of God that occurs within these modes, Merton wrote about ‘bafflement’,⁷⁰⁷ ‘hiddenness’⁷⁰⁸ and ‘darkness’;⁷⁰⁹ ‘darkness that is above concepts’;⁷¹⁰ going ‘beyond the reach of any natural understanding’;⁷¹¹ becoming ‘empty of all precise, rational knowledge’;⁷¹² entering a state that ‘leaves the intellect suspended in obscurity’;⁷¹³ advancing ‘beyond the range of concepts into a darkness’;⁷¹⁴ coming to ‘[lack] clarity and intellectual precision’.⁷¹⁵ And we can now also note that a number of Merton’s descriptions of the experience of apprehending God in obscurity were about language: the one who knows God in darkness and hiddenness is led to ‘inarticulate

⁶⁹⁷ *Inner Experience*, p. 20.:

⁶⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶⁹⁹ *What is Contemplation*, p. 104.

⁷⁰⁰ For accounts of ‘contemplation’ as a site for the obscure apprehension of God, see *Seeds*, p. 150; *Seeds*, p. 165; *Ascent*, p. 9; *Ascent*, p. 62; *Disputed Questions*, p. 180; *New Seeds*, p. 15; *The Inner Experience*, p. 65. See also section two of ‘Aporetic Obscurity’.

⁷⁰¹ *New Seeds*, p. 15.

⁷⁰² *Seeds*, p. 78; *Ascent*, p. 114; *New Seeds*, p. 96.

⁷⁰³ *Seeds*, p. 144.

⁷⁰⁴ *New Seeds*, p. 146.

⁷⁰⁵ *The Inner Experience*, p. 71. (Merton’s italics.)

⁷⁰⁶ *Contemplative Prayer*, pp. 103-4.

⁷⁰⁷ *New Seeds*, p. 146.

⁷⁰⁸ *The Inner Experience*, p. 65.

⁷⁰⁹ *Seeds*, p. 49.

⁷¹⁰ *Ascent*, p. 192.

⁷¹¹ *Seeds*, p. 144.

⁷¹² *What is Contemplation*, p. 104.

⁷¹³ *Seeds*, p. 78.

⁷¹⁴ *Ascent*, p. 9.

⁷¹⁵ *The Inner Experience*, p. 80.

praise’,⁷¹⁶ to ‘poetic language that tends to sound strange and dramatic’,⁷¹⁷ to an experience in which ‘all adjectives fall to pieces’,⁷¹⁸ and to language ‘simply does not make sense’.⁷¹⁹ Each of these descriptions will be applied to the forms of Merton’s prose in section four.

3. Literary Terminology: Aporia

Having gathered a vocabulary with which to describe the mode and character of the obscure apprehension of God, our next task is to introduce a key literary term that will describe the form of the texts that embody the content claims just discussed. The single term in question is ‘aporia’. Like the theological material gathered in section two above, the term relates closely to our definition of ‘obscurity’, whilst also offering a specific set of dynamics with which to describe how a ‘lack of clarity’ or ‘unintelligibility’ might be produced. The aim of this section is to outline the definition of ‘aporia’ with which we shall work, to outline its relationship to ‘obscurity’ as defined in *SOED* 1b (see section one above), and in the process ‘to develop’, as Sells puts it, ‘a critical vocabulary for better understanding that literary mode’—that is, the literary mode that embodies the obscure apprehension of God’s presence.⁷²⁰

‘Aporia’, then, is defined by the *Princeton Encyclopedia* as ‘a logical impasse in which meaning oscillates between two contradictory imperatives’.⁷²¹ It is with just such an impasse that we will be concerned in section four. Whereas the texts in the chapter on ‘denial’ above did not embody actual instances of caesura, volta, and hiatus, the texts under discussion here will, contrastingly, constitute direct examples of aporia. With respect to entry

⁷¹⁶ *Seeds*, p. 150.

⁷¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁷¹⁹ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 11.

⁷²⁰ Sells, *Unsayings*, p. 10.

⁷²¹ *Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 60.

1b of ‘obscurity’ from *SOED*, *aporia* relates to our broader theme of ‘obscurity’ as ‘uncertainty of meaning’, because the ‘impasse’ of *aporia* is a state of uncertainty about which of the two contradictory imperatives of the *aporia* one might accept or follow. *Aporia* also relates to the *SOED*’s definition of obscurity as ‘unintelligibility’ because, by commanding the reader to accept or follow both X and its opposite at the same time, the text ceases to be easily comprehensible. And with respect to Merton’s thoughts on obscurity, as we shall see, *aporia* can lead to (amongst other things) the sense of an emptying-out of rational knowledge, the suspension of the intellect, and the bafflement of inarticulacy. In sum, the correspondence of ‘*aporia*’ to the literary examples to which we shall now turn is relatively simple and direct.

4. Literary Analysis: Merton’s Poetics of Aporetic Obscurity

We have now defined a central theme (obscurity), placed it in relation to a notion that is prevalent in Merton’s theology (we know God obscurely), gathered various modes through which, for Merton, such obscure apprehension occurs (for instance, contemplation) and terms with which it can be described (for instance, as darkness), and outlined a literary form through which it might be embodied (*aporia*). Our next task is to bring these strands together by analysing instances of *aporia* in Merton’s texts that embody, in our readings, the notion that we know God obscurely. The six examples discussed below are ordered roughly in terms of the strength of their aporetic contradictions, starting with an example where an initial contradiction falls apart into non-contradiction, and finishing with an example that generates a contradiction between two imperatives that are both themselves contradictions. Each of our readings will hinge upon the definition of the two opposing sides of the *aporia*, and, in the latter cases, the two opposing sides of each of the opposing sides of the *aporia*, or in other words the aporetic contradiction within both sides of an aporetic contradiction.

The aporia in the following, from *Thoughts in Solitude*, revolves around a contradiction between the claims that *it is good, in the spiritual life, to seek unreality*, and the claim that *it is good, in the spiritual life, not to seek unreality*. The passage can be described, we shall read, in terms of Merton's claims about the knowledge of God *tending* towards obscurity.⁷²² The opening sentence of the passage is the beginning of the first chapter of *Thoughts in Solitude*; the second and third are also from the first page. I have placed them together for discussion because they contribute to a single train of thought concerning reality and unreality.

There is no greater disaster in the spiritual life than to be immersed in unreality...

Before we can see that created things (especially material) are unreal, we must see clearly that they are real.

For the 'unreality' of material things is only relative to the *greater* reality of spiritual things.⁷²³

The passage's evocation of a mode, such as contemplation, in which God is apprehended, requires only a small modification of the language Merton used in section two above. Placing the passage alongside, for instance, Merton's definition from earlier of 'contemplation' as 'the religious apprehension of God, through my life in God',⁷²⁴ we can see that the speaker of the passage, who seeks to explain aspects of the 'spiritual life' and to apprehend the 'reality of spiritual things', seeks something not dissimilar to 'contemplation'. Merton's language about 'God' and 'the way of faith' is replaced by corresponding language about 'spiritual life' and 'spiritual things'. The passage thus coheres closely with the contexts gathered in section two.⁷²⁵

⁷²² *Inner Experience*, p. 71.

⁷²³ *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 19.

⁷²⁴ *New Seeds*, p. 15.

⁷²⁵ *Ascent*, get p. 115.

The passage is also highly obscure, not because any given part of it is unintelligible in isolation, or because there is uncertainty of meaning within any given sentence, but because of the relationships between the sentence-paragraphs. The question on which this obscurity hinges is: 'What does the speaker seek?' In the first sentence-paragraph, the answer appears to be 'reality'. 'Unreality' is a 'disaster', and, we might presume, reality is not. The speaker seeks to avoid 'disaster', and so seeks to avoid 'unreality', and, implicitly, to find 'reality'. This simple inference is undone, however, in the second sentence-paragraph, where the speaker seeks to see that 'created things (especially material) are unreal'. Here are the first two quoted sentences again.

There is no greater disaster in the spiritual life than to be immersed in unreality...

Before we can see that created things (especially material) are unreal, we must see clearly that they are real.

The emphasis in the second sentence is not upon seeing that things are unreal in order subsequently to see that they cause 'disaster' and should be avoided, but on seeing that things are 'real' in order to reach the conclusion that things are 'unreal'. In the first sentence the speaker implicitly sought what is 'real' in order to avoid the disaster of the 'unreal'; in the second sentence he seeks to see that things are 'real' in order to be able to see that, in actual fact, they are 'unreal'. There is an aporetic contradiction at work here between the imperative to find the real and the imperative to find the unreal. There is also a conflict between the imperative to get to the real by avoiding the unreal, and the imperative to get to the unreal by embracing the real. The first two sentences diverge in these ways. To borrow a literary term used by Roland Barthes: there is '*incommunication*' between them.⁷²⁶

⁷²⁶ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 20. Hereafter *Pleasure*.

The relationship of the third sentence-paragraph of the passage to the former two partially resolves this situation, but also generates further obscurity. Re-quoting the three sentences will make this clearer.

There is no greater disaster in the spiritual life than to be immersed in unreality...

Before we can see that created things (especially material) are unreal, we must see clearly that they are real.

For the 'unreality' of material things is only relative to the *greater* reality of spiritual things.

The third sentence relates coherently to the first and second sentences when we ignore the already noted relationship between the first two sentences. If, in the first sentence, the speaker sought to avoid the 'disaster' of 'unreality' and, implicitly, to seek reality instead, the third sentence identifies the site of unreality as 'material things', and the site of '*greater* reality' as 'spiritual things'. The third sentence describes, then, the place to which the speaker of the first sentence should go in order to complete his search. And the relationship between sentences three and two is similarly coherent. If the second sentence identifies a progression from seeing that 'created things' are 'real' to seeing that they are 'unreal', the third sentence describes the next stage in that series. One moves through, firstly, the stage of seeing that created things are real, and secondly, the stage of seeing that created things are unreal, before reaching the stage of the third sentence, where one sees that 'spiritual' things are real.

One can tentatively bring these readings together in an overall paraphrase of the passage: *in order to see that spiritual things are more real than material things, first see that material things are real, and then see that they are unreal*. As a claim in its own right, this is nearly comprehensible; the only remaining puzzle is the unexplained process, described in the original text by sentence two, of seeing that something is 'unreal' by first seeing that something is 'real', which borders paradox. Yet even the given paraphrase is only tentative, because sentence three complicates the passage in a way not allowed for by our paraphrase.

Sentence three opens, that is, with the word ‘For’, which has the sense, *the reason for this is as follows*. Sentence three does not simply posit that spiritual things are more real than material things, then, but that there is a causal relationship between sentence three and sentence two. The baffling paraphrase of the last two quoted sentences thus runs: *the reason we must see that material things are real before seeing that they are unreal is that the unreality of material things is only relative to the greater reality of spiritual things*. On its own, without further explanation, this makes little sense. The passage would be clearer if it were inverted, so that the reason we sought to see the unreality of things by seeing the reality of things was in order to perceive the relative greatness of spiritual things. As it stands, however, the claim that spiritual things are relatively greater than material things bears no clear causal relation to the specific progression from seeing that material things are real to seeing that they are unreal.

At the same time, however, we can also now say that the aporetic contradiction in the relationship between sentences one and two has been undone. The causal relationship between sentence two and three may be unintelligible, but the overall point it seeks to make is not. The end-goal of seeking the unreal by seeking the real, whatever this might mean, is to find the ‘reality of spiritual things’, and we can say conclusively that the answer to the question ‘What does the speaker seek?’ is *spiritual reality*. The passage leads to a single, non-aporetic imperative, which is obscure only because of the strange process by which we are led to it. The first sentences ‘tend *toward*’ one kind of obscurity, as Merton put it in *The Inner Experience* (quoted in section two above), before leading to another, lesser kind of obscurity.⁷²⁷ Equally, the text displays, as Merton puts it in *New Seeds*, ‘inarticulate... efforts to centre your heart upon God’, insofar as we can associate the search for spiritual reality

⁷²⁷ *The Inner Experience*, p. 71.

with a search for God. There is a lack of such *centring* in the passage, the pivotal logic of which continually evades the reader's grasp.

The kind of conclusion to which our readings of Merton's poetics of aporetic obscurity bring us have now begun to become clearer. Commentators on the obscurity of Merton's late poetry have often pointed to an 'affirmative project'⁷²⁸ or to 'alternative kinds of poetic coherence' beyond the difficulty of understanding the poems;⁷²⁹ our contrasting aim has been to show that the form of the passage embodies a claim Merton made elsewhere at the level of content. How does one seek spiritual reality? The reader is denied an answer to this question because of both the unintelligible relationship between seeking the real and the unreal in the first two sentences of the passage from *Thoughts in Solitude*, and the indeterminate causal relationships between the last two sentences; but in doing so the passage nevertheless shows forth what Merton earlier claimed: that the contemplative life leads us to a state of 'bafflement'⁷³⁰ where knowledge of the Spirit is characterised by 'hiddenness'⁷³¹ and 'darkness',⁷³² where we are emptied of 'precise, rational knowledge'⁷³³ and where language, at times, 'simply does not make sense'.⁷³⁴ To take this a step further by relating it to the theological background of Merton's thoughts about the darkness of God, we can further say that the dynamics of the passage embody the apprehension of a God who is both known and not know, immanent and transcendent, and whose characteristics thus cohere with Merton's notion of a God who is present through the cross yet distorted through original sin.⁷³⁵ The example just discussed is a site, we have read, where the practical upshot of this

⁷²⁸ Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, p. 170.

⁷²⁹ Poks, 'Endless Inscription', p. 209.

⁷³⁰ *New Seeds*, p. 146.

⁷³¹ *The Inner Experience*, p. 65.

⁷³² *Seeds*, p. 49.

⁷³³ *What is Contemplation*, p. 104.

⁷³⁴ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 11.

⁷³⁵ See *Thoughts*, pp. 68-9 and *Inner Experience*, p. 20.

theology is embodied, enacted, performed. This is our first example of Merton's poetics of aporetic obscurity.

In our second example, which is taken from *Jonas*, an aporia remains in place and, further, both sides of the aporia are themselves indeterminate. The passage describes Merton's reflections on his struggle to remember what to do whilst performing his duties as deacon.

I was afraid the whole Church might come down on my head, because of what I used to be—as if that were not forgotten!
But God weighs scarcely anything at all.⁷³⁶

What is the relationship here between the Church's coming 'down on my head' and God's weighing 'scarcely anything'? One possibility is to read opposition in the passage, with the subtext, *the Church is heavy but God is light*. In that case, however, it is unclear whether or not God's lightness alleviates the speaker's being 'afraid', and, if it does, how so. On the side of the text not alleviating the speaker's fear, the subtext might be, *although God weighs less than the Church, I am still afraid of the Church coming down on my head*, or, *although I am afraid of the Church coming down on my head, I am not additionally afraid of God doing the same, because God weighs scarcely anything at all*. In both readings, the 'But' at the beginning of the second sentence contrasts a notion of heaviness with a notion of lightness, but not a notion of fear with a notion of overcoming fear. On the other hand, if God's lightness does alleviate the speaker's fear, the subtext might run, *I was afraid of the Church's heaviness, but God's lightness alleviated my fear*. Reading in this way, the question becomes: how does God's lightness alleviate fear? God might be identified with the Church, with the subtext, *I was afraid of the Church coming down on my head, but the Church is Godly, and God is light, so my fear was alleviated*. Or the Church might have been mistaken for God,

⁷³⁶ *Jonas*, p. 171.

with the subtext, *I was afraid of the Church coming down on my head, but really it was God coming down on my head, and God is light, so my fear was alleviated.*

A pattern, familiar from our reading of the ‘spiritual reality’ passage above, has emerged. The passage can be read in two ways, and specifically as either a ‘Yes’ or a ‘No’ to a closed question, which in this case runs: ‘Does the speaker’s fear continue in the second sentence?’ Re-quoting the passage with this question in mind should make the aporia clearer.

I was afraid the whole Church might come down on my head, because of what I used to be—as if that were not forgotten!
But God weighs scarcely anything at all.

As we have already seen, to address the question of the speaker’s (dis)continuing fear is to be confronted with further indeterminacy, or lingering indecision concerning meaning. If we answer ‘Yes’ to the question, the text either emphasises the continuation of fear (*although God is light, I am still afraid...*), or the limitation of continuing fear (*I am not additionally afraid...*). If we answer ‘No’, the text either emphasises union between God and the Church (*the Church is God*), or confusion between God and the Church (*it was God, not the Church*). And as before, it is with the impossibility of avoiding the aporia between these options that we are concerned. The same is true when Turner, discussing mystical writings, claims that the effect of paradoxical metaphors is to ‘*exhibit*’ their failure to express information clearly rather than to ‘measure any particular extent to which the metaphors negated fall short of the mark’.⁷³⁷ With Turner, and partially with the overall shape of the project of Amos Wilder,⁷³⁸

⁷³⁷ Turner, *Darkness*, p. 39.

⁷³⁸ One of the central theses of Wilder’s *Christian Rhetoric* is that ‘we may find in the dialogue between heaven and earth that occurs in the New Testament elements of distortion, or hyperbole and incomprehension’ (*Christian Rhetoric*, p.58). Wilder’s study most strongly provides the theological side of the theological poetics implied by this kind of claim, by providing a way of thinking about God to which a poetics of writing about God might be related. Wilder does not, however, provide close analysis of the workings of ‘distortion’, ‘hyperbole’, and ‘incomprehension’ in the New Testament, in the same way that McGinn does not lend close textual analysis to his view that ‘Bernard [of Clairveaux’s] rich and

we are concerned with the relationship between the text's failure to avoid obscurity on the one hand, and Merton's theology on the other.

To relate our reading of the passage from *Jonas* to Merton's content claims: the text is, as we have seen, unclear about whether or not the speaker is afraid, but the ambiguity about fear always relates specifically to the obscurity of our knowledge of God. The question 'Is the speaker afraid or not?' is indeterminate because it is unclear whether God is or is not identified with the Church, and, equally, whether God is or is not coming down on the speaker's head. In Merton's words from section two above, the passage is about the obscurity of 'our knowledge of God',⁷³⁹ with an emphasis on the 'hiddenness' of that knowledge, which results from the ambiguous relationship between the two quoted sentences.⁷⁴⁰ And to take this a step further into the Merton's theological roots, the passage presents to us a God whose presence is distorted in a way that coheres with Merton's views about the distortion of our knowledge of God as a result of original sin.⁷⁴¹ We might also add that the passage embodies the notion that we know God in a 'darkness that is above concepts',⁷⁴² if we are willing to read into the passage the sense that the obscurity leads us *above* concepts, rather than (say) below them into a mire of ambiguity. Nothing in the passage itself makes explicit this notion of elevation, but Merton's wider work, for instance the quotations from section two above, makes this reading more compelling: as we saw earlier, Merton associates an obscure knowledge of God with going 'above' and 'beyond'.⁷⁴³ Without having to read this notion of ascent into the passage, however, we have an example of the obscurity of the

suggestive descriptions of mystical experience conceal the very act of revealing' (*Growth*, p. 207). In distinction, the core analysis of the present essay concerns, not the description of the poetics, but the analysis of them.

⁷³⁹ *Contemplative Prayer*, pp. 103-4.

⁷⁴⁰ *Inner Experience*, p. 65.

⁷⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷⁴² *Ascent*, p. 192.

⁷⁴³ See, for example, *Ibid.*, pp. 192 and p. 9.

knowledge of God, which is hidden behind an aporetic contradiction resulting from an ambiguous relationship between sentences.

The aporia in our third example, which is taken from *Jonas*, also leads us to two conflicting alternative readings. It is taken from a description of the different ‘levels of depth’ that can be experienced in prayer.⁷⁴⁴ The ‘third level’, Merton contends, ‘is charged with intelligence’. It is a place where God is known through a ‘strange awakening’.⁷⁴⁵ Still writing about the third level, Merton goes on to describe God in the following ways.

He has passed by sooner than he arrived. He was gone before He came. He returned forever. He never yet passed by and already He had disappeared.⁷⁴⁶

The question on which the aporia hinges in this case is: ‘Are the actions of God in the passage paradoxical?’ We can ask this question of each of the quoted sentences, with the exception of the last one. With respect to sentence one: if ‘passed by’ means, for instance, *dropped by*, the sentence is a paradox; how can He drop by before he arrives, assuming that He is dropping by and arriving at the same place? If, on the other hand, ‘passed by’ is read as, for instance, *walked past*, the first sentence need not be paradoxical; He might have walked past, not realising His destination, before turning back and arriving shortly afterwards. With respect to sentence two: if His being ‘gone’ is read strictly as denoting an action that can only happen after He comes, the sentence is paradoxical; ‘He was gone *before* He came’. If, on the other hand, ‘gone’ simply means *being away*, the sentence makes non-paradoxical sense; He was absent before becoming present. With respect to sentence three: if ‘forever’ is taken to mean a time-span that has always already begun, with no beginning, then the act of returning cannot pre-date an eternal time-span, and the sentence is paradoxical. If, on the other hand, one does not read ‘forever’ in this way, the sentence can simply be taken to mean that He

⁷⁴⁴ *Jonas*, p. 338.

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 339-340 & 340.

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

came back and stayed, without leaving again. It is harder, lastly, to find paradox in sentence four. To do so would be to assume that one could not, for some reason, have disappeared prior to having passed by. It is clearly non-paradoxical, on the other hand, that He might not have passed by, whilst also having disappeared. The body of a creature that lived a million years ago might not have passed by the library window, and might well have disappeared.

If, on the one hand, we read the four quoted sentences, or at least the first three sentences, as paradoxical, the passage is obscure because unintelligible. The action of God strains beyond a comprehensible conceptual framework—or, as Merton put it in *The Inner Experience* earlier on, it ‘lacks clarity and intellectual precision.’⁷⁴⁷ How can God arrive before he arrives? How can he return before forever begins? If, on the other hand, we read the text as non-paradoxical, a new set of questions result. Why not use clearer, more precise language? If sentence one says that God passed by the house before coming back and eventually arriving, why leave open the possibility of the paradoxical reading about arriving before arriving, and why do the same in sentences two and three? Why do so, furthermore, given the wider context of Merton’s work as a writer who praised paradox as a form of mystical language,⁷⁴⁸ and as a theologian working within a mystical tradition that views paradox as a central part of its enterprise?⁷⁴⁹ Why, finally, tell us relatively mundane facts about God’s movements at all, especially in the high-flown tone generated by the repetition of ‘He’ at the start of each sentence?

⁷⁴⁷ *Inner Experience*, p. 80.

⁷⁴⁸ ‘The language of the mystics... is always poetic and claims plenty of license for paradox.’ *Inner Experience*, pp. 14-15.

⁷⁴⁹ See, for instance, McGinn, whose history of Christian mysticism is centred on the ‘motif’ of ‘the puzzling paradox of God’s presence which is also his absence’. One of the lengthiest accounts of paradox in McGinn’s volumes is devoted to Eckhart’s famous view of ‘identity without distinction’. See McGinn, *Growth*, p. 420, *Harvest*, p. 121, and pp. 94-194 for a longer account of paradox in Eckhart.

Positioned between these two sets of questions, the passage generates what some literary critics call ‘slippages’⁷⁵⁰ or ‘slide’⁷⁵¹ between meanings, and what the *Princeton Encyclopedia* called, in our exposition of ‘aporia’ above, an ‘oscillation between imperatives’.⁷⁵² With respect to Merton’s thought about God’s obscurity: on the one hand, the text slips or oscillates towards the obscurity of paradox, but also, on the other hand, towards a clear description of God’s actions. To borrow words Merton used to describe ‘contemplation’ in *New Seeds* (quoted above), the text is positioned between the ‘darkness’ of the paradoxical and the ‘enlightenment’ of the non-paradoxical,⁷⁵³ or again between God’s being touchable and His being untouchable,⁷⁵⁴ rather than, as has often been noted of literary strategies in mystical discourse, between the two sides of a paradox.⁷⁵⁵ And more than this: the part of the text that enlightens us as to God’s actions is *the same part* that produces the incomprehensible darkness of paradox. Merton also claimed in *New Seeds* earlier on that ‘He

⁷⁵⁰ Kermode, ‘Endings, Continued’, p. 73.

⁷⁵¹ Sells, for instance, speaks of ‘antecedence fusion, ambiguity, or slide’. See *Unsayings*, p. 75. ‘Slide’ has also been used in recent discussion of the dialectic between language and silence. See for instance Ward’s ‘forms of the apophatic—where words slide off into silence or mystery or aporia’. Graham Ward, ‘Steiner and Eagleton: The Practice of Hope and the Idea of the Tragic’, in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 19, No. 2, June 2005, pp. 100-111, p. 101.

⁷⁵² See section three above.

⁷⁵³ *New Seeds*, all p. 15. The argument being made here about the paradoxical, dark side of the passage is not the same as the claim, made by William James and his followers, that paradox in mystical literature can represent an attempt, in Nelstrop’s summary, to ‘describe an ineffable experience’. The mode to which the passage relates is not an *ineffable* experience, such as ‘infused contemplation’ as defined in Merton’s words in section two above, but an experience where God is known obscurely. Neither do I wish to make the claim, with James and his ‘perennialist’ school, that paradoxical language in mystical discourse has a ‘purely descriptive function’. The six passages analysed here are not merely descriptive but also exhibitory: they embody a mode of knowing, rather than describing a mode of knowing that is, in fact, ineffable. See *Contemporary Theoretical Approaches* pp. 49 & 53.

⁷⁵⁴ *Ascent to Truth*, p. 77.

⁷⁵⁵ William Johnson, for instance, writing about Thoreau, argues that ‘Rousseau’s literary aim is to reveal the intricacies of identity as a perpetual paradox, a conflict between awareness and feeling’. The ‘conflict’ in this case describes the interaction within the paradox between awareness feeling itself, whereas the passage from Merton under discussion consists of a conflict between paradox and a reading external to the paradox (that is, a non-paradoxical reading). See Johnson, *Thoreau*, pp. 83-4.

who is infinite light is so tremendous in his evidence that our minds only see him as darkness', and a similar, analogous relationship between non-paradoxical evidence about God's action and paradoxical darkness occurs in our reading of the passage.⁷⁵⁶ Whether the *cause* of the paradoxical darkness is (to paraphrase Merton) the tremendousness of the non-paradoxical evidence is not exhibited in the text from *Jonas*; but the analogy between evidence and darkness remains intact. This is a literary phenomenon not noted by McGinn, Turner, or Sells in their major works to date. It is also not an example of the well-known tendency of mystical texts 'to suggest what cannot be said', as Merton once put it in *Zen and the Birds*, but rather of the simultaneous explanation of something that can be said clearly, and the paradoxical description of something that cannot.⁷⁵⁷ This is our third example of Merton's poetics of aporetic obscurity.

The similar contradiction in our reading of the following, from *Inner Experience*, occurs between the claim that we know God, and the claim that we do not know God. The strength of the contradiction is based upon the explicitness of the opposing terms employed. Merton is speaking about 'contemplative experience', and as such the passage maps directly onto the mode about which Merton spoke in section two above.⁷⁵⁸ The passage is the concluding sentence in the paragraph to which it belongs.

It knows Him as unknown. It knows "by unknowing".⁷⁵⁹

Clearly the language used here belongs to the tradition of theology concerned with '*agnosia*', and perhaps, as Michael Sells puts it, to a theology concerned with 'an unknowing that goes

⁷⁵⁶ *New Seeds*, p. 94.

⁷⁵⁷ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 6.

⁷⁵⁸ See, for instance, the exposition on *Seeds* given in section three above.

⁷⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

beyond rather than falling short of kataphatic affirmations'.⁷⁶⁰ The passage also chimes closely with what is perhaps theology's best-known use of the word 'unknowing', namely *The Cloud of Unknowing*.⁷⁶¹ Despite these clear resonances, however, our aim is not to situate Merton's formulation within a wider theological context, but to analyse the coherence between the form of his language and his content claims from elsewhere.

Following this aim, we can note two distinct kinds of description in the quoted text: firstly, the description of what God is known as, and secondly, the description of how God is known. Both types of description are obscure, and, further, obscure at the level not only of form but also of content. At the level of content, God's being 'unknown' places him 'beyond concepts',⁷⁶² as Merton put in *Inner Experience* a few pages before the passage under scrutiny, because a God who is 'unknown' is, presumably, a God whose characteristics (beside unknown-ness) cannot be expressed clearly in language, or, in the terms of our current chapter, an 'unknown' God is an obscure God. An alternative way of phrasing the content of the passage could thus be: *God is obscure*. For this reason the passage could have been quoted in section two above amongst Merton's other content claims about obscure apprehensions of God.

The subtext *God is obscure* does not, however, take into account the aspects of the passage that enact, as well as describe, obscurity. God may be beyond concepts because He is unknown, but the process of knowing God 'as unknown' itself has an unclear meaning. To 'know[] Him as unknown' is different, that is, from knowing that we cannot know Him, in which case we would know a comprehensible object, namely our ignorance about Him. In the case of knowing the unknown, we paradoxically know something that we do not know. But

⁷⁶⁰ Sells, *Unsayings*, p. 35. For Merton's own account of St John of the Cross's theology of unknowing, see *Ascent to Truth*, pp. 55-66.

⁷⁶¹ Amongst many examples see, for instance, the author's description of 'This blind impulse of love towards God for himself alone, this secret love beating on this cloud of unknowing'. *Cloud*, p. 139.

⁷⁶² *The Inner Experience*, p. 71. (Merton's italics.)

even this does not accurately summarise the paradox of the passage. The speaker does not claim that we know the unknown, but that we ‘know[] Him *as* unknown’. He is not unknown *per se*; he is only unknown *in the way that* (‘*as*’) we know him. Our knowing Him as unknown does not necessarily rule out, for instance, somebody else knowing Him as known, in the same way that, whilst I might know somebody as an enemy, you might know that same person as a friend.

The continuing paradox of knowing an object as unknown is further complicated by the fact that we know ‘*Him*’ as unknown. We have already seen that the passage does not rule out the possibility of knowing Him as known – or, simply, knowing Him – and the direct mention of ‘*Him*’ reinforces this sense of possible knowing. Who is the ‘*Him*’ that the speaker mentions? One thing we can note in this regard is that He is not merely a symbol for something that is unknown; for instance, Merton introduces the concept that He is male and that He is God (or at least, the capital letter implies this). He is not totally beyond the reach of an attempt at conceptualisation, then, and it seems to be that the word ‘unknown’ conveys the *limit* of our knowledge rather than its total absence. Given this, we might read that He appears to be ‘unknown’ because of the narrowness of our knowledge about Him. We have, then, managed to gather three ways in which His being ‘unknown’ is controverted by the suggestion of a limit to knowing, rather than a total negation of knowing: firstly, His being ‘known’; secondly, His not necessarily being unknowable, but only known ‘*as*’ unknown; and thirdly, His being an object about which we know basic information, such as maleness. Each of these three factors leads to a reading of the seeming paradox – to know the unknown – as signifying the subtext, *He is known, but incompletely*. In this way the paradox can be undone.

Such a reading is called into question, however, by the second quoted sentence – ‘It knows “by unknowing”’ – which states that, beyond the separation between aspects of Him

that are known and aspects that are unknown, the mode through which any part of Him is (un)known is itself paradoxical. Whether we are speaking about the aspects of Him that Merton has sought to conceptualise, such as His maleness, or those parts of Him that are described by the negative noun 'unknown', he is known *by* unknowing, which is itself paradoxical. In our earlier analysis of the passage we began to split the paradox apart at the level of whether He, as an object, is known; but the second sentence re-assembles a new paradox that is applicable to every aspect of knowledge of Him. Aporia returns, and it hinges on what it means to 'unknow'. If to 'unknow' means to cease knowing, for instance by erasing knowledge in some way, the paradox seems to be that the task of unknowing erases 'knowing', which is also, according to the passage, the mode by which knowing occurs. One way around this paradox is to say that it is the *process* of unknowing and not the *result* of unknowing that constitutes knowing. To illustrate: the speaker knows God through the action of erasing knowledge, and not by the blank page that is left after the erasure is complete. The knowing that is produced by this act of erasure does not controvert the act of erasure itself, because the process of erasure can continue whilst more knowledge is added. To re-illustrate: the process of erasing marks on paper itself produces more marks.

Avoiding paradox in this way, the obscurity of the second sentence comes to revolve around the unintelligibility of the illustration just given. Had we been told that we come to know God by reading the Bible, the activity that constituted our gaining knowledge of God would have been relatively (although only relatively) comprehensible. As it stands, however, it is unclear how we might perform the action of erasing knowledge about God in such a way that more knowledge about Him is produced. And further obscurity is generated as soon as we seek to relate the second sentence to the first, and specifically to the claim that we know God 'as unknown'. Inserting this claim into the second sentence, it can no longer be the case that the act of erasing knowledge simply produces knowledge, because the act of erasure

produces knowledge which is known ‘as unknown’. To follow our definition of ‘unknow’ as erasure through to its logical conclusion, the full image, taking both sentences into account, involves erasing marks in such a way that more marks are produced, but with the qualification that the new marks are themselves not marks, but blank spaces of unknowing. The passage is not quite an example of what Turner calls the ‘negation of a negation’, then, but rather the negation of an affirmation caused by a negation.⁷⁶³ Whether we are speaking about the aspects of Him that are known, such as His maleness, or those aspects of Him that we do not know, He is known by unknowing, which is itself a paradoxical formulation. Recent critics have sought, as we have, to get around the problem of paradox;⁷⁶⁴ the point resulting from our analysis of the ‘unknowing’ passage is that, in the case of the present passage, there is no such escape.

The single closed question on which the aporia of the passage hinges in this case is ‘Do we know God?’ The distinctiveness of the passage amongst those already discussed is the explicitness with which it provides reasons for answering that question with both a ‘Yes’

⁷⁶³ Within the category of the ‘negation of the negation’ Turner includes paradoxical formulations such as the classical image of God’s ‘brilliant darkness’, which negates that God is dark and bright by affirming that he is bright and dark, as well as negating *that* negation by affirming that He *is* a ‘brilliant darkness’. Turner goes on to claim that this last stage is not a ‘*third* utterance’ or a ‘*synthesis*’ but ‘the collapse of our affirmation and denials into disorder’. The claim of the present chapter is slightly distinct from this. Whilst our analysis shows, with Turner, that there is no way round the paradox of ‘knowing by unknowing’, and that it cannot be synthesised non-paradoxically, it also shows that the obscurity of the paradox is an analogue to claims Merton made elsewhere. The ‘unknowing’ passage *does*, then, constitute a ‘*third* utterance’, as Turner put it, which is distinct from the claim that we know or do not know God—that is, the utterance that we know God obscurely. Turner, *Darkness*, p. 22.

⁷⁶⁴ For instance, Blodgett and Coward read into ‘Blake’s contrarities’ the view that ‘both creation and destruction involve a kind of losing’. Blake remains unquoted in the text, so it is impossible to know whether his ‘contrarities’ are paradoxical or otherwise, but Blodgett’s and Coward’s mode of reading clearly seeks a non-oppositional ground that unites the contrarities of creation and destruction, in the same way that the present analysis sought (and failed) to avoid the paradox through its reading of a distinction between the process of unknowing and the process of knowing. E. D. Blodgett and H. G. Coward, ‘Introduction’, in Blodgett and Coward (eds.), *Silence, the Word and the Sacred* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989), pp. 1-9, p. 3.

and a 'No'. In the 'he has passed by' passage discussed above, the contradiction of God's actions both being and not being paradoxical was generated by implication: the tone and word choice implied paradox, but each sentence could also be read as describing a non-paradoxical action. In the passage now under discussion the aporia is generated by the juxtaposition of the antonyms 'know' and 'unknow' in a logical formulation that explicitly claims that we do both at once. The aporia is generated, then, at the level of content, and, further, by content that is clearly, even obviously, aporetic, in contrast to the way that the 'he has passed by' example relied on implication.

For this reason the passage is the strongest, or at least the most easily recognisable, example of the poetics of obscurity that we have discussed so far in this chapter. It is a direct and clear embodiment of Merton's claim that 'contemplation' (the 'It' in the quoted passage referred, after all, to 'contemplation') 'can only be expressed in poetic language that tends to sound strange and dramatic.'⁷⁶⁵ And to strangeness and drama we could add a number of Merton's other descriptions of contemplation and the obscure apprehension of God: the paradox leaves the reader in 'bafflement'⁷⁶⁶ and the object of unknowing in 'hiddenness',⁷⁶⁷ describable only in language that 'simply does not make sense'.⁷⁶⁸ And beyond this, the passage can also be mapped onto terrain from Merton's writings that is far more highly specified than these general descriptions: it is a clear example of the dialectic between God's being known and unknown, touchable and untouchable,⁷⁶⁹ easy to find and impossible to find,⁷⁷⁰ that we quoted earlier from Merton's account of the theological background of his writings on obscurity. The God who is known 'as unknowing' and 'by unknowing' embodies both sides of the tension between a God who is made known to us through the mystery of the

⁷⁶⁵ *Seeds*, p. 165.

⁷⁶⁶ *New Seeds*, p. 146.

⁷⁶⁷ *The Inner Experience*, p. 65.

⁷⁶⁸ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 11.

⁷⁶⁹ *Ascent to Truth*, p. 77.

⁷⁷⁰ *Thoughts*, p. 56.

cross⁷⁷¹ and yet whose presence is distorted because of our sinfulness,⁷⁷² or again, a God who has both gone to be with the father and yet remains with us as the immanent Word.⁷⁷³ This is a particularly compelling instance of the poetics of obscurity. It is the fourth of the six examples we will discuss in this chapter.

The aporia of our fifth example, which is taken from *Seeds*, hinges on the question ‘Does the speaker change his mind about meditation?’ The strength of its aporia derives from the occurrence, in our reading, of a contradiction within a contradiction—that is, a contradiction where one side of the opposition is itself a contradiction.

You have only really meditated well when you have come, to some extent, to realize God. Yet even that is not quite the thing.

After all, anyone who has tried it is aware that the closer you get to God, the less question there can be of realizing Him or anything about Him.⁷⁷⁴

There is a tension here between the view that to meditate well is to realize God, and the view that to get close to God is not to realize Him. In itself this is not an opposition; but the close proximity of the two claims, as well as the phrase ‘after all’, which seems clearly to link the third sentence to the previous two, implies that coming close to God is an action related to meditation, and specifically that one may come close to God in meditation. The opposition in the passage occurs, then, between the view that to meditate well is to realize God, and the view that to meditate well is not to realize Him, because the aim is to come close to Him, which for Merton is to do the opposite of realizing Him. The passage’s obscurity is not comprised of this opposition, however, which could be read as a straightforward example of turning away, like those discussed in our chapter on ‘Denial’ earlier: a view about meditation is posited, partially withdrawn because it is ‘not quite the thing’, and then denied through the

⁷⁷¹ *Thoughts*, pp. 68-9.

⁷⁷² *Inner Experience*, p. 20.

⁷⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁷⁷⁴ *Seeds*, p. 169.

assertion of its opposite. There is no ‘uncertainty of meaning’ with respect to a contradiction between views, but only a change of opinions.

The aporetic obscurity in the passage is instead related to whether the speaker’s attitude towards meditation really changes. If we answer ‘yes’, citing as evidence the opposition between the speaker’s initial view about realizing God and his subsequent view about not realizing God, the obscurity of the passage is generated by the negative character of the view to which the speaker turns. In this reading the speaker changes his mind, but in doing so he controverts the content of the first sentence of the passage by claiming that we do not realize ‘anything about Him’. In this case, we are left with uncertainty of meaning with respect to questions that the initial sentence of the passage seemed to answer. How do we know we have meditated well, if not by realizing God? How might we come to realize God, if not by meditation? The last sentence of the passage offers no answers to these questions. The denial of the claims of first sentence results only in indecision and indeterminacy.

We could also assume, however, that the speaker does *not* change his mind in the passage, or at least that he does not change his mind as radically as the opposition between his initial and his eventual view of meditation implies. It seems strange, for instance, that the initial sentence, with its confident assertion about the ‘only’ way to meditate well, is so quickly subverted by the subsequent sentences. If ‘anyone who has tried it’ knows that meditation is not about realizing God, why did the speaker initially assume that realization is the way to meditate well? Perhaps he simply made an error in the first sentence, and reverses his position in the second and third, or perhaps the passage embodies a mode of language in which, as Merton once put it, ‘the moment fact is transferred to a statement it is false’.⁷⁷⁵ But in several ways the passage does not support this reading of an initial error or falsehood. The second sentence does not say, *but the view I just mentioned is, in fact, totally wrong*; it

⁷⁷⁵ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 36.

actually says, ‘Yet even that is not quite the thing’, with the subtext, *the view I just mentioned is close to the truth, but is not quite right*. Similarly, the third sentence does not say, *I have made an error: I should have said that my initial view was totally wrong*, but rather, ‘After all...’, with the subtext, *my initial view was close to the truth, but not quite the thing because, after all...* The text comes close, in these two ways, to asserting the view that believing that we realize God in meditation and believing that we do not realize God in meditation are not opposed to one another. X and its opposite are similar, if not quite the same. This is obscure because unintelligible. We can agree, in words Merton wrote about Eckhart (and quoted earlier in section two), that ‘From the point of view of logic this... simply does not make sense’.⁷⁷⁶ It is, in Sells’s words, ‘analytically incoherent’,⁷⁷⁷ if not at the level of Sells’s concern with ‘the fusion of normal grammatical polarities’, then at the similarly strange level of implying that polarities are *similar* to one another.⁷⁷⁸

The reader of the passage from *Seeds* is also left, as was true of our previous passages, with a third type of obscurity, namely uncertainty about which of the two given readings to adopt. Does the subtext run, *I have completely changed my mind about meditation*, or not? The obscurity here is not only one of ‘reversals, dislocations, and fragmentations’, as McGinn, describing Mechthild of Magdeburg’s writings, puts it, but of the possible dislocation of a dislocation, which results in the question: is this text dislocated or not?⁷⁷⁹ Unlike the ‘perceptual shifts’ identified by Sells in mystical writings, whereby the way in which an object is read changes due to a process of negation, the present passage’s obscurity rests upon the degree to which there is or is not a perceptual shift.⁷⁸⁰ In this way the passage is aporetic; it can be read as asserting a total change of mind, or as asserting a partial change

⁷⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷⁷⁷ Sells, *Unsayings*, p. 21.

⁷⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷⁷⁹ McGinn, *Flowering*, p. 227.

⁷⁸⁰ Sells, *Unsayings*, p. 84.

of mind. And whichever of these two readings we adopt, we are left in obscurity, as we have seen. The ‘unresolved dilemma’ of the text, as Sells puts it, functions at the level of both an initial aporia, and the obscurity of the unresolved options to which the dilemma fails clearly to point.⁷⁸¹

The strength of the passage as an example of the poetics of the obscure apprehension of God is further heightened by the clear context to which the obscurities apply: meditation. Either the speaker leaves indeterminate what meditation does by negating a particular viewpoint about its effect, or the speaker’s view of meditation is obscure because unintelligible. In either case, whether we read the passage as the speaker’s description of meditation or the speaker’s stance towards meditation, the passage is about an act whereby the speaker seeks to know God in a way reminiscent of the forms of ‘contemplation’ explored in section two above—or, to make the extent of the overlap clear, an act of what Merton earlier described as ‘meditation’.⁷⁸² Given this, does the obscurity of the passage constitute the speaker’s failure to speak clearly? Or does it embody Merton’s claim, quoted earlier from *New Seeds*, that ‘this bafflement, this darkness, this anguish of helpless desire is a fulfilment of meditation’?⁷⁸³

Any link between the poetics we have discussed and Merton’s content claims about meditation does, clearly, need qualification in this case. The poetics to which our literary analysis has pointed do not imply the ‘fulfilment’ of meditation, or the ‘helpless desire’ of the meditator, as the words from *New Seeds* did at the level of content. What remains present in both cases, however, is the bafflement and metaphorical darkness to which we are led by meditation, whether through practising or describing it. The indeterminacy between paradox and non-paradox in the passage enacts this claim in textual form. And in doing so, in a way

⁷⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷⁸² *New Seeds*, p. 146.

⁷⁸³ *Ibid.*, 146.

we have witnessed in each of the passages discussed in this chapter, it presents an experience of God that coheres with the immanent-transcendent God about whom Merton writes in his theology. If we accept the first offered reading of the passage, we are left in darkness with respect to how we might come to ‘realize God’ in a way that evokes the distortion of our view that results from original sin.⁷⁸⁴ If we accept the second offered reading of the passage, the act of meditation both brings one close to God and does not bring one close, in a way closely reminiscent of Merton’s claim that the moment of gaining certitude about God is also the moment when ‘wide chasm of darkness’ opens up.⁷⁸⁵ And if we accept that the possibility of both these readings leads us to the obscure sense of not knowing which option to choose, this picture is complicated even further: the passage is situated, like Merton’s theology, between the distortions of original sin and the certitude-as-darkness of coming to know God. For these reasons the passage is, we argue, a compelling instance of the embodiment of Merton’s theological claims in the dynamics of literary form. It is our fifth, and penultimate, example of the poetics of aporetic obscurity.

Our sixth example, which is taken from *New Seeds*, is an even more emphatic example of aporia, because it involves not only a contradiction between two parts that are themselves both contradictory, but a contradiction between two general ways in which the passage can be read, both of which contain contradictions, and both of which contradict one another.

...we ourselves are words of His. But we are words that are meant to respond to Him, to answer to Him, to echo Him...⁷⁸⁶

Two things can be said about the context of the obscurities of this passage. In the first sentence, the passage describes our status in relation to God, as ‘words of His [i.e. ‘God’s]’.

⁷⁸⁴ *Inner Experience*, p. 20.

⁷⁸⁵ *Ascent to Truth*, p. 77.

⁷⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

In the second it describes the actions we are ‘meant’ to perform in relation to God, namely ‘to respond’, ‘to answer’, and ‘to echo’. Both of these descriptions concern our relationship to God, either in the role of originator, or as a ‘He’ to whom we can relate. The context of the passage thus relates to the theme of our knowledge of God in the specific form of knowledge about how we come from Him and how we relate to Him. Within these contexts, there are three modes of obscurity in the passage, which, as before, relate to two possible readings (here called reading one and reading two), and the contradiction between those readings.

Reading one of the passage paraphrases the second sentence as, *But really we are not words of His, because we are words that respond to Him rather than being spoken by Him.* The contradiction in this case occurs between the imperative to *believe that we are words of His* in the first quoted sentence, and the imperative to *believe that we are not words of His* in the second. In this reading the ‘But’ of the passage signifies a radical change in the speaker’s view, in a way reminiscent of our reading of the passage from *Seeds* concerning whether the speaker changes his mind about realizing God in meditation. In the reading of the present passage as containing an aporetic contradiction, the obscurity relates clearly to the *SOED*’s ‘uncertainty of meaning’. The passage correlates to the moment, described in *What is Contemplation* and quoted in section two above, ‘when you cannot seize Him any longer by clear, definite concepts’,⁷⁸⁷ with the caveat that the thing being seized is not strictly ‘Him’, but the way in which we relate to Him.

Reading two paraphrases the second quoted sentence as, *But we are not just words spoken by Him, because we also respond to Him.* There is no contradiction here: the ‘But’ in this case serves the purpose of qualifying an accepted statement rather than opposing a faulty one. The act of qualification, however, generates a sense of indeterminacy, by leaving open the question: ‘In what sense are we both spoken by, and answers to, God?’ It might be that

⁷⁸⁷ *What is Contemplation*, p. 104.

God speaks us to Himself. But how? Does he speak us one moment as a question, and respond to or answer or echo that question the next moment? Or is God's speaking us simultaneously an answer to or echo of itself? Both of these readings are possible if we also read 'meant' as 'destined to',⁷⁸⁸ which emphasises the necessary relationship between speaking and answering, with the subtext, *we are words spoken by God who also inevitably answer God*. If, however, we read 'meant' as 'supposed to',⁷⁸⁹ the two suggested readings become less coherent, because the emphasis on the necessary relationship between God's speaking and answering is replaced by the possibility that sometimes we do not answer or echo God, with the subtext, *we are words spoken by God who can choose not to echo God*. In this case God is not speaking to Himself; rather, He speaks to us and we echo Him by our own will. The problem then becomes: at the point of echoing God, are we still words spoken by God? If not, we have a contradiction identical to that in reading one given above, between our being words spoken by God and our not being words spoken by God. If so, we have a new contradiction, this time in the form of somehow imagining a word being spoken by God to God by the will of one who is not God. One common response to this kind of language in the world of mystical theology is the claim that it leads us into an 'obscure initiation, something closer to touch than sight', as McGinn, speaking of Augustine's thought, puts it.⁷⁹⁰ As we will now see, it is not the aim to make that claim here, but rather to show the correlation between Merton's obscure literary form and Merton's claims about knowing God obscurely.

The third mode of obscurity in the passage is, as in two of our previous passages, generated by the simultaneous possibility of both reading one and reading two. In distinction

⁷⁸⁸ See *SOED*, 'mean', entry 1c: 'Design (a thing) for a definite purpose, intend (a person or thing) to have a particular future...' A paraphrase of Merton with this definition in mind could run: 'We are designed to respond to Him; it is our definite purpose to respond to him'.

⁷⁸⁹ See *SOED*, 'mean', entry 1c: 'expect or require *to be, to do*'. A paraphrase of Merton with this definition in mind could run: 'we are expected or required to respond to Him'.

⁷⁹⁰ McGinn, *Foundations*, p. 254.

from Sells's work on the 'apophatic displacement of the grammatical object',⁷⁹¹ the obscurity in question here hinges on which of the two kinds of obscurity to adopt when reading the passage. Unlike an instance where, as Sells puts it, 'reference is split, referring back to two possible antecedents', the passage's reference is split between an antecedent (our being 'words of His') and a subsequent claim that contradicts the antecedent.⁷⁹² Both the split itself, and the contents of the readings that are themselves split, generate obscurity. Even if one of the given readings was not obscure, it would still exhibit uncertainty of meaning because of the continuing possibility of the alternative suggested reading. In sum, the reader is left with a text that is indeterminate about whether the text is aporetic or indeterminate, all with respect to the knowledge of our relationship to God. The text is obscure about its own obscurity.

As in each of the examples discussed in this chapter, the reader of the passage is left to decide whether the text is weakened by its failure to communicate clearly about our relationship to God, or, conversely, whether it succeeds in embodying the obscurity of that relationship. Given the major arguments of his work on mystical writings, Turner might well claim the latter, and specifically that the opposition between the two metaphors in, for instance, the phrase 'brilliant darkness' allows the text 'to transcend the domain of metaphorical discourse itself.'⁷⁹³ But whether or not Turner is right in this regard is not really at issue here. What *is* at issue is whether it is possible to read the form of the passage as corresponding to dynamics Merton wrote about at the level of content. It is. As we have seen, the passage concerns what Merton described earlier on as a kind of 'experiential contact with God',⁷⁹⁴ and it is about 'our knowledge of God'.⁷⁹⁵ And the obscurity leaves us, as other

⁷⁹¹ Sells, *Unsayings*, p. 10.

⁷⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁷⁹³ Turner, *Darkness*, p. 39.

⁷⁹⁴ *The Inner Experience*, p. 71. (Merton's italics.)

⁷⁹⁵ *Contemplative Prayer*, pp. 103-4.

passages discussed in this chapter have done, in a place of darkness,⁷⁹⁶ bafflement,⁷⁹⁷ and inarticulacy⁷⁹⁸ with respect to the experience and the knowledge described. It is another instance of Merton's poetic showing forth of a God who we know in contradictions and contradictions between contradictions, a God who (in a way reminiscent of Merton's claims in section two) is both touchable because we can speak about him and untouchable because our speech about him issues in aporia.⁷⁹⁹ It is our sixth and final example of Merton's poetics of aporetic obscurity.

5. Conclusion

As was the case in the conclusion to chapter three, it is our aim in this concluding section to synthesise what we have learnt about Merton's theology from the literary analysis above. We will show, as we showed with respect to 'thereness' earlier on, that a Formalist analysis of Merton's prose can offer a deepening and broadening of our understanding of Merton's views of the obscurity of our apprehension of God. In doing so it will be our further aim to continue arguing that a Formalist theological poetics of the kind being developed in this thesis offers a site through which theological information can be gathered. We will return to the broader ramifications of this claim later on, in our concluding chapter, where we will outline at more length the significance of our argument in relation to theological studies of language. For now, and in keeping with our concern with actual examples rather than general theories, our aim is to concentrate on the localized examples on which we have focussed in the chapter so far.

⁷⁹⁶ See, for example, *Seeds*, p. 49.

⁷⁹⁷ *New Seeds*, p. 146.

⁷⁹⁸ *Seeds*, p. 150.

⁷⁹⁹ *Ascent to Truth*, p. 77.

In our first example ('unreality') we read that one of the ways in which Merton enacts his account of a tendency *towards* obscurity in one's apprehension of God is through the juxtaposition of sentences that simultaneously clarify and call one another into question in a complex series of relations. The example described meditation in such a way that it not only embodied the bafflement to which an experience of God can bring a meditator, but also revealed a particularly intricate way in which that bafflement can be played out. The conflict between two initial thoughts was resolved, we read, by a third thought that itself conflicted with both of the original thoughts when taken in isolation. To Merton's more general claim that contemplative experiences tend towards obscurity we can thus add the more specific point that one of the roots of that tendency in Merton's writing is a mental progression where, just as one element is clarified, a further element becomes confused. This is not, to employ Merton's language from section two, an instance of total darkness with respect to knowledge of God; it is a darkness whose obscurity is characterised by flickers of light, or clarity with respect to knowledge of God. Simultaneous clarification and confusion through the juxtaposition of ideas is one way through which the paradox of God's touchable untouchability is embodied in Merton's work.

In the second example ('God weighs scarcely anything') we read that one of the ways in which Merton generates a sense of the darkness in which we apprehend God is through ambiguity that leads to a profusion of diverse and at times conflicting sentiments. The passage was unclear to the point of affording at least four very different interpretations, namely, *I continue to be really afraid; I continue to be afraid, but not too afraid; I cease to be afraid because the church is God; I cease to be afraid because God acts independently from the Church*. This profusion of different options was distinct from the overlapping obscurities and clarification of example one; in this case the experience of obscurity revolves around, not the relations between steps in a process, but the simultaneous possibility of multiple options.

Our analysis of the form of examples one and two thus gave us a picture of two distinct ways in which the apprehension of God can be obscure: in the first example the reader struggled to move forwards along the steps in a process; in the second the reader struggled to choose a pathway to tread, though there were multiple possible options. These two images were not found in the exposition of content in section two above. They are an example of the new material to which an analysis of literary form can lead us.

In the third example ('He passed by') we read that one of the modes through which we might lose clarity with respect to knowledge of God is though confusion as to the very mode in which we are speaking. Our reading in this instance hinged on an obscurity with respect to differing genres, namely the genre of high-flown paradox on the one hand, and that of a confusing mode of attempting to describe mundane, non-paradoxical facts about God on the other. On close inspection there was reason to dismiss the choice of both of these genres: what appeared to be paradoxes were not paradoxes at all, and to read the passage as a presentation of mundane information left unexplained why the passage implied paradox so strongly. Reflecting back, we can now see that the first example we discussed involved intricate relations that called one another into question; the second involved a choice between four differing options; and the third revolved around the problematic nature of choosing any possible options. This brings the third passage close to what we will be later describing as 'hermetic' obscurity, rather than 'aporetic' obscurity, because the ambiguity stems from a lack of plausible obvious interpretative possibilities. The passage is finally aporetic, however, because both of the mentioned readings are implied to be plausible by the text; the obscurity stems in part from the weakness of the options, but also partly from the ambiguity with respect to which option to choose.

In our fourth example ('We know Him as unknown') we learnt that one of the ways in which a reader might apprehend the baffling presence of God is through a complex series of

opposing implications with respect to the claim that we can ‘know’ God. On the one hand, the passage stated that God was ‘unknown’ and that we know him through the paradoxical and seemingly unintelligible mode of ‘unknowing’; on the other hand, the passage implied that there are things about ‘Him’ that we do know, and that our lack of knowledge about him refers not to the impossibility of knowledge but to the way in which we know him (the key word in this regard was ‘as’); and we also read that to know ‘by unknowing’ might be intelligible if read as a process rather than an end result. The dialectic between these two sides of the passage, we read, was an exemplification of what Merton earlier called the chasm of darkness that opens up just as we come to know God; but it also developed, broadened, and made present Merton’s claim about the illuminating chasm because of the specific phrases and grammatical forms through which it performs its exemplification. To read the passage as we read it earlier is to see that one of the modes through which simultaneous illumination and darkening occurs is the use of conflicting sentiments, confusing juxtapositions, and almost-unintelligible phrases.

In the fifth example (‘You have only really meditated well’) we read that a sense of the hiddenness of God can be generated by what we called the dislocation of a dislocation. On the one hand, at the level of the initial dislocation, we read that there was a possible opposition between views about realizing God in meditation; on the other hand, that initial dislocation was dislocated by the alternative possibility that Merton was actually claiming that X and the opposite of X are similar to one another. Beyond paradox, one of the modes through which Merton shows forth his claims about the strangeness of language about God is thus through the dual possibility of both conflicting statements and unintelligibility. The reader is confronted with a reality in which the realization of God in meditation is X and then not-X, and also whereby the realization of God in meditation is *both* X and not-X.

In the sixth and final example ('we are words of His') we read that one of the ways in which the apprehension of God can lead to the inarticulacy Merton described in section two is by the presentation of two ways of describing God that are both obscure. Either Merton's understanding of God underwent a radical shift in the passage, between the claim that we are words of God's and the claim that we are not words of God's, or he paradoxically claimed that we are both words of God's and not words of His at the same time. One of the most compelling and extreme ways in which Merton shows forth his claim that we know God in darkness is thus by the obscurity that issues from being given two possible claims that are both themselves obscure. In earlier examples what we called the light that flickers in the darkness was generated here by the possibility of readings that made sense; here there is no reading that makes clear sense, but only the possibility of contradiction on the one hand and paradox on the other.

Our purpose in outlining the broad shape of each of these six examples has been to state in concise form what we have learnt about Merton's theology of the obscurity of God in our literary analysis. The claims about the apprehension to which that analysis has led us constitute the main argument of our thesis: the views about how God can be known in darkness that we have just described are the fruits of our method. It is only on the basis of these specific, concrete claims that we have any ground to make further claims about, for example, the nature of theology as an embedded practice as well as something stated at the level of content—and we shall return to broader claims such as these later on, in our concluding chapter. For now, however, suffice it to say that our contribution to Formalism is the gathering of specific theological claims such as those just outlined through literary analysis, and our contribution to the theology of form is a series of specific readings that show a relation between particular forms and particular theologies. It will be our aim to

continue this focus on the relation between specific forms and specific theologies in our final literary-critical chapter, to which we now turn.

Chapter Five: Hermetic Obscurity

1. Aims

In six ways, the present chapter shares the background and aims of chapter four. Firstly, the sense in which the term ‘obscurity’ will be used here remains as before: ‘lack of clarity of expression; uncertainty of meaning, unintelligibility’.⁸⁰⁰ Secondly, the chapter continues to distinguish itself from much of the existing interest in literary obscurity by arguing for a descriptive relationship between Merton’s theological claims about obscurity on the one hand, and the obscure forms of his prose writing on the other. Thirdly, the field to which the chapter contributes continues to be the one suggested by McGinn and pioneered by Sells, as described in the opening section of ‘Aporetic Obscurity’ above. Fourthly, the quotations gathered in section two of our chapter on ‘Aporetic Obscurity’, such as Merton’s language about ‘darkness’, ‘hiddenness’, and ‘bafflement’, will be re-used here, and, moreover, re-used in order to describe further instances where Merton’s prose embodies the sense of an obscure apprehension of God. Fifthly, and in conformity with the present thesis as a whole, the chapter seeks to substantiate existing comments about Merton’s prose style (specifically his obscure style) by performing extensive close analysis of his literary strategies. And sixthly, the central question to be asked remains: ‘What can literary form show us about Merton’s views on the obscure apprehension of God?’

The novel feature of the chapter forms the heart of its analysis. It relates to the literary mode in which Merton’s obscure apprehensions of God are written. Instead of offering readings in which texts are primarily structured by aporetic oppositions, the analysis below focuses upon the difficulty of formulating readings at all. The obscurities in question in this chapter are no longer the conflicting possibilities of aporia, but a genre of literary form called

⁸⁰⁰ *SOED*, ‘obscurity’ 1b.

‘hermeticism’, the meaning of which term we will outline in section three below. The overall ‘obscurity’ of an apprehension of God embodied by the texts in the two ‘Obscurity’ chapters are similar, then, but the literary mode of that embodiment is distinct. The reason for devoting two separate chapters to the ‘Obscurity’ theme is this literary difference.

2. Re-exposition: Merton’s Language About Obscurity

As we have noted, much of the preparatory work for the literary-critical analysis of this chapter was done in the chapter on ‘Aporetic Obscurity’. For this reason the opening sections of the present chapter will be shorter than those in our previous chapters. The key term (‘obscurity’), the existing literature, and the field to which the chapter contributes, need not be outlined again. It remains only to re-quote, by way of a reminder, the key words and phrases from Merton’s writings to which the poetics analysed below form an analogue, and to outline the literary terms that will be used to describe the poetics through which Merton’s ideas about obscurity are embodied. The aim of this section is to carry out the former of those two tasks.

As before, then, we will be concerned in this chapter with contexts in which, for Merton, God can be apprehended as obscure, and the way in which he describes that obscure knowledge. In terms of the theological roots of the obscurity in question, our readings will relate literary forms to Merton’s claims about God being simultaneously touchable and untouchable,⁸⁰¹ easily found and impossible to find,⁸⁰² and close to us through the cross⁸⁰³ whilst also distant because of original sin⁸⁰⁴ and the Ascension.⁸⁰⁵ In terms of the contexts in which God is apprehended in obscurity, the readings offered below continue to speak about

⁸⁰¹ See *Ascent to Truth*, p. 77.

⁸⁰² See *Thoughts*, p. 56.

⁸⁰³ See *Ibid.*, pp. 68-9.

⁸⁰⁴ See *Inner Experience*, p. 20.

⁸⁰⁵ See *Ibid.*, p. 44.

or to embody instances of ‘prayer’⁸⁰⁶, ‘contemplation’⁸⁰⁷ (by which we continue to take it to mean ‘the religious apprehension of God, through my life in God’),⁸⁰⁸ ‘faith’,⁸⁰⁹ a ‘deep and vital experience [of God]’,⁸¹⁰ ‘meditation’,⁸¹¹ ‘experiential contact with God’,⁸¹² and ‘our knowledge of God’.⁸¹³ In terms of Merton’s descriptions of the obscure knowledge of God that occurs within these contexts, we continue to be concerned with texts that embody God’s being known in ‘bafflement’,⁸¹⁴ ‘hiddenness’⁸¹⁵ and ‘darkness’,⁸¹⁶ and specifically ‘darkness that is above concepts’⁸¹⁷ or ‘beyond the reach of any natural understanding’.⁸¹⁸ As in ‘Aporetic Obscurity’, the texts scrutinised will, in our readings, embody a mode of knowing God that is ‘empty of all precise, rational knowledge’,⁸¹⁹ ‘leaves the intellect suspended in obscurity’,⁸²⁰ ‘advances beyond the range of concepts into a darkness’,⁸²¹ and ‘lacks clarity and intellectual precision’.⁸²² The language with which Merton’s poetics embody these obscure modes of knowing can be described, in Merton’s own words, as ‘inarticulate praise’,⁸²³ as ‘poetic language that tends to sound strange and dramatic’,⁸²⁴ as a site where

⁸⁰⁶ *What is Contemplation*, p. 104.

⁸⁰⁷ For accounts of ‘contemplation’ as a site for the obscure apprehension of God, see *Seeds*, p. 150; *Seeds*, p. 165; *Ascent*, p. 9; *Ascent*, p. 62; *Disputed Questions*, p. 180; *New Seeds*, p. 15; and *The Inner Experience*, p. 65. See also section two of ‘Aporetic Obscurity’.

⁸⁰⁸ *New Seeds*, p. 15.

⁸⁰⁹ *Seeds*, p. 78; *Ascent*, p. 114; *New Seeds*, p. 96.

⁸¹⁰ *Seeds*, p. 144.

⁸¹¹ *New Seeds*, p. 146.

⁸¹² *The Inner Experience*, p. 71. (Merton’s italics.)

⁸¹³ *Contemplative Prayer*, pp. 103-4.

⁸¹⁴ *New Seeds*, p. 146.

⁸¹⁵ *The Inner Experience*, p. 65.

⁸¹⁶ *Seeds*, p. 49.

⁸¹⁷ *Ascent*, p. 192.

⁸¹⁸ *Seeds*, p. 144.

⁸¹⁹ *What is Contemplation*, p. 104.

⁸²⁰ *Seeds*, p. 78.

⁸²¹ *Ascent*, p. 9.

⁸²² *The Inner Experience*, p. 80.

⁸²³ *Seeds*, p. 150.

⁸²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

‘all adjectives fall to pieces’,⁸²⁵ and as language that ‘simply does not make sense’.⁸²⁶ Each of these ways of speaking was applied earlier to texts that we read primarily in terms of aporia. Now they will be applied to texts that, in our readings, are obscure as a result of hermetic literary forms.

3. Literary Terminology: Hermeticism

As ever, our overarching key term (‘obscurity’) and Merton’s descriptions of the obscure apprehension of God both need to be related to key literary terms with which the passages will be described. In the present chapter there will be a single such term: ‘hermeticism’. An outline of the *Princeton Encyclopedia*’s definition of the term will reveal its relation to ‘obscurity’, as defined by the *SOED* and described by Merton.

The literary sense of ‘hermeticism’, then, is defined by the *Encyclopedia* as ‘inaccessibility and multivalence of meaning’.⁸²⁷ The word relates to our definition of ‘obscurity’ because the inaccessible meanings of the hermetic text are necessarily ‘unintelligible’ (*pace* the *SOED*) due to their inaccessibility. The *SOED*’s entry for ‘hermetic’ metaphorises this relationship further: as well as being ‘esoteric’⁸²⁸ and therefore obscure to the outsider, the unintelligible meanings of the hermetic text are ‘airtight, hermetically sealed’.⁸²⁹ There is thus an immediate affinity between the ‘inaccessibility’ of meaning in a hermetic text, as defined by the *Encyclopedia*, and the claim, made in Merton’s *Seeds*, that God is ‘beyond the reach of any natural understanding’, because in both cases an object is out of reach, sealed away. As the present chapter proceeds, these initial lexicographical overlaps

⁸²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁸²⁶ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 11.

⁸²⁷ *Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 623.

⁸²⁸ *SOED*, ‘hermetic’, entry 2.

⁸²⁹ *Ibid.*

will be further substantiated in the link between Merton's hermetic texts and his claims about apprehending God in 'darkness' and 'blindness'.

Before proceeding to our literary analysis, it should be noted how 'hermeticism' is distinct from 'aporia'. Whereas the aporetic text yields 'two contradictory imperatives',⁸³⁰ the hermetic texts with which we will be concerned refuse, at certain points, to yield *any* clear imperatives. The 'lack of clarity' (see *SOED*) in the case of hermeticism is caused, not by an ambiguous relation between readings, but by the impossibility of formulating a clear reading at all, whether because it is inaccessible, air-tight, out of reach. Of the metaphors from Merton's prose re-quoted above in section two, that of 'hiddenness' is consequently amongst the most apposite as a way in which to figure hermeticism. The meaning of the aporetic text was 'hidden' in the sense that we did not know whether X or its opposite was true. The use of 'hidden' in that context was metaphorical, in the same way that we would be talking in a metaphor if we said that a town is hidden because we are unsure of whether we wish to visit it. The hiddenness metaphor in the case of the hermetic or defamiliarised text, on the other hand, is more literal. The meanings of the texts to which we now turn are hidden in the more direct sense that we cannot see them.

4. Literary Analysis: Merton's Poetics of Hermetic Obscurity

In 'Aporitic Obscurity' the passages were ordered according to the strength of their aporetic contradictions, concluding with the strongest. The six passages discussed here, similarly, are ordered according to the degree to which, in our given readings, their meaning is inaccessible. The analysis below starts with passages where meaning is more accessible, or less hermetic, and proceeds to those where the inaccessibility is particularly strong.

⁸³⁰ *Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 60.

Firstly, the role of ‘Love’ in the following, which is taken from *Jonas*, is unclear to the point of hermeticism. The passage is taken from the opening to Merton’s diary entry for 26 September 1948.

Love sails me around the house. I walk two steps on the ground and four steps in the air. It is love. It is consolation. I don’t care if it is consolation. I am not attached to consolation. I love God. Love carries me all around. I don’t want to *do* anything but love.⁸³¹

How is this passage describable in terms of the claim that we know God in obscurity? As before, we must first show that the passage is about the knowledge of God in order to answer this question. We can do so in two ways. Firstly, the ‘Love’ of the first sentence can be associated with the claim, in the seventh sentence, that ‘I love God’. The reader can either assume that the love for God is unrelated to the earlier action of ‘Love sail[ing] me around the house’, or that the love that ‘sails’ the speaker is the speaker’s love for God. The latter reading is strengthened by the connection between love’s active agency in the sailing metaphor and love’s active agency in the carrying metaphor in the passage’s penultimate sentence: ‘Love carries me all around’. Unless the speaker changes track dramatically, the claim that ‘Love carries’ metaphorises the claim that ‘I love God’, leading to an overall subtext for sentences seven and eight that runs, *my love for God carries me all around*. This in turn relates to the fact that it is the speaker’s love that ‘sails’ him ‘around the house’ in sentence one. In both cases love is an active agent – as sailor or carrier – and in both cases ‘love’ is the speaker’s love for God. We are left with the subtexts: *My love for God sails me around the house*; *I walk four steps in the air because of my love for God*; and *my love for God carries me all around*. The alternative to this reading is to assume that the passage is comprised of a series of disjunctive descriptions. We shall return to this possibility later on.

⁸³¹ *Jonas*, p. 120.

The second way of reading ‘love’ as signifying a relationship between God and the speaker is through an association between ‘love’ and the ‘consolation’ of the fourth sentence: ‘It is consolation’, which, in the context of Merton’s status as a Catholic writer schooled in the language of consolation and desolation,⁸³² we can assume to mean a kind of consolation received from, or at least in some way related to, the action of God. To build on this: when the speaker claims that ‘It is consolation’, the abstract pronoun ‘It’, as before, is either cut off from the rest of the passage, or refers back to the speaker’s act of walking ‘two steps on the ground and four steps in the air’. The action thus becomes, or at least comes to be related to, ‘consolation’. If we read the second sentence as a continuation of the sailing metaphor initiated in the opening sentence, for instance by suggesting that the speaker’s up-and-down motion is evocative of the image of a boat bobbing on water, the first sentence is also referred to by the ‘It’ of ‘It is consolation’. If, furthermore, the active agency shared by the love that ‘sails’ and the love that ‘carries me all around’ implies that the love that ‘sails’ and the love that ‘carries’ share an identity, the love that ‘carries’ also describes ‘consolation’. The subtexts in this case are: *consolation sails me around the house; I walk four steps in the air because of consolation; and consolation carries me all around.*

As in the texts discussed in ‘Aporetic Obscurity’, we have been led in our reading so far towards an aporetic contradiction that hinges on a central closed question, namely ‘Is love the speaker’s love for God or God’s consoling action upon the speaker?’ It would be possible to focus further on this aporia, as an extension of ‘Part I’, and indeed as an extension of Merton’s telling claim, a few lines after the quoted passage, that he is speaking about ‘hidden love, obscure love’.⁸³³ We might say, for instance, that an aporia concerning the confused

⁸³² See, for example, the section on ‘Desolation’ in Merton’s poem ‘Prologo’. There consolation is ‘the place of danger’ and desolation is the speaker’s ‘home’ because there he is ‘seized by God’. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1980), pp. 742-756, p. 748.

⁸³³ *Jonas*, p. 120.

identity of the speaker and God implies what McGinn, discussing the symbolic imagery of Mechthild of Magdeburg's writings, describes as a strategy to evoke the 'participation and reciprocal relation' shared between the writer and God.⁸³⁴ The use of noting the aporia here is not to further this reading, however, but to highlight the strength of the context of the passage, which oscillates between differing accounts of who is loving whom, but both of which involve a relation between God and speaker. As we shall see, this God-speaker aporia has the function, in our reading, of reinforcing the hermeticism of the passage.

How does 'love' (whether God's or the speaker's) act in the passage? This, in our reading, is the question with a hermetic answer. We shall consider it, firstly, in relation to the first two sentences.

Love sails me around the house. I walk two steps on the ground and four steps in the air.

Assuming that 'sails' means 'to sail a boat', 'Love' takes the place of the sailor in the opening sentence, and the speaker takes the place of the boat. This is clear enough. Less clear is the relationship between the figuration of love-as-sailor and the second quoted sentence. If, as we have suggested, the second sentence describes the first, one might expect the second sentence to emphasise the key feature of the first sentence, namely that love sails the speaker.

⁸³⁴ McGinn, *Flowering*, p. 232. To provide a content claim from Merton's own writings that would cohere with this embodiment of 'participation and reciprocal relation' we could quote, for instance, Merton's claim in *Inner Experience* that, after the incarnation, 'nature itself has, in man, become transformed and supernaturalized so that in everyone in whom Christ lives and acts, by the Holy Spirit, there is no longer any division between nature and supernature'. See *Inner Experience*, p. 40. For another account of the conflation of identities, see Cervone's literary analysis of Middle English writings, where the Second Person of the Trinity is figured simultaneously as 'agent and action'. Cristina Maria Cervone, *Poetics of the Incarnation: Middle English Writing and the Leap of Love* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), p. 86. Finally, for a similar claim from Merton's own writings, see *Entering the Silence*, p. 237: 'The fire of love for the souls of men loved by God consumes you like the fire of God's love, and it is the same love.'

But this does not happen. The emphasis of the second sentence is rather on the motion of the boat, which takes ‘two steps on the ground and four steps in the air’. In other words, if the second sentence is a description of the metaphor of the first sentence, its emphasis on the up-and-down motion of the boat draws our attention to, for instance, the metaphorical wind that drives the speaker-boat, or the engine that drives it, or the waves beneath it. Conversely, the second sentence does not concern the action of the sailor, whose job is to sail the boat but not to make it move up and down. It might be that love sails the speaker-boat so that the speaker-boat moves up and down in a distinctive way, but this reading is, at best, only loosely related to the emphasis of the second sentence. It is with the *fact* of moving up and down that the speaker is concerned, rather than with a particular *way* in which the speaker-boat is sailed by love. The claim that *love* sails the speaker-boat in the opening sentence seems largely, in sum, to have been forgotten in the second. There is something, to borrow McGinn’s description of Gregory the Great’s prose style, ‘digressive and elusive’ about the metaphor.⁸³⁵

None of this calls into question love’s role as sailor in the metaphor, or, in other words, the role of a relationship between God and the speaker; but it does call into question the nature of love’s role. Whether God’s or the speaker’s, ‘Love’ holds a prominent role in the act of sailing, but a role about which we are told nothing at the moment when the characteristics of sailing are described. And as the passage goes on, even this hidden character of love-as-sailor is called into question. The pronoun in the third sentence – ‘*It* is love’ – may refer to the image of love as the sailor, with the subtext, *It is love that sails me as I step on ground and air*, but it might also refer to the entirety of the situation described in the first two sentences, with the subtext, *everything I have just described is love*. In the latter case, ‘love’ has shifted from having the specific role of the sailor to being, in general, the act of sailing. This resolves our earlier question about the tenor of the sailing metaphor, because

⁸³⁵ McGinn, *Growth*, p. 68.

we can now say that love does, after all, play a significant role in the second sentence of the passage. The description of moving up and down has become a description of love, regardless of whether the action of a sailor is mentioned. The question is no longer, ‘What does moving up and down have to do with love’s role as the sailor?’ There is instead a new obscurity concerning love’s role in the metaphor: ‘Is love a sailor, or the act of sailing in general?’

This last obscurity is furthered again in the final two sentences of the passage.

Love carries me all around. I don’t want to *do* anything but love.

If the former of these sentences continues the sailing metaphor (and if we continue to assume that ‘sails’ denotes ‘to sail a boat’), love has now become the boat, and the speaker has become a passenger. This is a change from the initial metaphor in which the speaker was the boat, love was the sailor, and no passenger was mentioned. It is also a change from our reading of ‘It is love’ as implying that love is the act of sailing as a whole. The last quoted sentence shifts these roles once again. Whereas the figurations of the speaker as a boat and as a passenger both placed him in the position of the recipient of an action – he is sailed around, carried, done to – he now becomes the perpetrator of the action: he wants to ‘*do*’ love. Does the speaker now imagine himself in the position of the sailor, or the wind? Is love now the passenger, or the boat again, or something else?

At a basic level, then, the passage describes the speaker’s relationship to God in such a way that the roles taken by the speaker and by love lack clarity, certainty of meaning, and intelligibility. The passage does this, furthermore, in such a way that the mode of obscurity is distinct from the six readings given in ‘Aporetic Obscurity’. The reader of the passages from ‘Aporetic Obscurity’ might, that is, have chosen to embrace one side of the aporia from which the obscurities in question issued. In the order that we discussed them, the reader of ‘Aporetic Obscurity’ might, for instance, have opted to read that 1) *The speaker seeks*

spiritual reality, 2) *The speaker ceases to be afraid of the Church*, 3) *God is paradoxical*, 4) *We know God*, 5) *The speaker does not change his mind about meditation*, and 6) *We are words of God's*. It is not possible to give a single answer of this kind to the question 'What is love's role in the passage from *Jonas*?' The passage is an instance, not of binary or aporetic obscurity but of what we might label *expansive* obscurity, where we are left with open questions rather than conflicting options. And further to this: even the readings we have given are based on questionable assumptions. We might well also read that 'sails' denotes 'to fly';⁸³⁶ or that the passage makes a link between a love of one kind that sails and a love of another kind that carries; or, similarly, that the passage associates the love that sails with the speaker's love for God and the love that carries with God's consoling action; or, as we noted before, that the passage impels its sentences towards a kind of disjointed thereness (see chapter three above), without any connection between 'Love' and 'consolation'. Key characteristics of the speaker's love for God, and God's consoling action upon the speaker, are hidden from view, leaving us with an obscure sense of our relationship with God in way reminiscent of Merton's claims from section two. The passage is a site through which we know God and experience God in 'hiddenness',⁸³⁷ 'bafflement',⁸³⁸ and 'darkness'.⁸³⁹ The God about which it fails to speak is evocative of the God Merton wrote about, in section two, as being impossible to touch⁸⁴⁰ and impossible to find.⁸⁴¹ This is our first example of Merton's hermetic obscurity.

⁸³⁶ The *SOED*'s entry for 'sail' as 'Glide over water or through the sky' neatly captures the relevant side of the ambiguity in question. *SOED*, entry 4.

⁸³⁷ *The Inner Experience*, p. 65.

⁸³⁸ *New Seeds*, p. 146.

⁸³⁹ *Ascent*, p. 192.

⁸⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁸⁴¹ *Thoughts*, p. 56.

The following, from *Entering the Silence*, shares with our first passage a series of descriptions of an obscure God. It opens Merton's diary entry for 27 February 1950, and forms a paragraph in its own right.

The song of my Beloved by the stream. The birds descending in their clerestories. His skies have sanctified my eyes, His woods are clearer than the King's palace. But the air and I will never tell our secret.⁸⁴²

Here Merton describes God in ways that we might call non-obscure, in the sense of being intelligible, in three ways: firstly, as the 'Beloved';⁸⁴³ secondly, as the owner of the 'skies'; and thirdly, as the owner of the 'woods'. Further to His being the 'Beloved', we can add that God is the *speaker's* ('my') 'Beloved', and that the Beloved has a 'song... by the stream'. Further to God's ownership of 'skies' we can add that the action of those skies has 'sanctified' the speaker's 'eyes'. To God's having woods we can add that the woods are 'clearer than the King's palace'. As such, any obscurity in the passage will always be positioned in relation to a series of intelligible descriptions of the 'Beloved' and the characteristics of further objects that relate closely to the Beloved. For this reason the obscurity of this passage is neither an instance of what Sami Sjöberg's 'antipoetics', which enacts the 'abandonment' of positive content',⁸⁴⁴ or of his 'apoetics', which enacts 'a thoroughgoing lack of positive content'.⁸⁴⁵

The main thrust of the hermetic obscurity of the passage is instead generated by grammar and syntactical structure in relation to the mentioned positive content about the Beloved. To begin with, the first sentence leaves unclear whether 'The song' is the subject or object of the sentence because there is no verbal relationship between the song and further

⁸⁴² *Entering the Silence*, p. 412.

⁸⁴³ Our reasons for reading 'Beloved' as a reference to God will become clear as we continue our reading.

⁸⁴⁴ Sami Sjöberg, 'A Book About Nothing: The Poetics of the Roman Blanc', in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 25, No. 2, June 2011, pp. 185-198, both p. 188.

⁸⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, both p. 189.

predication. This has the effect of calling into question both the absent description of an unnamed subject that is in relation to ‘The song’, and an unnamed object to which ‘The song’ might be in relation. It is, then, as instance of what Sells calls ‘double delimitation’, whereby a part of grammar is presented as both a subject or an object,⁸⁴⁶ or what might conversely be called double de-positioning, whereby a part of grammar is presented as neither a subject nor an object. In either case, the sentence about the song is not, according to traditional grammar, complete, as it would have been if the song had been positioned as a subject (for example, *The song of my Beloved by the stream is soft*) or an object (for example, *I hear the song of my Beloved*).

The sentence about ‘skies’ and ‘woods’ adds further ambiguity to this de-stabilization of position.

The birds descending in their clerestories. His skies have sanctified my eyes, His woods are clearer than the King’s palace.

Who, firstly, is the owner in ‘His’? We might assume that it is the same owner as that in the second ‘His’ of the same sentence, and thus that ‘His’ means ‘God’s’, because the capital ‘H’ extends beyond that of the formal sentence opening. To which male noun, though, does the adjective ‘His’ refer back? The plural ‘birds’ of the second sentence do not translate grammatically into the singular ‘His’, so the answer appears to be the ‘Beloved’, with His similarly capitalized ‘B’. Clear as this may be, however, ‘His’ actions remain obscure. What characterises God’s ‘skies’? Are they every sky, or a limited number of skies? If the latter, how do we recognize them? And how do the skies in the passage perform the action with which we would not normally associate them, namely sanctification? A spliced comma lies between ‘His skies’ and ‘His woods’, which might imply that the two are connected, not

⁸⁴⁶ Sells, *Unsayings*, p. 20.

separable by a full stop. Is there an overlap, then, between the sanctification by the skies and the clearness of the woods? For instance, do the skies sanctify through their own clearness?

The second half of the 'skies' sentence is also obscure. What is 'the King's palace'? In what sense is it not 'clear', and indeed less clear than the woods? Only when we know the answer to the latter question can we begin to tell how clear God's 'woods' are, or whether they are clear at all. Who, further, is 'the King'? Had the passage mentioned 'a King' the following reading would have been plausible: *the grandeur of a worldly palace may seem impressive, but the woods are more impressive still*, although there remains an unaccounted shift in this subtext from clearness in the actual passage to *impressiveness* in our reading. We could also replace clearness with, for instance, loftiness, beauty, or spaciousness, and the same kind of unaccounted shift would occur in each case. There is not, however, a King palace but *the King*, with an incumbent sense, either of a specific worldly King to whom the speaker might be referring, or of a ruler commonly known as *the King*. The former does not seem plausible: there is no mention of a particular King in the preceding or succeeding text. If we are to accept the latter, one obvious candidate would be Christ the King. But even if the King is Christ, we are left with the subtext, *God's woods are clearer than Christ's palace*, which does not solve the problem of our initial questions: What is God's palace? In what sense is it clear? Overall, then, the sense in which God's woods are clear remains inaccessible, because the object to which they are compared is unspecified.

The final sentence of the passage is not explicitly about God, as the other two sentences we have analysed are, but it does add a further sense of obscurity to the character of God's action.

But the air and I will never tell our secret.

What is it about the sanctifying skies or the (un)clear woods that might lead the reader to suppose that the speaker and the air might share their ‘secret’? Nothing in the preceding text has implied that the speaker has a secret, let alone that he might share it. As before, possible readings remain conjectural: *I may have told you many things about songs, skies and woods, but the air and I will not tell you an additional thing, which is secret; or, the woods may be transparent, but the air and I are secretive.* This is a not-saying or un-saying that does not conform to the traditional forms of speech associated with *apophatic* theology. As we noted in the introduction to this thesis, Denys Turner has pointed to the mystical-erotic text as a prime example of a mode of writing that implies an unsayable otherness without necessarily employing the strategies of negation with which *apohasis* is normally associated⁸⁴⁷—and to that thesis we can add the multivalence-inviting obscurity of hermetic passages such as the one under discussion.

We can now note that two forms of obscurity are at play in the passage, the one retrospective and the other non-retrospective.

The song of my Beloved by the stream. The birds descending in their clerestories. His skies have sanctified my eyes, His woods are clearer than the King’s palace. But the air and I will never tell our secret.

Firstly, God’s song, skies and woods are presented obscurely by the sentences within which they are introduced. The reader learns about the obscurity of the woods non-retrospectively: the woods are obscure in the sentence that describes the woods, and so on. Secondly, the final ‘But’ adds to this by retrospectively calling into question an aspect of the song, woods, and skies that did not form part of their original obscurity: initially we do not know how clear God’s woods are; retrospectively we do not know how God’s woods imply that the speaker

⁸⁴⁷ For instance, ‘Turner sees the use of erotic language as the perfect expression of the interplay between positive and negative language’. Nelstrop, *Contemporary Theoretical Approaches*, p. 95.

has a secret. This is a new form of the obscuring of the obscure, different examples of which were discussed in the contradictory contradictions of ‘Aporetic Obscurity’. In the readings given there, it was the choice between two options that were both themselves obscure that added the second layer of uncertainty of meaning to the passage. Now the second layer of obscurity is not added by choice but by the retrospective addition of a further category that calls into question something that had not previously been mentioned.

In relation to the quotations from Merton given above in section two, three specific content claims can be used to describe the form of the passage. Firstly, the passage is, with *What is Contemplation*, a site that is ‘empty of all precise, rational knowledge of God’.⁸⁴⁸ The imprecision in this case is generated, not by different concrete options calling one another into question, but by the vagueness of any possible option when considering the questions we have asked about the woods and skies. Secondly, if with *Disputed Questions* ‘contemplation’ involves ‘losing the shape of words’, the present passage also embodies a mode of what we might call the loss of a comprehensible semantic structure or shape through the addition of obscurity to obscurity.⁸⁴⁹ The thing lost is certainty of meaning, or, metaphorically, the shape of the song, the skies, and the woods. We might add that the passage embodies the present continuing tense of ‘losing’ because the loss is on-going, beginning non-retrospectively and continuing retrospectively. Or, to borrow a term much-used in discussions of obscurity, the passage is not only *fragmented*, but enacts the *fragmentation* of its own information, especially in the last sentence, as it proceeds.⁸⁵⁰

⁸⁴⁸ *What is Contemplation*, p. 104.

⁸⁴⁹ *Disputed Questions*, p. 180.

⁸⁵⁰ For a discussion of the ‘fragment’ see, for instance, the exchange between David Tracy and Jacques Derrida in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*. Derrida’s argument is that the term ‘fragment’ is not deconstructed enough: ‘It [the fragment] is something finished, and it refers to the totality from which it comes.’ Whether Derrida is correct or not, Merton’s theology assumes a ‘totality’ from which his apprehension of God flows—that is ‘a deep and vital experience of God’ (*New Seeds*, p. 15) as the site where the Divine is known obscurely, and as such the term ‘fragment’ applies to Merton’s poetics, which are argued here to form an

Thirdly, and in conformity with the passage that opened ‘He passed by’ in ‘Aporetic Obscurity’, the passage’s combination of non-obscure information about the Beloved’s ownership of skies and woods, with obscurity about the characteristics of the ownership, leads to a relationship between, in Merton’s words from earlier, the ‘darkness’ and the ‘evidence’ of God,⁸⁵¹ or the ‘bafflement’ and ‘fulfilment’ that co-exist when we apprehend God’s presence.⁸⁵² The God whose woods, skies and song are out of the reach of our understanding is, nonetheless, a present God who sings by the stream, as we began by noting.

The passage also relates back to the theological roots, or claims about God, that we discussed in section two. In our first example (‘Love sails’) we noted that the hermeticism of the passage led us into a particularly extreme sense of the darkness of God; here we have noted both that the darkness is strong, and that it functions in relation to the positive affirmation about the ‘Beloved’ with which our analysis began. The God of the passage as we have read it is thus both impossible to find (what is His song? what relation does He have to the palace? what kind of skies does he own? and so on) and easy to find (He is the Beloved, who sings by the stream). Our knowledge of him is both distorted, just as knowledge of God is distorted in Merton’s account of a poslapsarian world,⁸⁵³ and also open to our clear description, in a way that evoked Merton’s claims that, since the cross, we have been clothed in truthful knowledge of Him.⁸⁵⁴

In the examples discussed in ‘Aporetic Obscurity’, and in the two examples discussed in this chapter so far, the contexts have been explicitly related to our theme of the obscure apprehension of God, either through their evocation of a context that Merton spoke about

analogue to his obscure apprehension of God, regardless of the validity of the ‘totality’ implied by the term. See Tracy, ‘Fragments’, and Derrida, ‘Response to David Tracy’, in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. by John D. Caputo and Michael J Scanlon (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 170-180 & pp. 181-184.

⁸⁵¹ *New Seeds*, both p. 94.

⁸⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁸⁵³ See *Inner Experience*, p. 20.

⁸⁵⁴ See *Thoughts*, pp. 68-9.

directly in section two, such as contemplation or meditation, or through the evocation of a context that relates directly to Merton's contexts, such as knowledge of the spiritual life or knowledge of heaven. Our analysis will now change tack, however, and focus upon four further examples of hermeticism that relate to the apprehension of God in a way that requires more explanation if it is to be understood as relating to Merton's spiritual contexts. The passages each concern the act of listening to nature – specifically to rain, silence, snow, and night-time – without mentioning the apprehension of God, whether in words Merton himself used in section two above, or in words that relate clearly to the act of apprehending the presence of God.

Why, then, include the passages from Merton's observational nature writing? Our reason is that, in the wider context of Merton's work, each of the four texts to which we now turn can be read as a report or expression of contemplation. Scholars have already begun to sketch the relationship in Merton's work between his appreciation of the natural world and contemplative prayer,⁸⁵⁵ although in Lawrence Cunningham's view there is still work to be done on the subject,⁸⁵⁶ and the contribution offered to that field here, as ever, is to track a descriptive relationship between Merton's content claims and the modes of his writing. Specifically, the five passages below will each be read as embodiments of Merton's claim, from *Inner Experience*, that

walking down a street, sweeping a floor, washing dishes, hoeing beans, reading a book, taking a stroll in the woods—all can be enriched with contemplation and with the obscure sense of the presence of God.⁸⁵⁷

⁸⁵⁵ See, for instance, Weiss on 'The reciprocal dynamic between external nature and internal prayer...' Monica Weiss, 'The Wilderness of Compassion: Nature's Influence in Thomas Merton's Writing', in *The Merton Annual: Studies in Culture, Spirituality & Social Concerns*, ed. by Victor A. Kramer, Vol. 14, 2001 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), pp. 56-80, p. 68.

⁸⁵⁶ For Cunningham 'there is a good book to be written on Merton's reflections on the world of nature' (*Monastic Vision*, p. 35).

⁸⁵⁷ *Inner Experience*, p. 66.

Or again: the prayerful apprehension of God can be experienced in the ‘concrete realities of everyday life’, as William Shannon puts it.⁸⁵⁸ The related contention here is that Merton’s list of concrete, everyday activities from *Inner Experience* can be lengthened to include the act of listening, and specifically listening to the sound of rain, the silence of the moon, the silence of snow, and the sound of night-time, as Merton’s speaker does in the passages discussed below.⁸⁵⁹ Merton evokes what Graham Ward, in a discussion of passages from Ted Hughes and Robert Jeffers, calls ‘a certain numinous quality in creation’,⁸⁶⁰ and in doing so his writing ‘cannot but conjure the possibilities of transcendence’.⁸⁶¹ Each of the passages to be discussed in the remainder of this chapter conforms as a context to Merton’s claim from *Inner Experience*, then; but they also conform, as we shall see, in their evocation of the obscure sense of the presence of God.

The following, firstly, which is taken from *Dancing in the Water*, is hermetic with respect to the placement and tenor of a walking metaphor. The passage opens Merton’s diary entry for 1 January 1965.

I woke up this morning with the vague feeling that something was walking around the hermitage: it was the rain again.⁸⁶²

As in the love-as-sailor example discussed above, there are several layers of obscurity here, and each layer is catalysed by a single question, namely ‘What is the relationship between the

⁸⁵⁸ Shannon, *Paradise Journey*, p. 196. The sentence more fully reads, ‘Meditation... must respect the concrete realities of everyday life—nature, the body, one’s work, one’s friends, one’s surroundings’. For Shannon there is a ‘pointing’ by meditation to these things. Meditation cannot be ‘privatized’, but must reflect the ‘ordinary realities of everyday life’ (all p. 197).

⁸⁵⁹ Kramer’s view that ‘specificity’ itself is one of the ways in which Merton ‘suggest[s] the contemplative experience’ supports our view that Shannon’s words can be applied more broadly. Kramer, *Thomas Merton*, p. 75.

⁸⁶⁰ Ward, ‘How Literature Resists Secularity’, p. 85.

⁸⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶² *Dancing in the Water*, p. 185.

speaker's initial "vague feeling" and his realization that "it was the rain"?' To start with we shall offer two possible readings. It might be, firstly, that the speaker initially mistakes the sound of the rain for the sound of, for example, an animal walking around the hermitage; he then proceeds to realise that the sound is the rain, and describes the sound of rain in terms of a walking metaphor. In this case the passage might highlight the similarity between the sound of the rain and the sound of walking. Following this, the tone of the passage might be one of amazement: *the rain sounds like an animal! Or: the rain seems to live, like an animal!* Or there might be relief – *I thought I was in danger because of something walking around the hermitage, but it was only the rain again* – in which case we could play on the ambiguity of the phrase 'walking around' to highlight different possible types of fear. For instance, if 'walking around' is taken to mean *walking relatively near to*, the speaker might be afraid of, for instance, a predator in the near distance (a bear in the woods); if it is read as *circling the perimeter of*, the speaker might be afraid of a predator walking around his hermitage (a bear at the window); and if it denotes *walking around inside*, he might be afraid of a predator inside his hermitage (a scorpion in the bedroom). Whether evoking amazement or fear, however, the passage revolves, in each case, around a central shift, whereby the speaker's initial 'feeling' that he perceives the sound of walking is dispelled, and replaced by the metaphorical assignation of walking to the same sound.

Secondly, and contrastingly, the speaker's initial 'vague feeling' about something walking might not be mistaken, with the subtext: *my initial feeling did not mistakenly concern the literal assignation of the act of walking to an animal, but the vague assignation of an action that felt like walking, but not necessarily literally, to a sound that turned out to be rain.* An equivalent scenario to this would be my vague sense, upon waking, that something is dancing on the walls. As I wake more fully I realise that the dancing shapes are sunlight. It turns out, then, that my description of something dancing cannot be applied

literally to the actual movements I perceived (the sun does not dance in the way we would normally consider something to dance in a literal sense)—but that does not mean the initial mode in which I perceived the shapes was mistaken. Rather, it might have been an initial description that was itself metaphorical; I did not think that something was dancing in the sense that a person might dance, but rather had a vague sense of something that seemed like, appeared to be, dancing in some way. Our first reading, of a shift from the assignation of an action to a metaphor, concerned the mistaken assignation of an action to a specific object; our second reading contrastingly concerns the correct assignation of a metaphorical description to an unknown object.

The passage from *Dancing in the Water* reinforces the latter reading in two ways. Firstly, the speaker's initial perception is synaesthetic, intimating sound through touch. The *Princeton Encyclopedia* describes 'synaesthesia' as 'the phenomenon in which one sense is felt, perceived, or described in terms of another',⁸⁶³ which is not dissimilar from the metaphorical description of a vague perception that is in question here, whereby one sound (rain) is perceived in terms of another sound (walking).

I woke up this morning with the vague feeling that something was walking around the hermitage: it was the rain again.

Had the speaker initially *heard* walking, there would have been a stronger sense that he believed his initial perception to be literally accurate: the phrase 'I hear walking' need not invite a suspicion that the sound in question is being described metaphorically. The phrase 'I feel the sound of walking', however, does invite questions as to the literalness of the phrase, because the act of feeling a sound is itself an experience that is not, or at least not obviously, literally possible. In this reading, we are left with the sense that the speaker *feels* the sound of walking, realises that he is *hearing* the sound rain, and continues to *feel* the sound of walking.

⁸⁶³ *Princeton Encyclopedia*, p. 1398.

Unlike our previous reading, none of these three stages involves the realisation of a mistake, because none of the stages involves a change in what the speaker perceives literally to be happening.

The second factor that reinforces the impression that the speaker never mistakenly believes that it is actually raining is his familiarity with the scenario he describes. 'It was the rain *again*.' We might be led by this phrase to the subtext: *I have often associated the sound of rain with the act of walking, to the point where, when I wake up, I immediately assign the metaphor of walking to the sound of the rain.* It remains possible that the speaker has repeatedly been woken by rain, or has repeatedly heard the rain around the hermitage, without ever assigning the walking metaphor to it before; but it seems likely that the speaker's familiarity should lead us to guard against viewing his initial 'vague feeling' as a one-off error. The speaker has known rain to walk before, perhaps to the point where he can 'feel' the walking metaphor before computing the tenor towards which it points, namely the sound of rain. If, in sum, the speaker's feeling the sound of the rain implied a mode of perception compatible with a metaphorical description, his familiarity with the rain walking around his hermitage implies a history of perception that leads him to an initial metaphorical description of what turns out to be rain.

When considered in terms of the progression of the speaker's perception, the passage, as we have read it, is not hermetic but aporetic. The central closed-question around which the contradictory imperatives revolves is: 'Does the speaker mistake the sound of the rain for the sound of walking?' We could answer this question either way, for instance as 'Yes', with the now familiar paraphrase: *the speaker initially mistakes rain for walking, and then describes the rain in terms of a walking metaphor.* It is thus only when considering a further question, towards which began to turn in our first reading, that a hermetic mode of obscurity comes to the fore. What, that is, does the passage tell us about the speaker's attitude towards the rain?

The thing held back in hermetic ‘*darkness*’,⁸⁶⁴ and ‘*hiddenness*’,⁸⁶⁵ ‘beyond the reach of... understanding’,⁸⁶⁶ comes to be, not the stages of the speaker’s perception, but the judgement to which that perception leads the speaker.

I woke up this morning with the vague feeling that something was walking around the hermitage: it was the rain again.

Why does the speaker tell us about the rain at all? It might be that he seeks simply to convey the fact of the rain’s occurrence; but in that case, why the ambiguity surrounding the walking metaphor, which leads to the aporia discussed above? In our given reading we interpreted the possible tone of the passage as one of fear or excitement, and to these we might add, for example, the speaker’s *wonder* at the growth of his walking metaphor into a figuration specifically of the rain, or *frustration* that the rain has invaded (walked in on) his sleep once again. But these assignments of attitude remain entirely conjectural, with nothing to back them up in the text. On the question of tone the passage is, without a gap in the seal, hermetic.

The final contention of our reading is that the sense resulting from the hermetic absence of a function for the obscurity can be paraphrased thus: *my perception of the rain is enriched with an obscure sense that evokes the transcendent*. David Givney, discussing Merton’s social thought, has commented that the Trappist’s work displays a ‘metaphysical consciousness’,⁸⁶⁷ or in other words a sense, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, of the metaphysical framework within which Merton’s ethical reflections, such as those on nuclear war, are always situated⁸⁶⁸—and the argument here is similar. More in keeping with

⁸⁶⁴ *Seeds*, 49.

⁸⁶⁵ *The Inner Experience*, p. 65.

⁸⁶⁶ *Seeds*, 144.

⁸⁶⁷ David W. Givney, *The Social Thought of Thomas Merton: The Way of Nonviolence and Peace for the Future* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), p. 41.

⁸⁶⁸ See, for instance, Merton’s *On Peace* (Oxford: Mowbrays, 1971).

our discussion of Merton's language, Lawrence Cunningham has described the 'thickening', and specifically 'thickening of the ordinary',⁸⁶⁹ that Merton's prose sometimes brings about. Following these thinkers, we too read that there is something extra, something metaphysical, something 'thick', about the passage under discussion.

I woke up this morning with the vague feeling that something was walking around the hermitage: it was the rain again.

This is a text that will, in Roland Barthes's words, '*never apologize, never explain*' the function of its obscurity⁸⁷⁰—but why not? Because, we now read, of Merton's claim that activities can be 'enriched with contemplation and the obscure sense of the presence of God'.⁸⁷¹ It is the effect of the rain's obscurity to imply the subtext, *there is something going on that I do not clearly comprehend*, and our task, in this reading, to infer that the incomprehensible 'something' (a word used in the passage itself) is the presence of an obscurely sensed God. This is perhaps the most implicit relation between a content claim and a mode of prose we have encountered so far in this thesis. It requires a set of criteria, concerning an obscure description of an everyday activity, to be met, and for a gap to be left into which we can insert Merton's claim about acts of everyday contemplation. This is our third example of Merton's poetics of hermetic obscurity.

At the same time, the implicit relationship between the rain's obscurity and God's presence is made more compelling when we read it alongside further examples of concrete, everyday experiences described obscurely in Merton's writing. Like the previous passage, the following, from *Learning to Love*, is also taken from the opening of a diary entry, this time for 5 January 1966.

⁸⁶⁹ Lawrence S. Cunningham, 'Harvesting New Fruits: Thomas Merton's "Message to Poets"', in *The Merton Annual: Studies in Culture, Spirituality, & Social Concerns*, ed. by George A. Kilcourse, Vol. 9, 1996 (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press), pp. 21-33, both p. 27.

⁸⁷⁰ Barthes, *Pleasure*, p. 3.

⁸⁷¹ *Inner Experience*, p. 66.

Steady rain all day. It is still pouring down on the roof, emphasizing the silence of the hermitage.⁸⁷²

In our last example the aporia concerning a shift (or non-shift) towards a metaphorical mode of description made conspicuous a question regarding function, the purpose of which was inaccessible or hermetic. The same occurs here with respect to the claim that the rain emphasizes ‘the silence of the hermitage’. We shall analyse this obscurity in the same way that we did before: firstly, by pointing out various possible readings of the passage, each generated by obscurity that revolves around a central closed question; and secondly, by outlining the hermetic nature of the tone, or overall impression, to which those readings point.

Our central closed question this time is ‘Can the speaker hear the rain?’ If we answer ‘No’, citing as evidence the fact that the speaker perceives ‘silence’, which we take to mean noiselessness, it becomes ambiguous how the rain might ‘[emphasize]’ a lack of noise. It might be that the speaker cannot hear the rain, because the hermitage is sound-proof, or because the speaker is hard of hearing. We could then imagine, for instance, that the rain’s emphasis of the silence relates to its steadiness: it has been present ‘all day’, and is ‘still’ present, in the same way that the silence of the hermitage has been and remains present. Similarly, we could imagine the speaker looking out of the window, seeing that it is still raining, and marvelling at how silent the hermitage is, even though the rain is clearly making noise outside. The rain’s emphasis in this case stems from the evidence it gives that the hermitage keeps out immanent noise. On the same line of thought, and more in keeping with the mystical character of Merton’s wider work, we could read that the hermitage has a spiritual quality that enables the speaker to sit in silence even though the rain is making

⁸⁷² *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, ed. by Cristine M. Bochen (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 4.

audible noise outside. This reading might suggest, for instance, that the hermitage enables a mode of meditation during which the speaker's sense of hearing ceases to function.

We can also answer 'Yes', however, to the question 'Can the speaker hear the rain?' citing as evidence the fact that the speaker perceives the rain 'pouring down on *the roof*'.

Steady rain all day. It is still pouring down on the roof, emphasizing the silence of the hermitage.

It is possible that the speaker perceives the rain falling visually, on a part of the roof that is visible from inside the hermitage; but it is also possible that the speaker hears the sound of rooftop rain without seeing it. Were we to read that the speaker sees the rain on the roof, the question would result: 'Why mention the roof specifically, and not, for instance, the trees or the windowpane?' To answer this question is possible – the rain splashes in a particularly interesting way on the roof, for instance – but less compelling than the answer we could give to the same question when applied to the aural perception of rain on the roof, which could well be the loudest, most immediate sound in the speaker's perception as he sits inside the hermitage. As such the mention of the roof strongly suggests an aural perception that is at odds with the first reading given above.

Given the likelihood that the speaker's perception is aural, we are left with a further question: 'If the speaker can hear the rain, how does he also perceive "the silence of the hermitage"?' There are at least five possible answers. Firstly, it could be that the word 'silence' is used metaphorically, to signify something like 'greater quietness'. The speaker can tell that the noise of the rain is louder outside than inside the hermitage, and as such the rain emphasises, is the cause of, the speaker's perception of 'silence'. Secondly, and similarly, it could be that 'silence' metaphorically signifies something like 'stillness'. The rain is 'pouring', moving ceaselessly outside, which marks by contrast ('emphasizes') the stillness ('silence') of the hermitage. Thirdly, the hermitage might enable some form of

spiritual silence, or silence of the heart. The rain's emphasis of the speaker's silence in this case is itself obscure, but we could conjecture, for instance, that the power of the rain enhances ('emphasizes') a feeling of serenity resulting from the inner silence of meditation. Fourthly, we could interpret an emphasis on the passivity of the hermitage, which does not contribute anything to the noise made by the rain. The hermitage is silent in the way that I might be silent whilst listening to a piece of music. Fifthly, it might be that the speaker is located outside, in the rain, and judges the hermitage's silence from that standpoint. Overwhelmed by the noise of the rain, the speaker imagines that the hermitage will be silent when he reaches it; or he shares the perceptions we have already suggested in relation to an interiorly situated speaker, namely the perception that the hermitage is quieter than the rain, or stiller, or that it enables spiritual silence, or that does not contribute further sound to an already noisy situation. None of these perceptions necessarily related to the speaker's being inside the hermitage, and as such we can re-position them externally.

We have structured our readings so far around the question of whether or not the speaker can hear the rain, in order to show the cause of the obscurity, and in doing so we have presented various non-hermetic options for a reading of the passage. As before, however, our aim is to take the reading a step further by asking how the obscurity of multiple options implies that the speaker is obscurely apprehending God's presence.

Steady rain all day. It is still pouring down on the roof, emphasizing the silence of the hermitage.

In our claim that the previous passage, with its obscure shift towards a walking metaphor, was describable in terms of a perception of God's obscure presence, three main criteria were met. Those criteria are also met in the present passage. Firstly, the passage describes a concrete, everyday experience. Secondly, that experience is described in a highly obscure fashion, to the point where basic information about the speaker's perception is unintelligible.

Thirdly, there is no sense of why the everyday experience is being described obscurely. Overall, then, we are left, as before, with a gap that can be read in terms of Merton's content claim that everyday activities 'can be enriched with contemplation and the obscure sense of God's presence'. And as before, the text's lack of explanation of its purpose both makes possible and strengthens our reading. God is so obscure in the passage, we read, that His presence is communicated as the implicit analogue of an unintelligible verb—that is, 'emphasizing'. In Bernard McGinn's exposition of Eriugena, 'the most appropriate language [when speaking of God] is that of eminence, which is positive in form but negative in content'⁸⁷³—and that same relationship between positive form and negative content is present in our reading, albeit in a distinctive way.⁸⁷⁴ In the case of Merton, the positive form is the mode in which the character of the rain is described, and the negative content is the non-mention of God's presence. In our reading, the form of the passage obscurely gestures to an obscure experience that is not, at the level of content, there.

This notion of an obscure gesture by form in relation to the absence of an equivalent gesture by content relates to the dynamic between knowing and not knowing God in Merton's theology. As ever the passage could be described in terms of Merton's claims from earlier about a dialectic between touch and untouchableness, and knowledge through the cross and distortion through sin; but the more significant point to be made is about the mode through which the present passage embodies that dialectic. The passage leaves us in darkness with respect to our knowledge of God for the simple reason that it says nothing about God; but in our reading it also shows forth a God who can be apprehended in obscurity, because obscure content of the passage can be read in terms of wider claims in Merton's work about

⁸⁷³ McGinn, *Growth*, p. 98.

⁸⁷⁴ McGinn's claim about form and content relates to Eriugena's use of phrases such as 'God is *superessentialis*'. The positive form in this case is the mode of assertion – 'God is' – whilst the negative content is the implication that *superessentialis* ('beyond being' or 'beyond essence) can assert nothing about its transcendental referent. See *Ibid.*

apprehending God in everyday experience. We will turn now to further examples of the same phenomenon, which we shall continue to discuss in terms of a gesture by form that is absent in content.

Our fifth example, which is taken from *Dancing in the Water*, shares a number of features with passage just discussed, including that it opens a diary entry. This time the date is 27 March 1964.

Came up to the hermitage at 4 a.m. The moon poured down silence over the woods, and the frosty grass sparkled faintly.⁸⁷⁵

Placing this alongside the silent-hermitage passage will highlight the extent of the similarities.

Steady rain all day. It is still pouring down on the roof, emphasizing the silence of the hermitage.

In both passages an initial, non-obscure, scene-setting sentence precedes an obscure account of silence; in both, a physically elevated object (the moon, the rain) acts in relation to a non-elevated object (the woods, the hermitage), and specifically to the ‘silence’ of the non-elevated object; and in both, the action of the elevated object is described in terms of the verb ‘to pour’. The locus of the obscurity in the passages is also similar. This becomes clearer when we split both passages into three parts, as follows: 1) the noise of the elevated object (moon, rain); 2) the action of the elevated object upon the grounded object (emphasizing, pouring); and 3) the action of the grounded object (woods, hermitage). We have already conducted an analysis of these parts with respect to the ‘Steady rain’ passage, with an emphasis on part 2), namely, the obscurity of the rain’s act of ‘emphasizing the silence’. Our central question – ‘Can the speaker hear the rain?’ – hinged upon how we could best understand this act of emphasis. And we can read a similar hinge-point in the passage from

⁸⁷⁵ *Dancing in the Water*, p. 93.

Dancing in the Water, where the equivalent to ‘emphasizing’ is the claim that ‘The moon poured’. As we shall see, the obscurity of the moon’s action causes the difficulty of answering another central question concerning the speaker’s perception – ‘Can the speaker hear the woods?’ – to which contradictory answers are, as before, possible. We shall now present possible readings on both sides of this aporia, and go on to show that, as before, the function of the obscurity is hermetic.

If we answer ‘No’, firstly, to the question ‘Can the speaker hear the woods?’ we are left with a subsequent question: ‘What relation does the moon’s action have to the silence of the woods?’ Two options are open to us: either the moon causes the woods’ silence, or it does not. If the moon does cause the silence, it is difficult to formulate a subtext that does not evoke the miraculous, as follows: *the moon causes the woods to be silent by a miracle*. We might imagine further details to enlarge this subtext, such as a specific belief-system that lends the moon agency; but the main point about the moon’s miraculous power would remain the same. Such a reading might also evoke the description of the ‘grass’ at the end of the passage. In the same way that the moon miraculously causes the impression of silence, or the lessening of noise, the light of the moon also (non-miraculously this time) causes the grass to ‘[sparkle] faintly’. In both cases the effect of the moon is to produce a low intensity phenomenon, whether visual or audial.

Secondly, we could read that the woods are silent, but not as a result of the moon’s pouring.

Came up to the hermitage at 4 a.m. The moon poured down silence over the woods,
and the frosty grass sparkled faintly.

If we read the passage as only metaphorically assigning the pouring of silence to the woods, the moon might be drawing attention to the silence of the *woods*, with the subtext: *the light of the moon illuminated the woods and drew my attention to their silence*. This also chimes, in a

different way from before, with the sparkling of the 'frosty grass'. The moon's action upon the woods is the same as its action upon the grass: it illuminates the grass, and it illuminates the woods without noise, so that the speaker metaphorizes the process of illumination as 'silence'. In that vein we could read that the speaker is making a comparison between the ever-silent light poured down by the moon and the momentary silence of the sometimes-noisy woods 'at 4 a. m.'. The relationship implied by the moon's pouring 'over' the woods draws attention to the affinity between the necessary silence of light and the passing silence of the woods at a particular moment in time. *It is as though the moon causes silence*, the speaker says, *because at this moment the woods are as silent as moonlight*.

We can also answer 'Yes', however, to the central question 'Can the speaker hear the woods?' In this case we are left with the same sub-question as before: 'What relation, then, does the moon's action bear to the silence of the woods? Various possibilities present themselves. We could read that the gentle light of the moon makes everything feel still to the speaker, to the extent that the woods seem to be more silent than they are, or that the speaker's eyes are gazing so intently on the moon that his hearing of the wind in the woods is dulled, if not entirely muted. Conversely, we might read that the moon's pouring silence foregrounds the relative noisiness of the woods. There is a causal relationship between moon and woods, then, but of an opposing nature to those described so far. The woods are noisy *in spite of* the moon, we might read, or seem especially noisy *because* the moon is so quiet. The readings of direct causality between the moon's silence and the woods' silence can thus be altered. In each reading just given the moon's pouring does not cause silence in the woods, but it does bear upon the speaker's perception of how much noise they make.

We could also, finally, read the moon's pouring as not altering the speaker's perception of the noise made by the woods.

Came up to the hermitage at 4 a.m. The moon poured down silence over the woods, and the frosty grass sparkled faintly.

The purpose of the prepositional phrase ‘over the woods’ is to emphasize the height of the moon, perhaps, or to give a sense of the wider landscape, but not to position the moon’s silence in a causal relation to the woods. The moon pours ‘over’ the woods and not ‘into’ them, after all. On this line of reading we can also find a new sense for ‘faintly’, which implies that the moon barely reaches the grass with its light, let alone the woods with its silence. This answers our question about the relationship between the moon and the woods (there is none), but it does not answer the question ‘Can the speaker hear the woods?’ As we have seen, the passage is elusive on this matter, and only conjectural readings are possible.

We have come full circle, then, from the miraculous silence-causing of the moon, through various modes of non-miraculous relationships between moon and low-volume-woods, to relationships between the moon and high-volume-woods, and finally to an absence of relationship between the two. All this serves to confirm the three criteria required for the poetics under discussion. Firstly, the passage describes a concrete, everyday experience. Secondly, the passage is obscure. Thirdly, none of our readings has implied a purpose for the obscurity in question—that is, none of the scenarios we suggested were themselves obscure (the moon’s light drawing attention to the silence of the woods describes an event that could have been described non-obscurely). The gap into which a reader might insert the claim that the passage’s obscurity is describable in terms of the speaker’s perception of the obscure presence of God is consequently open again.

At this stage, having already offered two examples of the obscure apprehension of God in the description of an everyday event, we can add a strengthening set of wider claims, which apply to both the present and the previous example, and which each concern *silence*. Merton is the writer, after all, who instructs his reader to ‘dwell in the silence of your own

soul and rest there in the simple and simplifying light which God is infusing in you’;⁸⁷⁶ who describes contemplatives as those who ‘collect themselves into peace and interior silence and reach into the darkness where God is present to their deepest hunger’;⁸⁷⁷ and who claims that ‘Since nothing that can be heard is God, to find him we must enter into silence.’⁸⁷⁸ Merton’s obscure, everyday activity of silently watching or listening to the rain is charged, we read, by the presence of a God who, for Merton the Trappist, living in ‘silence, simplicity, contemplative and meditative unity’,⁸⁷⁹ was found in ‘the silence of the hermitage’, and at the times when ‘the moon poured down silence’. In other words, the passage just discussed does not only conform to the criteria of being an everyday reality; it also describes an activity that involves silence, which is closely associated in Merton’s work with the life of prayer and the apprehension of God’s presence. This is our fifth, and penultimate, example of Merton’s hermetic obscurity.

The same openness to the reading of obscurity in relation to God’s presence, and the same mode of reference to silence, occurs in the following, from *Dancing in the Water*, which we place alongside our previous two examples to highlight the similarities. It is the last passage we shall discuss in detail in this thesis. The passage opens Merton’s entry for 30 January 1965.

A cold night. Woke up to find the night filled with the depth and silence of snow.⁸⁸⁰

Came up to the hermitage at 4 a.m. The moon poured down silence over the woods, and the frosty grass sparkled faintly.

Steady rain all day. It is still pouring down on the roof, emphasizing the silence of the hermitage.

⁸⁷⁶ *What is Contemplation*, p. 106.

⁸⁷⁷ *Seeds*, pp. 178-179.

⁸⁷⁸ *New Seeds*, p. 94.

⁸⁷⁹ *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 33.

⁸⁸⁰ *Dancing in the Water*, p. 196.

There is no ‘pouring’ in the former passage by an elevated object onto a grounded object, but there is ambiguity concerning how the ‘night’ is ‘filled’ with ‘the depth and silence of snow’. The role in our last two examples of the moon’s pouring and the rain’s emphasizing is thus replaced in the present passage by the night’s filling. Given that each of the last four passages in our discussion has been taken from Merton’s journal writing, we might now add that it is, in Ross Labrie’s words, the freedom of the journal form from predetermined ‘imaginative’ and ‘expository’ expectations that leads Merton repeatedly to use this specific combination of grammatical and structural techniques in his journal writing.⁸⁸¹ The reader of Merton’s journals will, indeed, find further instances that employ a similar or identical structure.⁸⁸²

Again, in reading the passage from *Dancing in the Water* we shall point out various possible ways to read the obscurity of the ‘depth and silence of snow’ passage in order to highlight its hermeticism. Our closed question this time is: ‘Is the speaker surrounded by snow?’ The dual possibility of a ‘Yes’ and a ‘No’ answer this time stems from the different ways we can read ‘night’, ‘filled’, ‘depth’, and ‘silence’.

A cold night. Woke up to find the night filled with the depth and silence of snow.

If we answer ‘Yes, the speaker is snowed in’, ‘night’ might take on a physical role, with the sense: *the space around me during the night*. That this physical night-space is ‘filled’ means, correspondingly, that the snow fills a physical space. ‘Depth... of snow’ then takes on a sense to the effect of *deep snow*. The speaker has woken up to find deep snow around him; and it is this, we could read, that also fills the night-space with silence. *I can hear nothing*, the speaker

⁸⁸¹ Labrie, *Art of Merton*, p. 53. Labrie goes as far as to claim that the journals are ‘possibly the richest and the most memorable’ examples of Merton’s art (p. 80).

⁸⁸² To select two instances: ‘A grey, cool quiet afternoon. Lots of water falling over the rocks and this is the only sound’ (*Search for Solitude*, p. 168); ‘Light rain all night. A time of wordless deepening, to grasp the inner reality of my nothingness in Him who is’ (*Dancing in the Water*, p.222). The latter example would have conformed more clearly to the context of apprehension God’s presence. Its obscurity, however, is less pronounced and less complex than in the passages we have discussed.

says, *because deep snow insulates my dwelling-place from sound*. It is ‘A cold night’, as the first sentence says, because the deep, silence-inducing snow, which fills a large portion of the physical space of night, is cold.

The speaker might, however, not be snowed in. ‘Night’ might signify a non-physical object: *the feeling I have that it is night; the things I can hear during the night; or the things I can see during the night*, for example. That deep snow might ‘fill’ any of these versions of ‘night’ is itself an obscure concept. The passage does not, however, speak of deep snow, but of ‘the depth... of snow’, without reference to a specific depth, whether deeper or shallower. The question thus becomes: ‘How might the unspecified depth of the snow fill the speaker’s perception of night?’ We might read that the snow’s depth is closely tied to its silence, with a sense for ‘depth’ that can be paraphrased as: *the sense of deep stillness I get when the snow creates the impression of silence*. We might also imagine that, independently of its silence, the snow’s depth has to do with the generation of a deep sense of God’s presence—and this reading of one side of the passage’s aporia would be distinct from its hermetic implication of the same Divine presence, as we shall see. In any case, the sense of ‘depth’ does not necessarily have to do with the snow’s physicality, and ‘filled’, in turn, can function metaphorically, as it is in the phrase *I am full of joy*.

With respect to this latter reading (the ‘No’ to ‘Is the speaker snowed in?’), two further inaccessible meanings have surfaced. That ‘depth’ refers to something non-physical does not rule out the possibility that, if the passage describes physical depth, it signifies that the snow is in fact deep rather than shallow. The ‘deep’ silence or ‘deep’ presence of the snow might, we could read, be caused by a light, silent snow that does not settle on the ground; but it might also be caused by deep snow. In the latter case the speaker is, in the end, snowed in. This physical depth of a deeply silent snow might be read from the text as pure conjecture, or we might read ‘depth’ as having a double-meaning that merges the physical

and the metaphorical senses we have identified. *The physically deep snow causes a deep silence*, for instance.

What, though, of the *silence* of the snow?

A cold night. Woke up to find the night filled with the depth and silence of snow.

We have mentioned silence in connection to a purely physical reading, with the subtext, *the deep snow causes an absence of noise*, but the night's being filled with the silence of snow is obscure in itself, without reference to the ambiguity of the snow's (non-)physicality. 'Silence of snow' generates, that is, the same multiple possibilities that the silent-hermitage passage did earlier. Does the snow's silence generate a lack of noise as a whole, or a lack of noise in the speaker's limited or illusory perception? If so, how? And if not, how can the speaker hear the *snow's* silence whilst remaining aware of noise? We came across the same questions in our two previous 'silence' passages, and the multivalence of meaning to which they can lead, which hinges on the speaker's perception of silence. The purpose of noting similar multivalence here is to show that it is further compounded, in the passage from *Dancing in the Water*, by the further ambiguities surrounding 'night', 'filled' and 'depth', and the combinations of a physical and nonphysical sense to which these three words point.

Having thus analysed the obscurity of the passage, we can now ask, as we have before: 'What is the *effect* of the speaker's obscure descriptions of a concrete, everyday event?'

A cold night. Woke up to find the night filled with the depth and silence of snow.

That the passage conforms to the criteria of describing an everyday situation, doing so obscurely, and employing that obscurity without an obvious purpose, is clear enough. We can add, however, that to accept the reading just offered is also to accept that Merton's prose, in

the 'silence' examples, embodies the obscurest mode of apprehending God yet discussed in this thesis. It is another instance where there is no revelation of God from a place of hiddenness or light shone upon God from a place of darkness; it is an instance where any knowledge about God that gets communicate really does 'beyond the range of concepts',⁸⁸³ because no concept of God is presented at all. It is, as we have already described, an instance of a gap being left by the obscurity of a passage that invites, in our reading, the sense that the passage is about an obscure apprehension of God that it does not describe. And it is this very lack of God-content, we have argued, that makes God's presence so wholly inaccessible, and the speaker's apprehension of him so obscure, when we read the passage as having its place in the poetics of this chapter. This is our sixth, and final, example of Merton's poetics of hermetic obscurity.

5. Conclusion

As was true of our other chapters, the literary analysis just performed has exemplified Merton's claims about apprehending God in obscurity, and in doing so it has revealed new material that we can add to those claims. The first aim of this concluding section is to summarise the new material we have gathered in order to crystallise the fruits to which our Formalist analysis has led. The second aim is to continue preparing the way for the concluding chapter of this thesis, which will give an account of some of the broader ramifications of our contention that placing a Formalist analysis of form in relation to theological content claims opens up a new site through which we can understand the shape of the theology of a thinker like Merton. To begin with, however, we shall turn for the last time to the highly specific, grounded, and exemplified claims about the form-content relation that have characterised our argument throughout this thesis.

⁸⁸³ *Ascent*, p. 9.

In our first example ('Love sails') we read that one of the modes through which Merton encounters a baffling, hidden God is by describing God's actions in such a way that an initially intelligible notion (God is a sailor) is succeeded by a claim that bears a highly ambiguous relation to it (I walk in the air and on the ground). Merton's dialectic between God being easy to find and impossible to find, and graspable by concepts just as he becomes hidden in a chasm, was shown forth here by a procession from semantic unveiling of what God is like to an almost total re-veiling. Unlike the aporetic examples of chapter four, we began to learn in our reading of this passage that one of the ways in which Merton shows forth the obscurity of the presence of God is by frustrating all knowledge about Him through vague relations between sentences, rather than by placing conflicting options in relation to one another.

In our second example ('The song of my Beloved') we read that one of the ways in which Merton empties his writings of all precise, rational knowledge of God is through a series of literary techniques that contribute to the destabilization of our sense of God's character and relationships with the world. God's being (in Merton's words) easy to find or touchable stemmed in this passage from the intelligibility of God's being described as the 'Beloved', as singing, and as being 'by the stream', whereas the sense of the darkness of God stemmed from various aspects of form that called these intelligible descriptions into question. Specifically, we learnt that such a destabilization can result from the elision of predication, which withdrew the sense of the Beloved's spatial positioning; and also the semantic ambiguity about the character of the objects He owned, which called into question his relationship with the world, and which was heightened by the semantic ambiguity with respect to the relationship between those objects. Whereas in our first example an initially intelligible description was clouded by an only dimly-related sentiment following it, here there was no such succession of one thing by another, but rather the calling into question of

multiple aspects of descriptions that we might otherwise have been able to understand. And to this, finally, was added what we called the retrospective obscurity of the 'secret', which shrouded the already destabilized sense of God's character and action in further mystery. The passage showed, in sum, that Merton's claims about the darkness of God can be embodied through form by, not only the withdrawal of something that has already been affirmed about God, but the destabilization of affirmations about God in the moment of their utterance.

In each of the remaining four examples we read that Merton's writings about obscurity were embodied by a literary form that we described in terms of a 'gap'. The first example ('rain again') introduced this trend by showing that a sense of the hiddenness of God can be generated by the empty interpretative space left when a passage fulfils certain criteria. Specifically, the sense of God's presence can be implied when a text obscurely describes an everyday reality without giving good explanation for why the obscurity is being employed. The passage thus showed forth new material about Merton's theology in a way that is distinctive from all of the other examples discussed in this chapter. Instead of mapping onto Merton's content claims by reflecting the shape of content in some way, the primary relation between form and the content claims from section two in this instance was generated by something that was left absent by the form of Merton's obscure form of writing. Admittedly the passage fulfilled the mentioned criteria (it was obscure, for example, and it was about everyday reality), but in the final instance it was the gap into which we could insert the claim about obscure apprehension of God in everyday life that granted it a place in our poetics. We can thus label it an instance, not of form embodying or reflecting content, but of form leaving a space into which content can be inserted.

In the fourth example ('Steady rain') we began to see that Merton sometimes generates the mentioned gap by employing an ambiguous metaphor with respect to nature. We noted earlier that the three criteria to which a passage would have to conform in order to

generate the gap are the description of an everyday experience, obscurity, and a lack of an obvious function for the obscurity, and to this we can add that a repeated mode through which Merton's texts conform to this criteria, and thus invite a reading revolving around the obscurity of God, is by lending obscure, unexplained agency of some kind to nature. Further, we read that an additional basis for the gap in question was the ambiguity concerning the speaker's perception that resulted from the ambiguous metaphor with respect to nature: the rain's emphasis of silence led, in our reading, to our questions about the speaker's ability to hear. Overall, then, we learnt that Merton generates a sense of God's obscure presence by simultaneously calling into question both the actions of nature and the perception of the person who perceived those actions.

In our fifth example ('The moon poured down silence') we added to these characteristics of the obscurity gap a further criteria that related to content. Not only was the passage obscure about everyday reality in an unexplained fashion; it also involved 'silence'. Given Merton's wider work on the importance of silence as a mode through which we come close to God, we read that this strengthened the claim that the passage, whilst not mentioning God, implied that the basis for the obscurity of the moon's pouring related to an obscure Divine presence. With respect to what we have learnt about Merton's theology: one of the ways in which Merton generates the sense of God's obscure presence is by placing the unexplained obscure activity of nature in relation to themes that are evocative of Merton's wider work on the search for God.

Our sixth and final example ('the depth and silence of snow') conformed to this complex pattern. We also learned in this passage, as in the three that preceded it, that the literary forms that generate what we have been calling the 'gap' are amongst the most obscure that we have focussed on in this thesis as a whole. Unlike the other examples of both aporetic and hermetic obscurity, the unintelligibility of our knowledge of God in these

passages stems not only from the ambiguity of the grammar, syntax, typography, and other formal features of the passage, but also its lack of mention of God. To repeat what was said earlier: the obscurity of these passages does not reflect or embody; it points to something that is not there in the text. This is the God to which the 'gap' examples point us in our readings: a God who is not explicitly present in the semantic structures of the text, and who is only implied by merit of the ambiguity of the text. It is both the obscurity of the passage itself, and the lack of an actual mention of God, that generate the obscurity in this emphatic mode of the poetics in question.

Conclusion: Form and Action

This thesis claims that reading the literary forms of Merton's prose in terms of content claims he makes elsewhere can exemplify, deepen, and complexify our understanding of his theology. This central claim has remained unchanged throughout the pages above; our aim has been to substantiate it, by developing a method of close reading that led us earlier on to call our field of enquiry a 'Formalist theological poetics'. All of this should by now be familiar to the reader, and the aim of this concluding chapter is not to repeat the theoretical background against which our study is set (for that, see the introductory chapter and the conclusion to chapter one); to echo what has already been said about the specific links between form and content to which we have pointed (see the fourth sections of chapters one to five); or to copy and paste the new material about Merton's theology to which those links led us (see chapters one to five, and, for a summary account, the concluding sections of chapters three to five). Instead, the aim of this final chapter is to point forwards, by making clear one of the thus far unmentioned characteristics of our argument, and in doing so to shed new light on the originality of our contribution to Merton Studies, to Formalist analysis, and to the branch of the theology of form that we earlier quoted as being called 'performative language readings' of mystical discourse.

The general fields of theological enquiry to which our analysis could contribute are so broad as to risk vagueness, especially if they were to be outlined in the space of a single concluding chapter. Rather than listing them, the more substantial aim of this chapter is to show how our study contributes to Merton's view that it is important for us to place *lived experience* (we shall refine this ambiguous phrase later on) at the heart of our theology. Before outlining this characteristic in detail, it is first worth noting two further areas of inquiry that can be put into conversation with our own. The aim of doing so is to show that

potential future use of the thesis is broad and diverse, with applicability to works as seemingly disparate as Paul R. Kolbet's on *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*⁸⁸⁴ and Fergus Kerr's on *Theology After Wittgenstein*.⁸⁸⁵

Firstly, and in relation to Kolbet's study of Augustine, the research done in the present thesis could be used to contribute to the question of how particular ways of speaking and writing can help hearers and readers to grow in their spiritual lives. Kolbet's study is concerned with how Augustine sought, not just to inform or persuade when he spoke, but to communicate in a way that conforms with the classical ideal 'of an orator who cures the hearer's soul'⁸⁸⁶—and the fruits of Kolbet's account of Augustine overlap in several ways with our theological poetics. For Kolbet's Augustine, the kind of language that heals the souls of its recipients must display a 'harmony between words and deeds', and overcome 'breaches between knowing and acting'.⁸⁸⁷ Questioning the more 'purely cognitive' approach of the classical philosophies in which he was trained as a young thinker, Kolbet's Augustine (or at least, his mature Augustine) seeks to breach the gap between 'wisdom and lived experience', and to show that 'one's manner of life... is more compelling than even eloquent words'.⁸⁸⁸ Our own thesis about the coherence between Merton's recommendations of actions and the literary forms of his prose clearly sheds light on this concern with harmony between words and deeds: our contention has been that it is possible to read Merton's words as *embodiments* of his 'deeds', or, more accurately, as embodiments of the kinds of deed he recommended his readers to perform. To apply Kolbet's terminology to our own task, the chapters above have made possible the claim that the wisdom of a theologian's words about the importance of

⁸⁸⁴ Paul R. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls: Revising a Classical Ideal* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010). Hereafter *Cure of Souls*.

⁸⁸⁵ Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). Hereafter *Theology After Wittgenstein*.

⁸⁸⁶ *Cure of Souls*, p. 7.

⁸⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 3 & 47.

⁸⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 130, 130-131, & 162.

denial can be made manifest in the lived experience that is shown forth on the page in, for example, emphatic exclamations and syntactic turns and gradual processes of caesura-esque elision.

Further, Kolbet's Augustine is concerned with a method of psychagogic (or 'therapeutic')⁸⁸⁹ communication that prioritises the cure of the soul over the teaching of content. In his aim to '[educate] the affections', Augustine 'did not pass on to his students the philosophical conclusions to which he has come',⁸⁹⁰ but rather 'led souls gently to apprehend truth for themselves.'⁸⁹¹ Again: Augustine believed that the

truths of Christian teaching... are neither naked objects of vision nor simple verbal propositions, but the truth of things as they are known through an ongoing hermeneutical struggle.⁸⁹²

The overlaps with the present study are again clear: the examples analysed in section four of each of the five main chapters above are instances of a method of communication that, whilst being readable in terms in terms of content, are themselves not (in Kolbet's words from earlier) conclusions or propositions, but rather an invitation to readers to see for themselves the shapes of Merton's denials, simplifications, and acts of perceiving thereness and Divine obscurity. To bring this together with Kolbet's prioritization of lived experience over eloquent formulas: the present thesis has been concerned with analysing language that communicates by showing forth rather than proposing content, and in so doing it has proposed a method for responding to the kind of language that, for Kolbet's Augustine, is more effective in the pursuit of the cure of souls than the kind of eloquent content, divorced from life, against which Augustine reacted.

⁸⁸⁹ Kolbet uses the term 'psychagogic' to reflect a recent terminological turn in scholarship: 'Classical traditions of philosophical therapy have been referred to as "psychagogy" in recent scholarship'. See *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁸⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁸⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 143.

To develop this overlap fully would require a study in its own right, but even at this most preliminary of stages it is possible to formulate a research question that results from the parallels just outlined. If one's manner of life is more compelling than eloquence (*pace* Kolbet), and if one's manner of life can be shown forth in the forms of literary form (*pace* the five literary critical above), it would seem that the present thesis has developed a method with which to analyse and therefore to understand an aspect of language that is more compelling than its eloquence. Further, we have developed a method for understanding an aspect of language (its showing forth of lived experience) that, for Kolbet's Augustine, leads to the cure of the soul. The research question with which a more sustained account of these links could begin is thus: 'How can the manner of life as displayed in the literary form of a text lead to what Augustine called the "cure of the soul"?'

Secondly, an extended study could be done on the relationship between our poetics and Fergus Kerr's account of *Theology After Wittgenstein*. The main notion on which that study would hinge is the contention in Kerr's book that language does not have a hidden essence to which words refer, but rather displays its meaning on its surface, in everyday patterns of communication. 'To see what is obvious is difficult because we want to see something beyond it,'⁸⁹³ says Kerr's Wittgenstein; and again, our search for 'the essence of language only prevents us from seeing how conversation actually takes place.'⁸⁹⁴ In contrast to the Cartesian worldview that leads to these searches for essence, Wittgenstein contends that, 'far from concealing the soul, the body reveals it',⁸⁹⁵ and, correspondingly, that 'there is nothing I can find in myself, which I cannot show to other people, at least in principle.'⁸⁹⁶ And this pattern of visibility and immediacy applies in Kerr's account beyond the language of

⁸⁹³ *Theology After Wittgenstein*, p. 50.

⁸⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁸⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁸⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

the soul and the self. ‘Wittgenstein does not separate epistemology from real life’,⁸⁹⁷ says Kerr, and ‘we cannot catch reality in our net because it is the bustle of life of which we are a part’.⁸⁹⁸ In sum: the body reveals the soul; our real lives are enmeshed with knowledge; our bustling lives are themselves reality. Each of these claims is unified in the task of debunking the myth of a dualism between a hidden, essential content on the one hand, and the forms of life that constitute our actual experience on the other.

Such a view has implications for how we approach language. If the locus of meaning is visible and at the surface, the task of seeking somehow to talk accurately or correctly about concealed realities must be replaced by an attentiveness to our lives as we live them, including our use of language. It is here, in the shift of the focus of our attention as seekers after knowledge and ‘reality’ (as Kerr put it earlier), that the overlap with the present thesis comes into focus. For Kerr, a Wittgensteinian theology would be concerned with ‘how, when we have to, we speak of God’,⁸⁹⁹ and with coming to understand the meaning of the word “‘God’... by listening to what we say about God’.⁹⁰⁰ Our most important task, if we are to learn what the word ‘God’ means, is to ‘learn to watch our language about ourselves’.⁹⁰¹ All of this chimes with the work that has been done in the pages above. Our poetics, too, has displayed an impulse away from the kind of theology that talks about ‘God’ (or ‘the presence of God’) as an object, and towards the kind of theology that observes the apprehension of God, and indeed reads a sense of God’s presence, in the structures of closely observed language. Analysing the theologically-rooted actions that are displayed in Merton’s language shifts the site of our understanding in a way that mirrors the shift Kerr outlines in the thought

⁸⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁸⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁸⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁹⁰⁰ *Theology After Wittgenstein*, p. 148.

⁹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

of Wittgenstein: from language that is about, that speaks of, that refers to, and towards language that does, shows, embodies.

Again, we can develop a preliminary research question as a result of this brief account of an area of overlap. The present thesis has been concerned primarily with learning about every day actions (denial, simplification, perceiving thereness), but how could our method of correlation be used to develop the area of concern that Kerr mentions as the way forward for theology after Wittgenstein: learning what we mean when we talk about the word 'God'? The final two literary critical chapters above argued for a way of understanding what we mean by 'God' when that particular word was not necessarily present; but how could a formalist analysis, used in conjunction with theological content-claims about God, deepen our understanding of a particular, highly influential and frequently used word? Kerr himself offered the basic research question in this instance earlier on: 'How do we speak of "God"?' But we can take this a step further: **'How can a formalist analysis reveal aspects of the way in which we use the word "God", and therefore teach us what we mean when we refer to "Him" in a way that offers material for the Wittgensteinian theology outlined by Fergus Kerr?'**

All of this makes clear the broad applicability of the work done above; but our more substantial aim in this chapter is to outline in more detail one of the key developments our thesis has offered to the study of Thomas Merton: the centrality in his work of what we will initially be calling 'lived experience'. In order to make clear the connection between Merton's views on experience and our theological poetics, it is first necessary to outline the views of Merton's that are in question. This will require us to deviate momentarily from the strict task of discussing the significance of what we have done in this thesis; but it will help us to return to that task with better tools in a few pages' time. The basic contention that experience holds a central place in Merton's thought, first of all, is uncontroversial. For example, in *No Man* Merton writes that the first responsibility of a man of faith is to make his

faith really part of his own life’;⁹⁰² in *Monastic Prayer* he expresses the need for a ‘direct existential grasp’ on the mysteries of faith;⁹⁰³ in *Ascent* he claims that ‘It is useless to study truths about God and lead a life that has nothing in it of the Cross of Christ’;⁹⁰⁴ and again, albeit in relation to a way of life that does not so easily sit within the remit of ‘faith’ or ‘theology’, he claims in *Zen* that ‘One cannot understand Buddhism until one meets it in [an] existential manner, in a person in whom it is alive’.⁹⁰⁵ The secondary literature repeats this basic contention that some kind of lived experience is central for Merton just as frequently. A few examples can make the point: Dumont claims that Merton’s ‘monastic style’ of writing is ‘personal’ and existential;⁹⁰⁶ Pramuk speaks of Merton’s ‘attention to religious *experience* more than verbal formulas’;⁹⁰⁷ Shannon argues that ‘It was because Merton was attuned to experience that he was pre-eminently a theologian—a contemplative rather than a dogmatic theologian’;⁹⁰⁸ McCaslin contributes to the wealth of literature on the central importance of Merton’s major religious experiences in Rome (1933), Cuba (1940), Fourth and Walnut (1958), and Polonnaruwa (1968);⁹⁰⁹ and Michal Mott goes as far as to say that ‘something in Merton had to take everything to the autobiographical “I”, even at the risk of sounding egotistical to the point of megalomania.’⁹¹⁰ There can be little argument, then, over our initial

⁹⁰² *No Man*, p. xiv.

⁹⁰³ *Monastic Prayer*, p. 92.

⁹⁰⁴ *Ascent to Truth*, p. 9.

⁹⁰⁵ *Zen and the Birds*, p. 62.

⁹⁰⁶ Charles Dumont, ‘Cistercian Identity Today: Revisiting Thomas Merton’, in *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 487-498, p. 493.

⁹⁰⁷ Christopher Pramuk, ‘*Hagia Sophia*: The Unknown and Unseen Christ of Thomas Merton’, in *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2006, pp. 167-192, p. 169. (Pramuk’s italics.)

⁹⁰⁸ Shannon, *Dark Path*, p. 225.

⁹⁰⁹ See for instance Susan McCaslin, ‘Merton’s Mystical Visions: a Widening Circle’, in *Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge*, ed. by Ross Labrie and Angus Stuart (Canada: Thomas Merton Society of Canada, 2012), pp. 23-44, especially p. 23.

⁹¹⁰ Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1986), p. 315.

point. What Merton and his critics have variously called ‘experience’, ‘lived experience’, the ‘existential’ and the ‘autobiographical’ is a central tenet in the Trappist’s work.⁹¹¹

How does this relate to our Formalist theological poetics? How does it help us to conclude our thesis? The answer to these questions begins to appear when we look a little more deeply, at claims about the importance of, not just experience, but *writing* as a mode of experience. Comments on this topic in Merton studies are rarer than those about experience more generally, but they do appear on occasion. Merton’s claim in *Jonas*, for example, that ‘Hopkins’s spiritual struggles fought their way out in problems of rhythm’⁹¹² is a case in point. Hopkins’s experience (struggle) is made manifest (fights its way out) in one of the features of his poetic style (rhythm). To bring the trains of thinking we have been exploring together: for Merton, ‘lived experience’ of some kind is of central importance, and, for Merton’s Hopkins, literary form is a way of showing forth an aspect of that experience, namely an experience of struggle. In this way we can formulate the view that literary form is a site through which lived experience can be made manifest. Other claims in Merton’s writings support this view. In *Run to the Mountains*, for example, Merton outlines in more general terms his view of the mimetic function of language: ‘There is a logic of language and a logic of mathematics. The former is something like experience: it follows it closely, is not rigid but supple, imitates life.’⁹¹³ We can place this in relation to the claim about Hopkins: Hopkins’s display of spiritual struggle through rhythm is one particular way in which language can ‘imitate’ or in some sense map onto or reflect an experience. And there are more ambiguous claims, too, that we can more tentatively place in the remit of the relation

⁹¹¹ For a further account of the centrality of experience to Merton’s project, see also *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Rosemary Radford Ruether*, ed. by Mary Tardiff (New York: Orbis Books, 1995). Despite many disagreements, Merton and Ruether find a point in connection in Ruether’s characteristically broad-stroked claim that ‘I distrust all academic theology. Only theology bred in the crucible of experience is any good’ (p. 25).

⁹¹² *Jonas*, p. 87.

⁹¹³ *Run to the Mountain*, p. 83.

between form and experience to which we are pointing: Merton's description of '[T. S.] Eliot's literary chastity'⁹¹⁴ and Rilke's 'poetic solitude'⁹¹⁵ hint at a similar relation between form and a way of life. How else, other than in the way they write, could Eliot display literary 'chastity', or and Rilke 'poetic' solitude? And what exactly are they displaying when they do so, if not their experience of some kind of chastity and some kind of solitude?

Regardless of how we answer these last questions, the secondary literature reinforces the more direct claims of Merton's about what we might concisely call the 'form-experience overlap' (this is still an ambiguous phrase) with claims of its own. Kramer does not mention literary form directly when he makes the case that Merton's poetry is 'a gradual distillation of his experience of the monastic vocation',⁹¹⁶ but the word 'distillation' is key. Kramer is hinting at, not just the description of an aspect of the monastic vocation, but the 'Exemplification' of it, the showing forth of it, as the title of his essay claims directly ('Poetry as Exemplification of the Monastic Journey').⁹¹⁷ More clearly still, Burrell has argued that 'nothing testifies better to the salubrious effect of monastic discipline than Merton's clear prose'.⁹¹⁸ This is as complete an example of the form-experience overlap as the Hopkins example was earlier on: the experience in question here is 'monastic discipline' and the form through which it is expressed is clarity, 'clear prose'. And like Merton's claims about Eliot and Rilke quoted above, there is material in the secondary literature that more ambiguously suggests that poems can show forth experience: Kountz's claim, for example, that Merton's writing was 'the dimension through which he observed and interpreted not only

⁹¹⁴ Jonas, p. 98.

⁹¹⁵ *School of Charity* p. 296.

⁹¹⁶ Kramer, 'Exemplification', p. 113.

⁹¹⁷ See *Ibid.* For a more details account of Kramer's essay see note 118 above.

⁹¹⁸ David Burrell, 'Thomas Merton's Criteria for Discerning Truths about God', in *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 1988, pp. 330-339, p. 332.

life around him but the quality and character of that life'⁹¹⁹ might bear relevance to our concerns were it to be developed a little further. Either Kountz is making the commonplace claim that, for Merton, writing was a central way in which he made observations about his life; or there is something more sophisticated at play in the word 'interpreted', which might imply that writing was a site through which Merton *construed* life, displayed or (in a term much used in this thesis) *enacted* the way in which he lived it. The point here is not to argue for or against a particular reading of the Kountz quotation, but only to suggest that the latter reading is possible, and that Kountz might therefore be working on a similar line of thought to our own. Similarly, McCaslin has claimed that, in Merton's 'most contemplative poems, the poem itself becomes an incarnation of the longing for justice and peace'.⁹²⁰ This needs a little less interpretative work than the Kountz claim did in order to cohere with our ideas about form. McCaslin seems more clearly to be claiming that certain of Merton's poems make manifest ('incarnate', in fact) an experience of longing. As with Merton's words about Eliot and Rilke, a claim like this would need to be worked on in order to place it firmly in the remit of Merton's claim about Hopkins's rhythms or Burrell's about the monastic clarity of Merton's prose. The point of mentioning it here is to show that critics have both pointed directly, and gestured more vaguely, towards what we have tentatively been calling the form-experience overlap.

The very final task of this thesis is to show that the material we have just outlined can be brought to bear on the work done in the present thesis, and in doing so to re-clarify the contribution of our argument to several major fields on enquiry. The relationship of our argument to the form-experience overlap is clear enough: the literary-critical chapters of this

⁹¹⁹ Peter Kountz, 'The Significance of Thomas Merton as Artist-Writer (Some Reflections)', in *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1977, pp. 308-318, p. 318

⁹²⁰ Susan McCaslin, 'Pivoting Toward Peace: The Engaged Poetics of Thomas Merton and Denise Levertov', at <<http://www.prrb.ca/articles/issue10-mccaslin.html>> (Consulted February 2015).

thesis have each reinforced the view that literary form can make manifest characteristics of ‘experience’, and, more specifically, that it can make manifest particular theologically-rooted actions, such as self-denial, simplification, watching without analysing, and apprehending God in obscurity. To take a few of our examples from the chapters above: we have argued that the capitalization of a single-word sentence can enact a raw, impassioned act of denial rooted in a theology of *kenosis*; the replacement of justifications by an observation can embody an act of returning to a primitive state with few words, rooted in the theology of God’s simplicity; the elision of grammatical parts can generate a state of non-explanation and non-manipulation, rooted in the view that we come close to God when we cease to analyse; the juxtaposition of sentences that bear highly ambiguous relations to one another can create a de-stabilization of our sense of God’s character and even presence, rooted in the theology of God’s hidden-presentness; and so on. Summarising a few of our readings in this way, we can begin to see how our poetics has concerned what Merton and his critics somewhat vaguely called ‘experience’, ‘lived experience’, and the ‘existential’, and what we are now calling *theologically-rooted actions*. We have read literary form as embodying acts of denial, simplification, seeing the word in its thereness, and perceiving God in obscurity, and in doing so we have confirmed the thesis, expressed in a more elementary form by Merton and his scholars, that literary form is a site through which a reader can come to understand something experiential, something embodied in a way of life, and more specifically a series of actions that can be placed against the background of a theological framework.

Viewing the five main chapters above in terms of their exploration of the form-action overlap helps us to see several new things about what we have contributed to the fields of enquiry outlined in the introductory chapter with which we began. In terms of Formalism, first of all, we learnt earlier on that critics such as Susan Wolfson are paving the way towards

‘an historically informed Formalist criticism’,⁹²¹ and a discussion of ‘the meeting of ethics and form’;⁹²² and we argued that our distinctive contribution to this emerging field is an account of the meeting point of theology and the particularities of form. To this we can add that we have contributed an account of the meeting place of form and calls to action, or in other words the enactment by form of the actions to which psychagogic language points. This relationship need by no means be limited modes of psychagogic language that relate to theology specifically: it would be possible to take the framework of our argument and apply it to psychagogic language of any kind. What kind of psychagogic language did Percy Shelley use, and how did he enact it in the forms of his poetry? How could the same question be applied to Cormac McCarthy? The point of seeking to answer these and similar questions would be the same as it has been in the present thesis: the creation of a new prism through which to read the form of Shelley’s poetry and McCarthy’s prose, and of a new way in which to understand the modes of action about which they write elsewhere.

In terms of the theology of form, secondly, we can now see that the task of outlining a relationship between form and action makes clearer the distinctiveness of our thesis amongst the existing literature. We outlined in the introduction to this thesis that the closest existing work to the present thesis was Michael Sells’s *Unsayings*, but that our own work was nevertheless distinct from Sells’s, in three ways. We outlined that, firstly, Sells described mystical writers such as Eckhart’s prose forms as embodying ideas that were taken from outside the realm of Eckhart’s work, whereas we were concerned with describing Merton’s prose forms in terms of his own theologies; secondly, Sells was concerned with how texts embodied mystical union, whereas we were concerned with how texts embodied self-denial, simplification, and the perceptions of thereness and God’s obscure presence; and thirdly,

⁹²¹ Susan J. Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 1.

⁹²² ‘Reading for Form’, p. 13.

Sells was mainly concerned with the fusion of antecedents, whereas we were concerned with a diverse set of literary forms not discussed by Sells. The first and third of these differences have been well-documented already in the literary-critical chapters above, especially in the summaries to chapters three, four, and five, which list the relations between the new specific forms we have analysed, and the theologies of Merton's that we have related them to. More can be said, however, about the second difference (Sells is interested in mystical union whereas we are not). Earlier on, in chapter four, section two, we noted the difficulty of discussing what Sells calls the 'semantic analogue to mystical experience',⁹²³ when 'mystical experience' is taken to bear any relation to Merton's account of 'infused contemplation', which involves 'immediacy of union between the soul and God'⁹²⁴ and the removal of 'intellectual intuitions';⁹²⁵ and we can now see that our alternative to this difficult territory has been the discussion of particular kinds of *action*. Whereas Sells was concerned with the mystical, we have been concerned with the theologically-rooted practicalities of describable acts and practices; whereas Sells was concerned with union, we have been concerned with everyday theologically-rooted actions and disciplines. The remit of the model of theological poetics outlined in this thesis is thus far wider than Sells's, and it would be possible to apply our methodology to diverse theologies, including those that were not concerned with experiences of union at all. How, for example, do Augustine's prose forms enact a posture of penitence? How is Milbank's notion of outnarration made manifest in the form of his syntax? The present thesis has exemplified, deepened, and complexified our understanding of Merton's theology—and the same would be possible if a literary-critic-theologian were to follow through those questions about Augustine or Milbank.

⁹²³ Sells, *Unsayings*, p. 9.

⁹²⁴ *Ascent*, p. 61.

⁹²⁵ *Inner Experience*, p. 70.

Thirdly, the form-action discussion contributes to Merton studies in a number of different ways. Most basically, it shows that the present thesis responds to and significantly develops an area of thought to which, as we showed earlier, Merton and others have already discussed in detail at the level of content. In the same way that the present thesis responds to the many unsubstantiated gestures towards the need for close textual analysis in mystical theology, it also responds to the views about literary form as a site through which theologically-rooted actions can take place (for instance, Hopkins's rhythmic struggles). A little more complexly, it offers a new way of approaching the centrality of lived experience in the work of Thomas Merton as a whole. In this chapter so far we have shown that 'experience', or 'lived experience' is a central tenet for Merton and his appreciators; we have shown that there has been occasional interest in the relationship between literary form and some kind of experience; and we have shown that our own thesis develops a mode of reading that reveals the relationship between literary form and the performance of theologically-rooted actions. It follows that our thesis contributes to Merton studies a radical and heretofore only elementarily explored approach to one of the central themes in Merton's work—that is, we have shown that there is a whole new avenue for those readers of Merton who are concerned with emphasis on lived experience. By reading his literary forms in terms of his theologically-rooted commendations of action, the Merton scholar is gifted a new way to approach this key aspect of the Trappist's work.

Lastly, our Formalist theological poetics is not only a prism through which we can come to understand actions that spring from theologies; it is also a site of analysis that is capable of sidestepping the perennial problem of Merton studies, which we quoted George Kilcourse describing earlier on: most of the recent work on Merton positions the Trappist

himself as ‘the final locus of study’.⁹²⁶ Admittedly, a critic might use an analysis of literary form in order to contribute material to a biography of Merton. One might suggest, for example, that the some of the exuberant writing closely following Merton’s ordination in 1949 reflects his intensely excited and somewhat overwhelmed state of mind at the time,⁹²⁷ and in this way the study of form might contribute to the marketplace of ‘Mertonia’. Our own development of a theological poetics that reads form in terms of recommended actions has not, however, issued in biographical information. Rather, it has issued in claims that relate, as we outlined at the beginning of this thesis, to a number of fields other than Merton studies. To repeat this in concise form: our study of Merton’s literary acts of denial, simplification *et al* has contributed to the Formalist attempt to apply close textual analysis to wider theoretical territories; and it has offered specific substantiations to the often general claims, made by theologians of form, that forms of writing can reflect or show forth theologically-rooted recommendations of action. Our aim, then, has been to study the actions revealed in Merton’s literary forms in order to say something about the relation between form and theology, rather than about Merton.

This concludes our account of the originality and significance of the present thesis when considered in terms of form and action. Generally applicable to the study of the relationship of theology and form, it also opens up avenues for the Formalist study of the enactment of commended actions in the work of literary writers, and generates a new prism through which future scholars will be able to approach the rich prose of Thomas Merton. Such signposts are not the main fruit of our analysis, however. For that, the reader should return to the five main chapters of the thesis and rediscover the diverse, at times highly

⁹²⁶ George Kilcourse, ‘Introduction’, in *The Merton Annual: Studies in Culture, Spirituality & Social Concerns*, ed. by George A. Kilcourse, Vol. 15, 2002 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), pp. 2-18, both p. 13.

⁹²⁷ See, for example, the paragraphs from *Jonas* beginning ‘I wish I could explain’ (p. 193), and ‘Now I know’ (p. 195).

complex literary modes through which Merton brings his commendations of denial, simplification, the perception of thereness, and the perception of God in obscurity, onto the page.

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