

Poems in Interreligious Dialogue: Searching for God in the Poetry of
Ku Sang and Thomas Merton

by

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A Thesis

submitted to the Victoria University of Wellington
in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English Literature

Victoria University of Wellington

2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like first and foremost to thank my supervisor, Peter Whiteford, for receiving my initial inquiries regarding Master's study at Victoria University of Wellington with kindness and encouragement, and subsequently for all his guidance, insight, and patience over the course of the program. Thank you, Peter, for being an intellectual 'rock' upon whom I could always rely. I thank Brother Anthony of Taizé for welcoming me into his office in Seoul and sharing so many insights into Ku Sang and the field of Korean/English translation. He makes a pretty good cup of tea, too. I find myself in deep gratitude to Dr. Sara Cotterall, for her masterful facilitation of *Shut Up and Write!* workshops. Some of the material I wrote in those workshops each Friday morning at Pipitea can be found in this thesis. I thank Dr. Stephen Epstein for his information about South Korea and encouragement of my consideration to travel there. I thank Kim Mi Young for teaching a wonderful Korean Language for Beginners class, a class which helped me learn enough of the basics of such a beautiful language that I could survive while conducting research in Waegwan and Seoul. I also would like to thank all the dedicated librarians who have supported my research. I thank my subject librarian at Victoria University of Wellington, Kōichi Inoue, and correspondingly appreciate the many others who work at Te Pātaka Kōrero whose names I do not know. I also thank all the librarians in the various places to which my research led me: The Ku Sang Literature Centre in Waegwan, South Korea, the Loyola Library at Sogang University in Seoul, South Korea, the Christchurch Central City Library, the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, and the Auckland Catholic Diocese Library. I would have struggled to write this thesis without their help. I express my gratitude to all the individuals in the various offices of FGR, FHSS, SEFTMS, and the VUW International Office, those who provided behind-the-scenes support for the administration of my degree program, processing all those lovely forms and reminding me of all the important deadlines. I thank all my friends who stayed in touch even though I was on the other side of the planet. And ultimately, I dedicate this thesis to Angelo, Sandra, Andrea, Aimee, Kayla, Ronan, Ava, Ella, Conal, Noah, and Lila. I missed you while I was away.

ABSTRACT

Twentieth-century poets Ku Sang and Thomas Merton, two Catholic poets from Korea and America, respectively, were both aware of a space between themselves and God. Their poetry reveals attempts to go and find him. Because their searches for God entailed an interreligious nexus, insofar as their poetry blended Buddhist and Christian religious imagery, I utilise a comparative method, drawn from the field of Comparative Theology, which juxtaposes religious texts from differing faith traditions; I place Zen Buddhist kōans side-by-side with the Christian poems, each poem understood as representing a way to seek God. Moreover, I provide close readings of each poem and kōan, with critical commentary on the poems and interpretation of any new meaning revealed by the juxtaposition of texts. As a result of my examination, I propose that exploration of how these poets expressed their own understanding of God's whereabouts, achieved by contact with poetic experience at the naked level of the poem, yields insight both into the two men's unique contributions to broader knowledge of poets searching for God and how they were transformed for the sake of searching at all.

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It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.
Hear me out
for I too am concerned
and every man
who wants to die at peace in his bed
besides.

- from "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" by William Carlos Williams

What
does the traveller to your door
ask, but that you sit down
and share with him that
for which there are no words?

- from "One Day" by R.S. Thomas

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

In response to J. Hillis Miller’s observation that “post-medieval literature records, among other things, the gradual withdrawal of God from the world,” I examine two twentieth-century poets’ attempts to go and find him (Hillis Miller 2000 1). I have chosen Ku Sang and Thomas Merton, two Catholic poets from Korea and America, respectively, because their searches for God entailed an interreligious nexus, insofar as their poetry blended Buddhist and Christian religious imagery. I place the two poets from East and West side-by-side for comparative study. Furthermore, I have chosen a comparative method, drawn from the field of Comparative Theology, which juxtaposes religious texts from differing faith traditions. To determine if the method can be effectively applied outside its usual environment, I have placed Zen Buddhist kōans side-by-side with the Christian poems, each poem understood as representing a way to seek God. I provide close readings of each poem and kōan, with critical commentary on the poems and interpretation of any new meaning revealed by the juxtaposition of texts. I conclude the thesis with comparative critical discussion of the poetry selected for close study, commentary which describes in what manner the kōans have informed readings of the poems, and my summative thoughts on my response to Hillis Miller’s observation.

Of course, Ku Sang and Thomas Merton were not the only twentieth-century poets to go looking for God. Hart Crane’s “The Broken Tower,” and Czesław Miłosz’s “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto,” also offer meaningful examples of poets searching for God through their poetry. Just a few years after Merton’s death in 1968, John Berryman produced “Opus Dei,” a poem drawing upon the monastic Liturgy of the Hours for its structure. Around the time that Ku Sang published a poetry collection to express his Catholic response to the Korean War, *Scorched Earth Poems*, James K. Baxter converted to Catholicism and wrote *Fires of No Return*. Other prominent examples of poetry collections to reflect searches for God include Denise Levertov’s *Oblique Prayers*, Sir Geoffrey Hill’s *Tenebrae*, and R.S. Thomas’ *Experimenting with an Amen*. And finally, Wallace Stevens’ “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” and Les Murray’s “The Mouthless Image of God in the Hunter-Colo Mountains” also provide representative examples of poems that express a search for God. But Ku and Merton remain relatively lesser known than these poets I have mentioned. By examining their poetry in close detail, my work should add to our understanding of these two men, neither of whom was aware of the other or the other’s work, and their unique contributions to broader knowledge of poets searching for God.

Hillis Miller, referring to the situation which gave rise to what he termed ‘the disappearance of God’, asks, “How did this situation come about?” and proposes that although human culture began with an experience of the divine as “immediately present,” this communion between humanity and God eventually split apart, “matched,” as he says, “by a similar dispersal of the cultural unity of man, God, nature and language” (Hillis Miller 2000 2-3). Perhaps this situation provided the very stimulus for him “to attempt to trace the courses of five spiritual adventures” in *The Disappearance of God*, “guided by the assumption that each work by an author gives us a new glimpse of an underlying vital unity” (Hillis Miller 2000 15). Unity, though, must be constructed from parts in order to form the whole. In his book, Hillis Miller brought together five writers who “all belong to the same family...The writers studied here [in *The Disappearance of God* – De Quincey, Robert Browning, Emily Brontë, Arnold, and Hopkins] rejected or were excluded from certain ways of dealing with the loss of God” (Hillis Miller 2000 12). While making this observation, he also notes that these five writers demonstrated but one reaction to God’s perceived withdrawal, commenting that for some God actually remained present, and, for others, God’s withdrawal was noticed but not lamented (Hillis Miller 2000 12). My work, then, should not be construed as a challenge to his original observation, but simply a response, undertaken to examine two Catholic poets whom I perceive as belonging to the same family, although a different one than that found in *The Disappearance of God*.

Ku and Merton were both aware of a space between themselves and God. Their poetry often seeks to close the gap and thus offers direct testimony of their own searches for him, undertaken in confidence that they would be able to find him. Octavio Paz has observed that “one must interrogate the direct testimonies of the poetic experience. The unity of poetry can only be grasped by means of naked contact with the poem” (Paz 3-4). With that in mind, I suggest that an interpretation of Ku’s and Merton’s poems placed side-by-side should also signify the larger context of those who felt that God remained present but distant and therefore felt the need to search for him in response to his perceived withdrawal. Placing them side-by-side and reading their poems in close detail can help understand this search from intimate contact at the level of Ku’s and Merton’s individual poems.

For these two men specifically, I propose to examine Buddhist texts, which can help interpret their search for God within this larger context. Taken together, the Christian poems and Buddhist texts extend interpretive possibilities at the intersection of those religious literary traditions, while they retain original value in their home tradition. In a sense, one text can be interpreted to

dialogue with the other text (although that dialogue is of course filtered through an interpreter), and can be seen to function as another episode of encounter between Buddhism and Christianity. In essence, each encounter between Buddhism and Christianity forms a type of interreligious dialogue between the two faith traditions. The concept of interreligious dialogue itself is a term which retains some history of its own right and academic study of this ongoing dialogue has revealed some challenges of implementation. In his introduction to *In Search of the Divine*, Larry Shinn observes that some of these challenges exist because research in interreligious studies has mostly encompassed two general but separate focuses – theological issues and methodologies, and experiential practices and insights (Shinn xv). Furthermore, Shinn notes that focusing on either basis may lead either to affirmation of underlying unity or assertion of fundamental differences, neither of which, he implies, support efforts towards fruitful dialogue. Instead, he suggests that fruitful dialogue can occur when interreligious dialogue is implemented as “empathetic exploration of faiths as life-transforming symbol systems” in contrast to attempts which seek unity or divergence of faith (Shinn xv; xxvi). My own juxtaposition of Christian poems with Buddhist texts is undertaken in sympathy with this conception of interreligious dialogue as empathetic exploration, a sentiment perhaps best expressed poetically, as offered by Ku Sang in his poem, “70,”¹ from *Even the Knots on Quince Trees*:

Two faiths that reject each other as wrong teaching, false way,
stand in opposition, calling each other superstition, evil,
each seeing the other as a brood of snakes or scorpions

and here the gates of mutual succor open!

Humans, do not divide
the truth that is only one.

Humans, do not divide God,
who is only one.

Hearing this report on the radio
I was overjoyed, so overjoyed I sobbed. (*Even the Knots on Quince Trees* 196-197)

¹ All poems in *Even the Knots on Quince Trees* are numbered, 1-100, rather than given a specific title. The poet adopts this convention in some of his other collections as well.

In this way, my juxtaposition may be paralleled with the history of criticism of literary text. If literary criticism may be considered a dialogue between the author of an original text and its reader, then the history of criticism of that text can be seen as a dialogue with that author and the various commentaries on that text, each one an exploration of both original text and commentary. Literary criticism of text shares this quality with religious literary traditions in both Christianity and Buddhism - *Lectio Divina*, and the kōan tradition, respectively. The history of *Lectio Divina*, the Christian practice of focused religious reading, for example, is essentially an ongoing dialogue with the Bible through its original text and commentary on that text over a long tradition of hermeneutics. Similarly, the history of the kōan is an ongoing dialogue with Zen masters through original text and commentary on the text over a long tradition of interpretation. With these three contexts in mind, I consider that my response to J. Hillis Miller's observation may be best served by bringing these three traditions (Christian; Buddhist; literary) together to interpret the work of the two poets. Along these lines, Hillis Miller himself provided an ideal comment to illustrate the possibilities within just such an approach. In a dialogue with scholar Ranjan Ghosh, Hillis Miller made mention of how both he and Ghosh would benefit from separate readings of similar texts. For a way in which a reader of the book they co-authored could best get a sense of the collective picture of their isolated work, he commented: "A juxtaposition of the two readings is perhaps the clearest way of seeing what is at stake in the dialogue between us"² (Hillis Miller and Ghosh 134). Taking his comment as a building block, I imagine that perhaps the clearest way of seeing what may be achieved in a dialogue between Christian poems and Zen Buddhist kōans is to juxtapose them.

Outline of the Thesis

I have divided the study into five chapters: an introduction, three body chapters, and a conclusion. This opening chapter establishes the context for my thesis: a response to Hillis Miller's observation about post-medieval literature. That response is the exploration of poems by two poets who shared a common Catholic faith lived in different cultural contexts, searching for God through their poetry. In chapter two, I examine three preliminary considerations: a brief review of the poet's lives and secondary interpretive literature, a review of historical and cultural context, and a discussion of my comparative method, which includes a discussion of traditional spiritual reading practices within Christianity and Buddhism, *Lectio Divina* and kōan study, respectively. In chapter

² The book is *Thinking Literature Across Continents*, Duke University Press Books, 2016.

three, I read four of Ku Sang's poems, each reflecting a manner of searching for God. The four poems are "Jesus of Nazareth," which appeals to Jesus as mediator between God and humanity, "A pebble," which examines how a developing relationship transforms emotion, "On suffering," which considers a state of the human condition holding out hope for the promise of salvation given by God, and "Myself," which looks inward to search for God. Next, in chapter four, I read four of Merton's poems, "An Invocation to St. Lucy," which also appeals to a mediator, "Two States of Prayer," which expresses the value in attempting to establish direct and personal communication with God, "Clairvaux," which surveys the qualities of a sacred place, and "The Transformation: For the Sacred Heart," which also looks inward to understand the self. In chapter five, I conclude by comparing the poets' works, commenting on the impact of my chosen method, and offering summative statements which address the impact of my response to Hillis Miller's observation.

Additionally, I would like to mention two brief but necessary prefatory points before proceeding to the poetry. First, I offer close readings of Christian religious poems and Zen Buddhist kōans, drawing upon long histories of textual study based in the religious practices of each tradition. Although I have actually put into practice some of the techniques specified by each tradition, such as intense meditation on a single word within the poem or the kōan, for example, I do not claim any form of enlightenment or direct experience of God as a result of my personal study (in any of the diverse senses known to them within Zen Buddhism or Christianity, respectively). I have explored these works for their literary value and constructed my arguments as an implementation of literary criticism. Any insight that may have been achieved within this thesis is to be understood as only of a literary dimension.

Second, all Ku Sang's poetry and prose which I examine in this thesis was originally written in Korean; all Thomas Merton's works were written in English (although complete original Merton compositions exist in French, I did not review them). As such, I am working with one poet composing in their (and my own) original language and another poet discovered in translation. I recognise that I am basing my comparisons upon the English versions of the original Korean poetry, which may contain differences in poetics. I offer two comments by Brother Anthony of Taizé, the primary English translator of Ku Sang's works, to address the situation. Having had the honour to be a guest in Brother Anthony's office in Seoul to interview and share tea with him, I anticipate that a comment he offered about his experience with translating Korean poetry will place my own interpretations into the appropriate context. He relayed: "Koreans have their own collective national memory and also they have their own collective silences – things you know without saying and that

is part of what it is to be Korean. It's not something that anybody else has...When a Korean poem comes alive for a non-Korean reader, it might not be the same life" (Brother Anthony). I thus must acknowledge that my interpretations of Ku Sang's Korean poems may not necessarily address all the nuance and pertinent details of the exact Korean life he rendered within them, as I cannot claim to fully grasp the Korean national memory nor the collective silences. I am examining the English translations of these poems and my analysis will thus carry the bias of greater familiarity with the national memories and collective silences of English-speaking nations. With this in mind, though, elsewhere Brother Anthony has also said, "The poems of Ku Sang lie at the roadside of the world, ready and waiting for the reader who will only notice them" (Teague 33). Simply stated, I noticed and decided to explore them.

To conclude this introductory chapter, I suggest that exploring the search for God as expressed in poetry, when that search is viewed as a process that possesses intrinsic value, may indeed reveal as much as examining any destination points along that search's path. I propose, therefore, that exploration of how these poets expressed their own understanding of God's whereabouts, taken at the naked level of the poem, should also yield some insight into how the two men were transformed for the sake of searching at all.

CHAPTER 2 – PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

In this chapter, I provide pertinent background on the poets themselves and concise review of commentary by others who have previously interpreted their work. I then present a review of both historical and cultural contexts and my chosen method, illustrating the manner in which I compare the poetry and its fit for such purpose with these specific poets.

The Poets

Ku Sang's life and poetry echoed twentieth-century Korea so much that the primary English translator of his works, Brother Anthony, summarises the œuvre as the poems of a life, and specifically a life that was "caught up in the dramatic events, in the suffering, that are the stuff of modern Korean history" (Teague 23). Born in September 1919, in Seoul, a time which coincided with the start of Japanese Occupation (an occupation which would hold dominion over the peninsula until the end of World War II) and the March First Movement (an anti-Japanese series of protests and political action), Ku's poetry provided both a Korean and a Catholic response to the events encompassing Korean experience of the twentieth century (Ku 1990 ix-x). He spent the formative years of his youth near Wŏnsan, on the Korean peninsula's northeast coast (the city is currently situated within North Korea), an area to which his devout Catholic family had moved when he was a child; subsequently, it was not without significant emotional pain that he left his family in 1946, moving back to South Korea to escape communist persecution, in part due directly to his poetry, and most likely also in part for his Catholic faith³ (Ku 2004 51-52; Ku 1990 ix). Much of his poetry seems to long for reunion, at times concretely with his family, at others concretely for Korea, and, often, concretely for God. He worked for a time as a journalist and Vietnam War correspondent and he was unafraid to express his ideas, a trait which also brought him into conflict with post-Korean War governments in the South, particularly those of Rhee Syngman and Park Chung-hee; he even spent several months in prison while South Korea was led by Rhee (Ku 1990 x). The introduction of *Eternity Today* contains three illustrative quotations about Ku Sang. French poet and critic René Tavernier gives the following account of Ku Sang's work: "A poetry born out of faith in God, and at the same time emerging from history, the thoughts of Ku Sang are based on

³ Brother Anthony notes that Ku Sang's elder brother "is among the priests who disappeared into silence and presumed martyrdom in North Korea" (Ku 1990 ix).

experience as well as on belief: physical reality, appearances are by no means insignificant but beyond them there is another truth of which we only detect traces here and there...For Ku Sang, poetry is the sign of an inner experience” (Ku 2005 11). Quoting another unnamed scholar, Brother Anthony relays: “No other Korean poet has so perfectly brought together the Christian belief that all is redeemed in God’s eternity with the Buddhist conviction that all that exists is united in an unending cosmic process” (Ku 2005 11). Finally, Brother Anthony also shared words given by Seoul’s Archbishop, the priest who provided the sermon at the poet’s funeral Mass: “He was truly a Catholic poet, not just in the sense that he belonged to the Catholic Church and respected its doctrines, but in the sense that his heart was universal, that his poems had a vision that was cosmic, touching people in every corner of the world” (Ku 2005 9). Ku died in May of 2004.

Thomas Merton, one of the most widely read twentieth-century monk writers, was born in January 1915, in Prades, France, to a New Zealand father and American mother, both artists (Mott 5). After failed (at Cambridge) and ordinary (at Columbia) attempts at higher education, Merton came to believe that he was living a mediocre life (looking back on this period within his autobiography, Merton described himself as “self-centered, irresolute, obscene, and proud...Even the sight of my own face in a mirror was enough to disgust me”) (Merton 1949 110-111). But in a relatively rapid series of events (barely over three years), such realisation gave rise to emotions which would result in conversion to Catholicism and subsequent vocation in one of its most austere monastic orders, the Cistercians of the Strict Observance (otherwise known as Trappists), at Our Lady of Gethsemani Monastery in Kentucky, USA. The final decision for formal vocation came in rapid manner, too, occurring in little over a week at the start of December, 1941 (Mott 200-202). From that step, his writing output exploded and Merton took what little time was available to him within observance of his monastic day to write at first the autobiography which would make him famous (and which would serve both as a significant source of revenue for Gethsemani and a substantial recruiting channel for many Trappist communities), followed by enough poetry, essays, letters, and articles to give birth to an œuvre which continues to produce sizeable amounts of interpretive commentary (Lekai 213). The life and history of monasticism and its liturgy, and an ecumenical engagement with non-Christian traditions intended to deepen his own Christian faith (Buddhism most prominently), provide much of the substance of his written work. Merton’s earthly journey ended whilst on the physical embodiment of that ecumenism, attending a religious convention on the outskirts of Bangkok, Thailand on December 10th, 1968, exactly 27 years to the

day that he first entered the monastery that had become his physical and spiritual home (Mott 564-565).

Turning to consider how others have interpreted both poets' work, a variety of themes emerge, both vis-à-vis these men as individuals and as regards their poetry. A reasonable amount of secondary literature on Ku Sang's poetry does exist but, as a reader might expect, is found almost exclusively in Korean. English translation of interpretive works is mostly restricted to titles, abstracts, or otherwise limited extracts. Still, introductory material to English translations of collections of Ku's poetry also offers significant insight. In the foreword to *Alone with Myself*, Edward Schultz, who first knew Ku Sang when the poet was teaching at the University of Hawaii, corroborates Brother Anthony's comments on the connection between poet and life. "An energetic and gleeful poet, Ku Sang lived his life to the fullest. For him poetry was a way of life, and in his life poetry was truly lived" (Ku 2015 7). He goes on: "Comfortable in his own spiritual understanding, he wrote with passion and insight. His poetry remains clear and direct as he shuns turgid prose...It is through the poetry of Ku Sang that one can not only appreciate the thinking of Ku Sang but also the importance of poetry as a way to express our own struggle to understand and embrace life" (Ku 2015 8). As a poet, Ku Sang was known for simplicity and clarity of style, simultaneously conveying deep and rich metaphysical ideas (Brother Anthony; Ku 2015 8-9). This simplicity often led critics to "question the openness with which [he] brings into one existential entity what may be considered incompatible" (Ku 2015 13). Translator Chan E. Park relays an exchange between a literary critic and the poet that Ku Sang had documented for one of his own essays and, although simple, the poet's response illustrates a deep and assured self-awareness, perhaps a contributing factor to why his life and poetry were so well bonded. The critic asked of Ku, "In some of your poems you show heightened stages of transcendence, and embarrassing degrees of worldliness in others, which is the real you?" To this, the poet responded, "Both...I am just one of this world" (Ku 2015 13). Simple and confident, the response may also indicate why Park would go on to describe Ku's poetic cosmos as a place where "a universal and inclusive spirituality reigns" (Ku 2015 15).

Ku Sang's poetry has engendered a good amount of scholarly research. Although I was unable to locate full English translations of the essays which I shall mention, a review of a sample of translated titles and abstracts illustrates some broad themes within interpretive research. In one such example, a survey of his early poems noted characteristics differentiating his work from other poetic material of the 1950s, identified as Christian spirit and humanism. The survey's author, Kwak Hyo-Hwan, notes little anger or hostility, qualities which set him apart from others responding to the

threats posed by North Korean communism. Others have focused on such aspects as mourning in his war poetry, noting particularly his ability to show empathy and mourning for both ally and enemy (as in Park Dong-un), and concepts of community, such as how he expressed Korean national communal life (as in Choi Do-Sik). Additionally, others have researched his *St. Christopher's River* cycle, a collection of poems in which the poet sought to bear the burdens of Korea by following a river's course over time, in a way similar to how legend posits that St. Christopher bore Christ over a raging river. Two of note examined the meaning of time within the cycle, the first informed by Paul Ricœur's understanding of Augustinian time, an understanding which identifies a "river paired with sorrow of the finite person and praise of the absolute person" (as in Kim Bong-keun), and the second a review of the "Ontological Quest and Eternity" within the cycle (as in Kim Jeong-shin).

Literature about Merton is numerous and wide-ranging. As one observer has drolly noted, "Merton is like the Bible: he can be used for almost any purpose" (Nouwen 160). Four important works of Merton criticism outline representative examples of interpretative practices, offering valuable material for their research and study of his poetry, and for their service as models upon which others were to build. George Woodcock's study, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet*, Bonnie Bowman's doctoral dissertation, *Flowers of Contemplation: The Later Poetry of Thomas Merton*, and Thérèse Lentfoehr's book, *Words and Silence*, were all written in the late 1970's, a period in which interest in Merton studies was at a height. George Kilcourse wrote his book, *Ace of Freedoms*, somewhat later, in 1993. Each of these scholars engaged with Merton's œuvre either by constructing categories of interpretation (such as in Woodcock and Kilcourse), or by focusing their analysis either by stage of development or on specific characteristics (such as in Bowman and Lentfoehr), which conceivably helped each scholar deal with the sheer volume of primary material (*Collected Poems* is 1030 pages).

For the sake of his study, George Woodcock split the poetry into two broad categories, the "poems of the desert" and "poems of the choir," noting some instances in which specific poems contained elements of both (Woodcock 49; 75). His desert classification interpreted the desert as representing "a place of marginal life...a place of hunger and thirst...a place where a man faces the perils of his own weakness...a place where every day is a walking through the valley of death's shadow" (Woodcock 74-75). These poems, he says, "are a relatively small group of quite distinctive works which are characterized by spareness, control, short quiet lines, a laconic manner that bows towards silence" (Woodcock 75). Merton's choir repertoire, those articulating his perspectives on

cloistered monastic life, in many ways contain opposite characteristics. Woodcock described these poems as possessing “a curious flavour of archaic devotionism...often using the imagery and language associated with a way of religious life that had once belonged to many but...was already the province of only a small minority even among Catholics”; he attributed this aspect of Merton’s poetry to the combination of conversational silence and liturgical sound that was a significant aspect of the Trappist monastic vocation (Woodcock 49).

Bowman contrasted Merton’s early and later poems, drawing some pertinent insights. Two of particular note are “the young monk was flexing his theological muscles in his poetry,” and “explicit statements of the rejections of ‘worldly things’ and of the speaker’s preference for the religious life are obvious even to the casual reader...Merton-the-poet is constantly watching Merton-the-monk” (Bowman 18-19). In her introduction to *Words and Silence*, Thérèse Lentfoehr, a Catholic nun and poet in her own right who shared a friendship with Merton, describes Merton’s central vision as “man’s basic orientation to God and contemplative awareness of Him in love” (Lentfoehr vii). This interpretation allowed her to recognise Merton’s contemplative vision from the beginning of his vocation, an innate quality which unfolded in his poetry, indicative of his search process and movement along his God-directed orientation (Lentfoehr vii).

Finally, Kilcourse actively engaged with Woodcock’s work and added two additional typological categories, “poetry of paradise consciousness” and “poetry of the forest.” These additions reflected his scholarly search for “a deeper coherence and continuity” among Merton’s works and investigation of the ‘true self’ or ‘inner self’ to be found there (Kilcourse 1993 44-45). Kilcourse examined Merton’s poetry in order to frame his own (Kilcourse’s) interpretation of Merton’s work as examples of “kenotic Christology, the epiphany of Christ in our ‘emptiness,’ as the paradigm of the true or inner self” (Kilcourse 1993 87).

In contrast to these broader interpretations of each of the poet’s work, I have chosen to observe a small selection of Ku’s and Merton’s poetry. In that way, I am incorporating Octavio Paz’s comments on the importance of coming into naked contact with poetry at the level of the individual poem. I expect the close contact to reveal the specific details of their twentieth-century search for God, a time in which worldwide discourse produced significant developments in interreligious dialogue. The launch of the World Congress of Faiths in 1936 and the declarations of Vatican II in 1965 (such as *Nostra Aetate*⁴ and *Dignitatis Humanae*,⁵ in particular) provide two examples of such

⁴ *Nostra Aetate* – “In our time,” a Vatican II declaration promoting religious ecumenism

⁵ *Dignitatis Humanae* – “Dignity of the Human Person,” a Vatican II declaration promoting religious freedom

developments. In the spirit of interreligious dialogue and conscious of both poet's awareness and consideration of Buddhism as a life-transforming symbol-system of its own (to apply Larry Shinn's terminology), distinct from Christianity, I have chosen to juxtapose those poems with Zen kōan texts. By doing so I can explore both the poems and the kōans in a text-to-text dialogue as each represent life-transforming symbol-systems. Some examples exist within Merton's work to suggest the validity of such an approach.

Conrad Hyers observes, "Much of the early literature on Zen was written by Rinzai scholar Daisetz T. Suzuki...Zen in the West was largely Suzuki Zen. And Suzuki Zen was Rinzai Zen" (Hyers 9). And, importantly, Suzuki Zen was Merton Zen. Biographer Michael Mott devotes several pages to Merton's engagement with Zen and, subsequently, with Suzuki. One note, rarely cited in other research material, occurs within Merton's compilation of notes for his own master's thesis on William Blake. It is extremely brief but Mott calls it "prophetic":

"C. de B Evans. Meister Eckhart
(Suzuki – Zen Buddhism)" (Mott 117)

Mott is of the opinion that Merton became familiar with Suzuki so early on in name only but stresses that many of his later concerns about contemplative practice were present even in 1938 (Mott 118; 396). Additionally, the two men, Merton and Suzuki, exchanged letters and even met once, in New York City in 1964 (Mott 325-326; 398-399). Mott articulates that Merton was "a man driven by ideas of self-improvement and 'progress in soul-making.' He would hardly have been attracted to either Apophatic theology or to Rinzai Zen if this had not been so" (Mott 509).

A more striking example of Merton's connection to Buddhism is found in Part Two of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. The prefatory note to Part Two describes the situation which gave rise to the written dialogue between Suzuki and Merton that encompasses the bulk of this latter half of the book. Merton had recently translated selections from the *Verba Seniorum*,⁶ and had sent text of the translations to Suzuki. The note recalls: "It was felt that the *Verba*, in their austere simplicity, bore a remarkable resemblance to some of the stories told of the Japanese Zen Masters and that Dr. Suzuki would probably be interested in them for that reason. He received with pleasure the suggestion to engage in a dialogue about the 'wisdom' of the Desert Fathers and of the Zen Masters. It was felt that an exchange of views would contribute something to the mutual understanding of East and West, and that it might be quite enlightening to confront the Egyptian monks of the fourth and fifth

⁶ *Verba Seniorum* – Sayings of the Elders, originally included within the *Vitae Patrum*

centuries with Chinese and Japanese monks of a slightly later date” (Merton 1968 99). In the book, a back-and-forth written dialogue between Suzuki and Merton follows this observation, the dialogue itself an interreligious commentary on religious texts from differing faith traditions that were themselves dialogues (Merton 1968 103-138). Drawing upon this excerpt from *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, I suggest that it would be quite enlightening to confront the American poet/monk and Korean poet/journalist of the mid-twentieth century with sayings of those same Zen monks. My work perhaps could also contribute something to the mutual understanding of East and West, especially in the context of response to Hillis Miller’s observation of post-medieval literature.

Additionally, other precedents exist for comparing Merton with other Asian writers based upon his documented history with Buddhism, often basing the comparative activity on a particular characteristic, such as spirituality or contemplation. Thomas Merton has been juxtaposed with such individuals as the aforementioned D.T. Suzuki, National Teacher Bojo, and Paramahansa Yogananda (as in Zyniewicz, Kang, and Farge, respectively). There even exists an example of Thomas Merton juxtaposed with a Korean poet. In his doctoral dissertation, Kwon Hyeo-kil compared Merton with Yun Dong-Ju, a Korean diaspora poet who wrote in the years before Ku Sang would publish his first work, and who died in 1945 at the hands of the Japanese. Kwon reviews each man’s poetry to compare their Christian spirituality, determining that both Merton’s and Ju’s poetry formed an essential way to express their lived experience and communicate to others in the context of a hidden God (Kwon 73).

Context and Method

Both Ku Sang and Thomas Merton were Catholic. As such, they both employed traditional Christian images, metaphors, symbols, and themes in their poetry. They also turned to Buddhist ideas and belief, sometimes directly, other times by association. These turns may be unsurprising considering that both Korea and America have experienced histories of religious plurality. Providing some background on both histories at this time will exhibit helpful context.

Korea adopted Buddhism as its state religion in a staggered fashion over the course of the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. during the Three Kingdoms period, as each of the Three Kingdoms (Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla) sought increased trade and diplomacy with the various states of China (Seth 35). From the time of introduction to the 12th century C.E., Korean Buddhism developed an “original synthesis” of sudden enlightenment and careful study, leading to “a distinctive body of

tradition and practices” (Seth 115-116). Korea’s Buddhism thus became distinct from that of its neighbours largely in this unique blend and was known as Sŏn (Chinese: Ch’an; Japanese: Zen). Christianity, like Buddhism, arrived via China. Encounters with Christian missionaries, increasingly diverse in their international character, brought Christian texts and practices to the Korean peninsula. After the initial Christian contacts by Jesuit missionaries in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, other orders arrived and “were assigned to different areas of the peninsula: German Benedictines in the northeast,⁷ American Maryknolls in the northwest and Irish Columbans in the southwest (Clark 11). Such widespread reach for such an extended period of time has led researchers such as Bernard Senécal to observe that “the Buddhist-Christian encounter in Korea has never been, and will never be, isolated from the rest of the Korean landscape” (Senécal 85). Both religious traditions have played a role in the formation of a homogenous Korean identity, creating a sense of unity in interreligious understanding (with current political conditions in North Korea a notable exception), which in its own way reflects a broader cultural uniformity across the Korean peninsula.

America’s own Christian foundations intertwined with the colonisation of the Americas as a whole, as Christianity crossed the Atlantic first with the Spanish, but followed fairly quickly by the English, French, Dutch, and the Swedish (Wills 7). Three broad religious themes, each aligned with a colonial region, influenced the subsequent expansion of Christianity in the United States: the quest for a holy commonwealth in New England, religious and cultural diversity in the Middle Colonies, and the encounter between black and white in the South (Wills 11). The regional distinctions led to diverse religious experiences and attitudes across America’s increasingly diverse population. As America grew, Christianity grew with it, expanding along with the population and boundaries of the new country. Although originally dominated by its Spanish and French influences, Catholicism in the United States was increasingly shaped by ethnic immigration, most notably by Irish, German, Italian, and Polish communities, creating a diverse situation within America’s largest single religious minority; Protestant Christianity also grew in a diverse manner (although less directly influenced by immigration), and with prominent evangelicalism, forming first into distinct congregations such as the Baptists, Methodists, Shakers, Mormons, Adventists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Disciples of Christ, to later coalesce into a broader “Protestant mainstream” which would still retain internal divisions (Wills 23-24; 27). Buddhism’s history in America is less clearly understood (and thus less a

⁷ In the footnote to “1,” the opening poem of *Even the Knots on Quince Trees*, Ku recalled the following: “we left Seoul, my father having been given a teaching post by the German Benedictines who were in charge of missionary activities in the region of Wŏnsan” (Ku 2004 15fn).

part of many American's perception of their own national identity). Scholar Rick Fields, in *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, expresses the notion that Buddhist roots in America go back much, much further than most Americans have been aware: "The vision of an Oriental Renaissance appears in Emerson, Thoreau, and Fenollosa, and when the historian Lynn G. White says that the introduction of D.T. Suzuki's work to the West may one day be counted as important as the rediscovery of Aristotle, or when Ezra Pound exclaims that China is our Greece, both men are embellishing and restating this key idea" (Fields 34). Fields then demonstrates that Eastern thought, and, hence, its ideas about Buddhism, was actually a part of America from America's beginnings, initially via both the works of William Jones, the 18th-century philologist, and New England business ventures in East India (Fields 35-55). According to Fields, both Jones' Sanskrit translations and the sailor stories of Boston, Nantucket, Salem, and New Bedford (all located in the present-day Commonwealth of Massachusetts) provided additional source material with which the Founding Fathers, Emerson, Thoreau, and others would build the opinions and philosophies which became part of America's foundation narrative. It would therefore be inaccurate to think that the writers of the Declaration of Independence, "Self-Reliance," and *Walden*, were drawing solely from Greek, Roman, and Biblical sources for their inspiration. So, at the same time that Thomas Merton was engaging in dialogue with D.T. Suzuki, the country as a whole was entertaining a 'newfound' interest in Buddhism which wasn't so very new after all.

That both Catholic poets, neither of whom was aware of the other or the other's work, were each aware of and positioned by Buddhism presents an opportunity to read their poetry, which draws upon Christian philosophical foundations, in a larger context, which includes Buddhism and Buddhism's own texts. Doing so affords the opportunity to access Christian images, symbols, and themes considered from the perspective of "recontextualization in the larger world" (Clooney 1990 69). To achieve this aim, I turn to a method of comparative study employed by Jesuit theologian Francis X. Clooney. I have chosen this method because I seek to determine if it also applies outside of Clooney's own field of Comparative Theology, in this instance comparative literary critical work using texts containing religious images and symbols. I also perceive that it may support my attempt at comparative literary criticism as I use it as an extension of the juxtapositional action of my own placement of Ku and Merton side-by-side. The method is not radical but does offer an interesting way to observe the poetry in a fresh context, recontextualised in the broader context of the larger world. The approach itself is fundamentally grounded in close reading, existing at the intersection of

both religious and literary traditions. Presenting some information on Clooney's method, on *Lectio Divina* practices, and on the kōan tradition will illustrate how well they overlap.

Clooney places texts of different traditions together, reads them, thinks deeply about them, and provides original commentary which, in a way, adds to the dialogue with the primary material he studies. He describes the character of his intentions in very personal terms, which also demonstrates the essential nature of the method – read one text, then read another text, then return to the first text in light of the second. “I have found that issues of method and decisions about method become clearest in act and by improvisation, even in the middle of any particular instance of study. We study a text, and see where that study leads; we study another text; we study them one after the other, back and forth” (Clooney and Stosch 42). A new context is thus formed organically and faithful to what the texts themselves have to say. As Clooney also notes: “Established meanings, simple or complex, are extended through previously unintended juxtaposition” (Clooney 1990 70). This procedure reflects Clooney's attitudes towards his own field of Comparative Theology in general and builds upon a long-practiced Christian reading tradition, known as *Lectio Divina*. Clooney notes that Comparative Theology “is never limited to scripture, nor is it supportive of any theology or doctrine cut off from the literary dimensions of the texts in question” (Clooney 2013 179). He goes on to declare that “distinctively Catholic traditions of reading already have within them resources for honoring authority and doctrine in the church, yet in a way that does not betray the obligations and fruits of reading. Indeed, attention to tradition makes for better reading” (Clooney 2013 179; 191).

The practice of reading closely in order to open oneself religiously in Christianity, a tradition going back even further than Christianity's earliest years, is called *Lectio Divina*. As one researcher has noted, “*Lectio* is a method used to search for, uncover and experience wisdom and truth in literary texts; it is a techné (a literary tool), outside the Christian context. It is not Christian in its origins; rather the early Christians applied the method to their search for wisdom and truth” (Keator 149). In his text, *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading*, scholar Duncan Robertson quotes Cyprian, third century C.E. bishop of Carthage, to articulate the essence of the practice as understood in its Christian religious context: *Sit tibi vel oratio assidua vel lectio: nunc cum Deo loquere, nunc Deus tecum*.⁸ Robertson himself describes *Lectio* as “an intimate dialogue with a living, present, divine interlocutor who will answer when the reader appeals to him” (Robertson xii). Each act of reading thus becomes

⁸ “You should apply yourself to prayer or to reading; at times you speak with God, at times he speaks with you” (Robertson xi) (Original text: Cyprian of Carthage, *Ep.* 1.15, citation from *Patrologiae Latina*. Edited by J.P. Migne. 221 vols. 1844-64 4:221).

an encounter with words that seem to live, seemingly also to echo the opening of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning the Word already was. The Word was in God’s presence, and what God was, the Word was” (*The Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha* John 1:1).

A *Lectio* guide text, the twelfth-century monastic treatise, *The Ladder of Monks*, outlines a standard approach to the process and illustrates a general and convenient example. “I hear the words read: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.’ [from Matt 5:8] This is a short text of Scripture but it is of great sweetness, like a grape that is put into the mouth filled with many senses to feed the soul. When the soul has carefully examined it, it says to itself, There may be something good here...So, wishing to have a fuller understanding of this, the soul begins to bite and chew upon this grape, as though putting it into a wine press, while it stirs up the powers of reasoning to ask what this precious purity may be and how it may be had” (Guigo II 83). The treatise also outlines four steps in the *Lectio* process: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation, the ingestion metaphor wound throughout the four stages, used most likely for its implications of nourishment. As Guigo II, Carthusian monk and ninth prior of the Grande Chartreuse, the head monastery of the Carthusian Order, describes them, “Reading seeks for the sweetness of the blessed life, meditation perceives it, prayer asks for it, contemplation tastes it” (Guigo II 11-12; 82). This technique corresponds quite well with poetry that asks of its readers the time and contemplation to encounter the composition, listen to its rhythm and theme, and potentially ingest its words and message into the reader’s own being.

Such practices are not confined to the Christian tradition. One of these practices, the use of kōan as a literary tool for religious training, has a long history within Zen Buddhism. The word “kōan” (Japanese: *Kō*, public; *An*, record) translates roughly and, depending upon the translator, to public case, public record, public notice, public announcement, or some version thereof, and its use arose in the 10th – 12th centuries C.E. in China (Dumoulin 1963 127; Miura and Sasaki 4-5; Shishin Wick 4). The use of this material reflected a desire to learn from the masters who had gone before, so the kōan has always relied on statements or other examples of dialogue from those masters to help elevate a student’s own Zen practice (Shishin Wick 4). While kōan practice demonstrates a confidence in text, kōan study is considered “first and foremost a religious practice,” training a variety of intellectual skills which “are always subservient to the traditional Buddhist goals of awakened wisdom and selfless compassion” (Hori 2003 6).

Presenting a quotation of an ancient Zen master will provide an illustrative example which corresponds well with the earlier words of Guigo II. Lin-chi (Japanese: Rinzai) master Chung-feng

Ming-pen (Japanese: Chūhō Myōhon), in response to a question regarding the purpose of the kōan, is reported to have said, “The kōans may be compared to the case records of the public law court...There have never been rulers who did not have public law courts, and there have never been public law courts that did not have case records which are to be used as precedents of laws in order to stamp out injustice to the world. When these public case records (kōans) are used, then principles and laws will come into effect; when these come into effect, the world will become upright...Now, when we use the word ‘kōan’ to refer to the teachings of the buddhas and the patriarchs, we mean the same thing. The kōans do not represent the private opinion of a single man, but rather the highest principle” (Miura and Sasaki 4-5). As Guigo II understood that one could find something good within close reading of scripture, Chung-feng understood that close reading of the teachings appealed to the highest principle. In parallel, each man seems to articulate the universal value provided by close reading of religious text within a single tradition.

Another illustration of commonality at the literary level is found in the introduction to *Two Zen Classics*. Editor A.V. Grimstone references the collection’s translator, Katsuki Sekida, as he describes the practice of kōan study: “The kōan...should be deeply embedded in one’s mind.” Then, quoting Sekida, ‘Recite it, exerting all your mind...take it syllable by syllable, word by word, and say it with all your attention, dwelling at length upon each word.’ The recitation is slow, and the inward voicing of each word or syllable may be done in phase with the slow, intermittent exhalation practiced in zazen. The kōan infiltrates the mind” (Grimstone 16-17). Although lacking the same four-step formula as that presented by Guigo II, on a holistic level, this description sounds quite similar to his ingestion of the grape metaphor for *Lectio*. I suggest that, in addition to sayings of the Desert Fathers, perhaps the sayings of the Zen masters sometimes also closely resemble those of medieval contemplative monks. It thus seems that both *Lectio Divina* and Zen Buddhist kōan tradition demonstrably emphasise deep understanding of text as a means of accessing religious knowledge. Taken together in light of Clooney’s observation to be open to see where juxtaposition of religious texts may lead, it may indeed be enlightening to observe where juxtaposed Christian poetry and kōan seem resolved to go.

To conclude this chapter on preliminary considerations, I relay a situation in which Thomas Merton himself provided Clooney with an illustration of the method. In drawing comparisons between his own approach and Merton’s, Clooney has observed: “Merton was a contemplative scholar deeply immersed in his own Cistercian tradition, probing, comprehending, and teaching it, and only as such did he find his way amid the contemplative traditions of the East” (Clooney 2017

51). This immersion provided the essential preparation for Merton's pilgrimage into the Buddhist texts that he studied. In one such case, Merton's "back-and-forth reading of Zen and Eckhart"⁹ combined with his (Merton's) own writing on *The Rule of St. Benedict* (**the** fundamental text in Western Christian Monasticism), and influenced the outcome of his comments on *The Rule* (Clooney 2017 51-53). History knows exactly how much Merton, by his own life and writing, in many ways moulded by his own deep reading, stimulated religious and literary exploration of his work. The amount of secondary material is voluminous, this thesis being but one additional piece of evidence towards that assertion.¹⁰ Clooney's method, as it overlaps with religious literary traditions in both Buddhism and Christianity, thus appears to be a reasonable choice for just such an exploration, and of reasonable fit with the poets placed together in my study. In précis, it would also seem reasonable to explore the possibility that if, as William Johnston suggests, "the kōan exercise may teach us to see into the essence of the Scriptures," then it should also be able to do so with poetry that takes the Scriptures as core of its worldview (Johnston 1971 67).

⁹ A reader will recall the lines from Merton's thesis journal which I cited earlier, lines written in 1938. Clooney references a separate occurrence, from over two decades later, but with strikingly similar content.

¹⁰ To help grasp a sense of the impact, I offer the following information: At the time I write this thesis, The Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky, USA, which holds the largest single collection of Merton primary and secondary material in the world, communicates a collection of over 50,000 items, including over two hundred and sixty masters and doctoral theses (www.merton.org/collection.aspx).

CHAPTER 3 – KU SANG

Although born four years after Merton, Ku Sang was active as a poet for a much longer time, owing to Merton's premature death. Reading his works translated into English reveals a deep sense of love for Korea, for his personal faith, and the ways in which he used his poetry to make sense of the serious times in which he was born. As I mentioned in the introduction, I was with good fortune able to interview and share tea with Brother Anthony in Seoul, South Korea. As the primary English translator of Ku Sang's poetry, he offered his insights on both Ku Sang's life and poetry as well as the unique perspective on the world that emerged from Ku Sang, the man. "He was honest. He [was] not interested in ideals and theories...In many ways, he was not considered a real poet [by the Korean poetic establishment]. He was an outsider." "His was not a dogmatic faith. It [was] all within the context of daily life" (Brother Anthony).

These statements are corroborated by Ku Sang's own poems, which reveal a highly critical yet compassionate eye, both towards the world and towards his own relationship with poetry as a means of expressing his thoughts about that world. In the later stages of his life, he placed some of these thoughts into a single collection, *Even the Knots on Quince Trees*, first published in Korean in 1984. As Brother Anthony noted in the introduction to the 2004 English edition, "These works...relate his [Ku Sang's] own private life to the events of modern Korean history in often unexpected ways. He feels that these poems are among his most significant work, since they bear vivid poetic witness to his nation's tormented recent past. At the same time, they are intensely personal and reveal the poet's own fragile humanity with all its 'knots'" (Ku 2004 9).

Relaying a few of Ku Sang's own statements from within this collection will illustrate some of these 'knots,' indicating both a sense that, as he searched for God, he believed it possible that God could indeed be found, and a sense that his search contained both positive and negative moments. "19" reveals feelings of sorrow but retains hope, a hope perhaps for rebirth in a world without the reality of those sorrows: "...every time I rowed my boat over the sea of existence/as if probing for someone drowned with an oar/I drew up the dead bodies of my dreams/and as I did so I sang songs of requiem/while yearning for a resurrection like that/of Lazarus waking inside his coffin" (Ku 2004 55). Ku indicated that poetry itself was a source of this hope. In "61" he observes, "I realize that the hero must advance by poetry/through life and that in total dedication/it is the most hope-giving task there is/I see that my ardent life/will find harmony no other way" (Ku 2004 167). He was not afraid to reveal less-joyous thoughts though, too. "89" draws strength from

strength's opposite: "What has enabled me to survive this far/is not the strength or the merits of my nature and destiny/but the weaknesses" (Ku 2004 259). "99" strikes a self-critical note, as someone who, looking back on their life, and their life's work, asks, 'what did this achieve exactly?': "while in the midst of all this commotion and discord/I've written a thousand poems/but there's not one poem that pleases me/to say nothing of anyone else/and it's all so pointless,/as people put it, it's a real shame" (Ku 2004 297).

These excerpts illustrate poetic statements of Ku Sang's intimate understanding of the suffering within himself and all around him. It is possible to observe his engagement with suffering as a condition of existence on this earth and how he surmounted it through his poetry and his faith. In an epilogue in *Even the Knots on Quince Trees* that he called "A Kind of Last Wish," Ku Sang summed up his life and his message eloquently and with simple humility, perhaps as a contrast to the sentiment found in "99." His point was to not postpone eternity until "entering the other world," but to live that eternity right now, in the present. "We usually speak of 'living in eternity once we're in the other world' but it is not like that, for to us today is simply one expression, one portion, one process of being in eternity...And for us, once our bodily life is done, to the question as to the processes and transformations by which the perfect state of our being, body and soul, will be attained, and what our perfect state will look like, I will only say that the answer lies veiled in mystery" (Ku 2004 307-308).

Reading a selection of his poems in close detail should help to understand this sense of 'Eternity Today' in light of his search for God. To do so, first I examine his appeal to a mediator, in the poem "Jesus of Nazareth." Second, I observe a poem which explores the changes to an individual as a result of the development of a relationship. "A pebble" records the state of affairs between a human being and an inanimate pebble which, although so small, seems able to reveal so much. Third, I explore a poem which comments upon the human condition. "On Suffering sets its speaker into a dangerous predicament and develops towards a state of ultimate relief. Fourth, and lastly, I examine a poem, "Myself," which looks inward to uncover a concept of self that seems to expand without boundaries.

“Jesus of Nazareth”

The appeal to a mediator is a common means of searching for God. In Christianity, all mediators one could consider eventually point back to a single individual, Jesus. This has Biblical precedent in the New Testament, “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and man, Christ Jesus, himself man,” and all saints or other holy individuals in some way have based their own life upon his example (1 Tim 2:5). The central poetic force in “Jesus of Nazareth” is the interrogative, applied to understand the make-up of Jesus himself. But, while the poem considers Jesus as its main subject, the understanding of Jesus as in part a human person also provides the vehicle by which the poet addresses how one goes about knowing a person at all.

Jesus of Nazareth!
Who are you really? (*Eternity Today* 136)

With this couplet, “Jesus of Nazareth” opens with a query that establishes a sense of uncertainty. Noteworthy for its punctuation, the exclamation and question, as much as its words, the speaker immediately establishes a situation of slightly raised temperature. The question usually expects an answer and, indeed, the speaker proceeds to express just such an answer as the poem unfolds. The initial couplet thus feels as though it could function as an anacrusis to the rest of the poem, an element which has initiated the substance to follow. In so doing, the opening element accentuates the initial assertion of response, “Born in a stable’s manger,” with its affirmation of both the traditional Gospel narrative of Jesus’ birth (and, by extension, that story of the birth then developed into the doctrine of the Incarnation) at the heart of who Jesus is, really.

Following the question, the speaker candidly constructs Jesus’ character by layering together portraits of associates and deeds, initiating a tension between that perceived as real and that perceived as false, between the normal and the strange. A reader encounters a manger birth, death alongside thieves, and association with “low class people,” “prostitutes and rebels,” and “louts.” With an additional, perhaps even xenophobic, layer of detail, the speaker adds that these people are louts “from other regions.” These descriptions would instinctively connote a personality to match the surroundings. Eating and drinking with enemies, real or perceived, is not normal human activity, and the poem reinforces the actions as strange. The speaker employs significant repetition, supplying many examples of negative people and emotions, matters most humans normally try to avoid. With a singular image thus constructed from amalgamated people and experiences, the speaker cuts right through that very image, ratcheting up the tension with quotations of Jesus’ own approbations

towards these lesser individuals: “you are the blessed!” and “yours is the Kingdom of God!,” both sharing the opening line’s exclamation and turning about insinuations of wretchedness.

The speaker then articulates a similar contrast, increasing the already heightened tension even further by its extremes of view. The speaker describes a series of Jesus’ deeds which are categorically exceptional; the deeds are attributed the status of miracles – restoration of sight, hearing, and ambulation, plus physical healing of disease, and, finally, resurrection. The remarkable list of deeds communicates significance of power and exceptionality of character. The list also draws attention to the state of perfection to which humanity is returned by association with Jesus, perhaps justifying previous approbations. Thematic development of Jesus’ character has progressed from the bad to the good and the opening section of the poem concludes with a summative paradoxical statement: “...dying without any show,/you are the ultimate failure” Miracle-worker as failure – a striking image and one also decidedly not normal when thought of in its human terms. Contemporary notions of a person as miracle-worker generally contain positive connotations. The perception that someone can work miracles assigns that person a positive, and uncommon, quality. In fact, the concept of miracle itself affirms positive outcomes. “Miracle-worker as failure,” however, takes a positive quality and assigns a negative outcome, turning the poetic statement in the opposite direction from normal human understanding of miracle-worker. The statement works to affirm the “absurd destiny,” as it was proposed towards the beginning of the poem; it also serves as this section’s pinnacle, the speaker having sufficiently blurred the lines between concepts of normal and strange, true and false, and positive and negative within a human understanding of Jesus. Before the section closes, though, the speaker directly addresses Jesus, in this instance highlighting a personal connection “from my mother’s womb.” The direct address brands this blur of a very personal kind, juxtaposing two opposing concepts, “familiar” and “strange,” which punctuate, perhaps in a manner akin to the poem’s opening line, all described before it.

...although extremely familiar,
you look like an absolute stranger. (*Eternity Today* 137)

The asterisk between the poem’s two sections then allows time for an extended breath, time for a reader to reflect on all that has just been described and digest the full implications made through the series of extreme contrasts laid out by the speaker so far. At this point, the opening question increasingly appears rhetorical in function. Following the asterisk, that opening question

gets posed again, but with adjusted phrasing that opens up a new path of exploration for the second portion of the poem:

So what on earth are you really like? (*Eternity Today* 137)

Two subtle but crucial variations grant this question some poetic distance from the original. First, the interrogative adapts from “who are you” to “so what...are you...like?” Second, the speaker now includes the prepositional phrase “on earth,” which narrows the scope of the question and provides a concrete image of physical place for the upcoming answer to unfold. “So what?” The words connote an urgency and establish distance from the original question; a “who?” is now a “what?” One could reasonably expect a similar difference from the forthcoming answer in order to satisfy the adjusted frame, thought which also returns a reader to the list of deeds previously articulated. Those actions, the miracles and associations were, technically speaking, answers to a “what” question. But the original question was “who?,” thus creating a stronger association between Jesus and his deeds, functioning as a metaphorical equivalency. Who is Jesus? He **is** the miracles. This structure underscores an interpretation of Jesus as a divine being with supernatural abilities. Also, the addition of “like” to complete the new question makes plain the upcoming answer as simile, as opposed to metaphor, resemblance instead of equivalency. This additional difference from the original question invites recurring thoughts of Jesus as both human and divine. Here, the miracles articulate a divine nature and this “so what...are you...like?” (a resemblance, instead of “who are you?,” which is equivalency) transpires to facilitate the human qualities, the ways in which humanity itself grasps an understanding of the divine. The human qualities also serve as a conduit through which humanity knows God, that conduit in Christianity being Jesus in human form and supported in scripture both as depicted in the Gospel of John, “no one comes to the Father except by me,” and the previously mentioned example from Paul’s first letter to Timothy (John 14:6; 1 Tim 2:5).

The use of the prepositional phrase “on earth” offers extra interest when considering the quite unearthly nature of the miracles described previously. The phrase also highlights Jesus’ divinity, when set in context of the knowledge that Christian doctrine asserts that he descended from Heaven to fulfill God’s promise on earth and returned there after his “absurd destiny” was fulfilled. Together, these two variations suggest that something upcoming may also vary from content preceding the asterisk. As the answer to this new question gets underway, the second person

pronoun applied anaphorically, “you were not,” fulfills that possibility. The lines offer a description constructed in negative form (I note that before the asterisk descriptions were positive), initiating a conception of Jesus, not “like” any human:

You were not a thinker,
 you were not a moralist,
 you were not one of this world's statesmen,
 and you were not the founder of a religion. (*Eternity Today* 137)

The human occupations, the nouns, are thinker, moralist, statesmen, and founder. The verbs that follow the transitional word, “therefore,” are also stated in the negative (did not teach learning; did not teach rules; did not launch a movement; did not teach detachment). Such a negative construction seems to articulate a corresponding negative stance towards these professions and their work. The connection places outcomes, “learning,” rules,” “social reform movement,” and “detachment from this world” (with “comput[ation of] past merit,” and “comput[ation of] past sins” also added), as less than valuable for understanding Jesus. Taken together, the speaker has offered a fascinating series of statements, especially when a reader considers that these very actions are often found valuable in many human societies, the phrase regarding detachment functioning as indicative of religious activity. Indeed, some would perceive these actions (learning, rules, and computation of past merit, for example) as the very fabric of a functioning society. The speaker has thus issued quite a bold statement to call those descriptions into question through the technique of negation, especially when placed in counterpoint to the series of miracles described earlier. The entire section seems to counter traditional thought on what Jesus actually realised in his time on earth. Instead of these qualities as evidence of greatness, a common human interpretation, the speaker contrasts their value with Jesus’ actual accomplishments. Perhaps the speaker is calling into question the terms upon which humanity has traditionally described and known Jesus, seeking through the poem to do the same as Jesus is addressed within it, “you overturned the thoughts and words/of everyone in the world.”

With the use of the word, “really,” a reader is connected back to the original question (with that original question’s rhetorical function now a most plausible thought). At this moment the speaker arrives at the poem’s central message, introduced by a fragment which feels as though it should stand on its own because its transitional content runs counter to the arguments which immediately precede it. Instead, the fragment is placed in the same stanza, perhaps to flow more directly on from those ideas and retain proximity in order to heighten the differences. Two

propositions enclose the core of this transition, Jesus' own words, and all state the same sentiment in variation, together forming a repetition of the same basic idea – “you overturned the thoughts and words”; “I will give you rest!”; “you proclaimed liberation.”

The poem closes with the theme of human redemption found in the “real” Jesus. Polysyndeton lends force, increasing the rhythmic pulse and linking together not only the statements within this final stanza, but also the references to words and ideas found back in earlier sections of the poem – “you taught,” and “Kingdom of God,” for example. The stanza finally resolves the poem’s tension, enduring as the final answer to that initial question, just as the juxtaposition of its two grandest concluding ideas, “Resurrection” and “Love’s imperishability,” also accentuate a notion of endurance:

and you taught that God is our Father,
that he is Love itself, infinite,
that when nestling like children in his breast,
we forgive as our Father forgives,
and love as our father loves,
then eternal bliss dwells in our lives,
and that, you taught, is called ‘the Kingdom of God’
and having practiced at the cost of your life
the sincerity of such loving,
you bore witness by your Resurrection
to that Love’s imperishability. (*Eternity Today* 138)

Two of the poem’s central features, the use of the interrogatives and a *via positiva/via negativa* form for thematic development, offer sufficient platforms for deeper investigation. First, observing the interrogatives, the opening question, “Who are you really?,” and its complement, “So what on earth are you really like?” appear genuine at first glance but reveal themselves as rhetorical in function because the speaker answers the questions through the poem’s development. The interrogative force eventually culminates in the final stanza, with closing lines providing a definitive declaration of the speaker’s own witness.

But this question’s application within the poem’s context also brings to mind a classic Christian response to almost exactly the same interrogative, a response recognisable to virtually any Christian reader as Biblical context: “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt 16:15; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20). “Who do you say that I am?” is never actually uttered in the poem but would make sense as a response to the original question “who are you really?” In the cited Gospel accounts, “who do you say that I am?” comes in response to brief dialogue, initiated by Jesus himself, with his disciples. The

dialogue's central theme of which bears witness to Jesus as the Christ, the foretold Messiah, in contrast to the declarations of others who are unsure of Jesus' identity. The question provides the tool by which Jesus teaches, helping his disciples understand him as the Messiah. Jesus' interrogative, "who do you say that I am?," is noteworthy for the way in which it elicits a response from his disciples. Indeed, the use of the question itself is considered a primary device via which Jesus teaches others about who he really is—to see, believe, and bear witness. Within the Bible, Jesus is just as likely to ask a question in response to a question of him as to provide a direct answer. A question which could also fit with this poem's context is Jesus' response to Philip's request to "show us the Father, we ask no more"; Jesus responds, "Have I been all this time with you, and still you do not know me?" (John 14:8-9). Such understanding reveals part of the poet's magic for Ku's use of the two interrogatives. While they are largely rhetorical on one level, on another they invite questions of belief which parallel the Biblical questions, "Who do you say that I am?" or "Have I been all this time with you, and still you do not know me?"

Secondly, the poet applies what could be interpreted as a cataphatic/apophatic approach on either side of the asterisk. The terms describe two ways a human can know, or approach, an unknowable divine, one positive (cataphatic, or also referred to as *via positiva*), the other negative (apophatic, or *via negativa*), the former utilising language of presence and the latter, language of absence. Scholar Bernard McGinn attributes the need for dual approaches as arising "because of the incommensurability between finite and Infinite subject" (McGinn xviii). He notes relevantly that "If the modern consciousness of God is often of an absent God (absent though not forgotten for the religious person),...the 'real God' becomes a possibility only when the many false gods (even the God of religion) have vanished and the frightening abyss of total nothingness is confronted" (McGinn xviii). The first section of the poem articulates the cataphatic, to explain who Jesus was by what he did – by observable phenomena bound by human understanding. People and statements all form in groups, such as "To the poor,/to the hungry,/to those in tears,/ to those despised..." and "You gave.../you opened.../you made.../you completely healed.../you brought..." These deeds all demonstrate some supernatural or strange quality. Two prominent examples include the miracles and the association with those perceived in some way as pariah, both counter to ordinary human experience and normal human understanding. Ordinary experience and normal understanding generally ground the cataphatic approach. The prepositional phrase "on earth" provides the small but significant detail pivoting to the *via negativa*, and the poem proceeds to explore things that cannot be definitively affirmed. In apophatic manner, items are listed in negative form, but, in a poetic twist,

are all human definitions which cannot be definitively confirmed in the divine Jesus and thus open to hermeneutics. Such treatment of cataphatic/apophatic construction offers quite a fascinating mixture of poetic and theological technique applied each in its inverse, perhaps to make the false god vanish so that the speaker can confront the real.

Entering into dialogue with Buddhism – “Nansen’s ‘This Flower’”

So far, I have described how the attitude and poetic motion of “Jesus of Nazareth” is accorded impetus by its interrogatives, the questions posed to Jesus which germinate poetry attempting to answer them. With this syntax in mind, the kōan, “Nansen’s ‘This Flower,’” seems fitting to juxtapose with “Jesus of Nazareth.” It contains three *dramatis personae*, Riku Taifu, Nansen, and Jō Hosshi. Riku Taifu was one of Nansen’s disciples, Nansen himself a Zen Master of high renown whose words and actions “are full of originality” (Grimstone 59; 181). This kōan, then, reflects a dialogue between a skillful teacher and student about a significant historical Buddhist figure, Jō Hosshi, who lived from 414-382 B.C.E, and himself greatly influenced the development of Chinese Buddhism by translating many Buddhist scriptures (Grimstone 256). The main subject and verse juxtapose images of clarity (such as mirror, serene waters, and reflection) and haze, or fuzziness (such as the dream, the frosty sky, and shadows). Because each kōan’s point is increased clarity within the student studying it, the juxtaposed images draw attention to questions of their own, such as: exactly how does one see with true clarity and how does one know that what one is seeing is the real thing? Or is what one observes in the mirror the real thing or simply the image that captures the thing? Does one’s perception of that thing accurately capture that thing’s true essence, or is it but a shadow of its real self?

The kōan is also accorded impetus by its two interrogatives, one in the main subject and one in the verse. Translator Sekida provides some interesting commentary on their application. “In the original text the word we have translated as “fantastic” is *kikai* (*ki*, strange; *kai*, weird). It has the implication of absurd extravagance...in using the word ‘kikai’ he [Riku] meant to say that Jō Hosshi’s proposition was so true that it sounded absurd to ordinary ears. He demonstrated thereby that his understanding went beyond the ordinary conception of such matters” (Grimstone 256). The key takeaway from this is that the perception of absurdity and the ability to comprehend that “Heaven and Earth and I are of the same root,” both go beyond ordinary understanding. It would be strange for the average human being to understand the two as one and the same. As to the

second question found within the verse, “With whom will the serene waters of the lake reflect the shadows in the cold?” its point is as metaphor for a purified, untroubled mind in pure cognition. “In profound silence, at midnight, the serene waters of the lake reflect (cognize) the frosty sky, the setting moon, mountains, rivers, trees, and grass...The serenity and sublimity of this image are intended to convey the profound beauty of the meeting of object and sensation in pure cognition” (Grimstone 258). The first question elicits the paradox which must be grasped in order to go beyond ordinary understanding, and the second question elicits the higher state of being that is realised when one is able to do so.

As part of his commentary, Sekida also articulates the difficulty in transferring the act of pure cognition from an object to everyday life, and such ability indicates maturity in practice. The culmination of the maturation process is the ability to see into the spirit of all things, with the ultimate lesson of relevance in relation to the present dialogue with “Jesus of Nazareth.” “When you do this you are really looking into your own spirit. It is a matter of intuitive, direct cognition” (Grimstone 257). In other words, the kōan is interpreted as saying that to look outward is to also to look inward, with an eventual outcome that subject and object are no longer two, stated in the kōan as “All things and I are of one substance” and in the verse as “hearing, seeing, touching, and knowing are not one and one.”

This interpretation can also be seen in additional statements by Victor Sōgen Hori in another of his works. His piece on kōan study of Rinzai monks yields two important notions, the first being the insight that comes when the monk realises that the study is the insight itself, often after a significant amount of time in painstaking struggle and suffering. “Finally there comes a moment when the monk realizes that his very seeking the answer to the kōan, and the way he himself is reacting to his inability to penetrate the kōan, are themselves the activity of the kōan working within him” (Hori 2000 288). The monk, via his study of the kōan, becomes what he is studying. It is in the seeking that he finds. The second important notion underscores the connection between the way, the wayfarer, and the wayfarer’s awakening, in fact asserting that they are all one and the same: “The kōan is not merely a static entity, something with a fixed self-nature to be apprehended. If anything, it is an activity, the activity of seeking to understand the kōan which uses the monk and his mind as its arena. The kōan is both an object of consciousness and the subjective activity of consciousness seeking to understand the kōan itself. The monk himself in his seeking is the kōan. Realization of this is the insight, the response to the kōan” (Hori 2000 288). The kōan is thus understood as a question intended to drive to the root of cognition, with “Nansen’s ‘This Flower’” containing

multiple sight images meant to highlight the distinctions between what is clear and what is fuzzy (mirror; reflection in a lake – dream; shadows). The kōan’s commentary helps a reader understand that to seek enlightenment in the kōan is to obscure the boundary between the seeker and what is sought.

Returning to Ku Sang’s “Jesus of Nazareth” with this context in mind reinforces the poet’s message which draws attention to the perception that normal human methods of knowing Jesus might be inadequate, largely because they are human ways and rely upon an intellectual approach. Conventional ways to know Jesus may well lead to conventional human patterns of behaviour, but the poem stresses that Jesus is not exactly these things. In order to appreciate who Jesus is, really, in order to realise it as pure cognition (to borrow the term from the commentary on the kōan), in fact, one must cut through normal human intellection about what is normal and what is strange. By reflecting more deeply on the poem’s questions, instead, one is led to engage with the question of who Jesus is by including Jesus’ own response to similar interrogatives, “Who do you say that I am?” Pondering the effort that would be required to answer that question brings to mind the Biblical text, “Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find” (Matt 7:7, also in Luke 11:9). In this light, then, if humanity must be careful to avoid observing Jesus only through the mirror of their own humanity instead of the real thing, and if the Rinzai monk in his seeking of pure cognition becomes that which is sought via the act of seeking, it might also be plausible that a component of the poet’s message is to learn who Jesus is by actually seeking after him, and doing so in ways others may consider strange, or absurd, to “forgive as our Father forgives,/and love as our father loves,” for example. Feasibly, the ultimate poetic statement can be interpreted as one in which the act of seeking by following the example, here realised in pure cognition of Jesus, can also overturn thoughts and words and bear witness to Love’s imperishability. Perhaps this may reveal the original motivations for the poem’s composition – to search for God by trying to know Jesus, a sentiment also found in the New Testament: “If you knew me you would know my Father too” (John 14:7).

“A pebble”

Another way to search for God is through a relationship with another. Through that relationship, one understands God in a different way than they would if acting independently; the relationship forms a unique conduit, revealing God’s work in ways not available to the individual searching alone. “A Pebble” parallels such a revelation, documenting a series of events between the speaker and a pebble, bonding the speaker with the pebble in concurrent movement from a superficial to a substantive relationship. One of the poem’s unique features is the fact that its central relationship is between a human being and an inanimate entity. The speaker begins the poem indifferent to that inanimate entity, yet adapts as information is gradually revealed by the pebble, which is actually given many sensate traits.

The poem takes place *in medias res*, outlining a passage of time that has its concrete points and is yet still imprecise, following time from before the instant of the poem to a present progressive lacking full resolution ostensibly because the reader is left unsure as to the concluding nature of the speaker’s communicated feelings of contrition. A change in character is recognisable but left open, a reader left to form their own account of the speaker’s future steps. Outwardly, a reader observes concrete present-past-present progressive markers, outlining a flashback bracketed by the opening and closing tercets: “...every day I meet.../...was once kicked.../At first.../And now each morning.../Sometimes.../So now, whenever I meet.” Each of these markers secures its own moment and is isolated from all others by the use of grammatical end-stops to close each stanza. The external signs parallel motion within the speaker, indicated by a series of key verbs, all initiated by the pebble, which steadily accumulate in intensity: “beg[ins] to address,” “reach[es]” out a hand, “gr[ow]s,” (which refers to the growing relationship between speaker and pebble, something originated by the pebble’s actions) “blossoms,” “gives” a blessing, “waits,” “flies” towards, “visits,” “explains,” and “reveals.” The speaker’s internal motion develops more rapidly than the external for there are more verbs than stanzas but, together, their parallel momentum accumulates towards the nucleus of the poem’s sense, “the immortal nature of Relationship,” which seems both indicative of relationship between speaker and pebble and grander appreciations of relationship, suggested by “immortal” and Relationship’s capitalisation.

Indeed, the poem contains only three capitalisations: Grace, Mystery of Meeting, and Relationship. Each retains an important role. Grace is the substance from which the flowers bloom, suggestive of a previously unobserved supernatural quality within the stone and an ultimate source of its blessing, presumably something beautiful, as typically are flowers. At first, the speaker and the

pebble are situated as strangers, but then interaction progresses into a relationship as a normal relationship between two humans would progress, "...we grew close, like friends." The blessing's emergence, preceded by the capitalised Grace, indicates something much deeper, as the word itself (blessing) contains connotations of special favour, permission, and religious holiness. Just as they are placed chronologically within the flashback, Grace comes before the blessing itself which precedes the explanation and revelation, suggestive of an overall interdependence. Each one is intertwined with the other as that already-established external sense of time continues to operate. Mystery of Meeting is paired with Relationship in a parallel grammatical structure, as objects of the pebble's most intense verbs, 'explains' and 'reveals.' Both are relatively ambiguous, just like Grace, and remain ambiguous to a reader over the course of the entire poem. Separately, all three drive some emotion. Grace precedes the blessing and both Mystery of Meeting and Relationship precede the speaker's sense of shame. The poem's trajectory eventually culminates in the very word Relationship. At this point the flashback closes, and the speaker returns to present tense, now in its progressive form.

The closing tercet restates similar material to the opening one but with a fundamental change in the speaker's state. Together, the tercets act to frame the internal stanzas, as they both present static situations in contrast to the motion recorded within the central stanzas. The close thus portrays the speaker's change as a testament to that internal development. The speaker's relationship with the pebble has revealed previously unmentioned, and perhaps even altogether unknown, internal emotions ("uncivilized"; "insecure"; "ashamed").

The poem's main theme is relationship, and specifically how relationships stimulate humans to change. The fact that such thematic material has been applied in the context of a human and non-human entity invites an interpreter to think of relationships beyond strictly human contexts. "A pebble's" religious significance begins as a reader engages with the poem's symbols which also find place as traditional Christian symbols: Grace, blessings, angel's wings, and Mystery of Meeting. Grace itself is an important concept for the Christian as an individual and for the Catholic Church as an institution. In its Christian sense, Grace is the idea that one's life circumstances are bestowed by God, and that which is received is derived from God's mercy and love. The official position of the Catholic Church is that "Grace is favour, the free and undeserved help, that God gives us to respond to his call" (Catechism 483). Within the context of this definition, the initial passive verb form and the speaker's "passing toe" of the opening tercet seem to possess additional meaning beyond the mere notation of time. Passive would suggest a possible alternative source for the

kicking action. Even though the speaker may have done the kicking previous to the poem's events, something else may very well have set those events into motion. In light of "free and undeserved help," the passing toe insinuates a lack of direct intent on the speaker's part, an almost casual, even accidental, circumstance, which would align with an interpretation that the speaker didn't necessarily do anything in order to receive grace. Indeed, the Church considers that "the preparation of man for the reception of grace is already a work of grace" (Catechism 484).

Somewhat related to Grace is blessing, which has its origins in the scriptural traditions of the ancient Israelites and can be considered "an action in which the divine descends upon an individual or group," with spiritual effect (Rivard 25-26). Historically, blessings reinforced the Old Testament theme of covenant, the blessings forming a mediation between God and his chosen people, which became modified in the New Testament with incorporation of the Messiah as the conduit for all God's salvific acts (Rivard 28-19). Blessings are considered one of the ways a person of faith can know God. Likewise, the image of the angel is an important one for its assistance in one's knowledge of God, knowledge of the unknowable. Primarily, and like blessing, the angel acts as an intermediary, although the angel retains tangible form whereas blessing remains fully intangible. The use of both blessing and the reference to the angel's wings (the synecdoche of the wings equivalent to an entire being of angelic status) is significant because they are both two traditional Christian images which perhaps point to both a human and divine form of mediated communication with God, the blessing and the angel, respectively.

The phrase Mystery of Meeting connotes an event that is not fully understood, just as the word mystery gives the sense that something cannot be fully explained. The word can also refer to "wonder, surprise, or astonishment at something the human mind did not expect, and could not have anticipated" (Wainright 81). William Wainright then cites an example from the New Testament to support this description, taken from 1 Corinthians, upon which I include additional Biblical text preceding his excerpt: "I speak God's hidden wisdom, his secret purpose framed from the very beginning to bring us to our destined glory...Scripture speaks of 'things beyond our seeing, things beyond our hearing, things beyond our imagining, all prepared by God for those who love him'; and these are what God has revealed to us through the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 7; 9-10). This excerpt demonstrates that some aspects of life cannot be fully understood; they are hidden, 'secret' as St. Paul notes. While some of this hidden wisdom may be revealed by attempts at direct communication with God (such as by the silence of mystical prayer – a notion to be discussed in the next chapter within a poem of Merton's), hidden wisdom can also be revealed through the events of life itself,

often through the actions of others. As the poem begins, the speaker has a certain level of awareness. That level of awareness is elevated as his relationship with the pebble deepens, the pebble gradually revealing what is hidden, thus revealing things beyond his seeing, beyond his hearing, and perhaps even beyond his imagining, to adopt the Pauline phrasing. This Relationship, then, can be interpreted to stand for something which assists access to that which is hidden. As does the Spirit in the Biblical passage (indicative of the Holy Spirit, one facet of the Triune God), perhaps the Biblical context helps to explain the pebble's sensate qualities and the nature of the Relationship with the speaker itself.

Entering into dialogue with Buddhism – “The Buddha Holds Out a Flower”

Ku Sang's poem examines the theme of Relationship and individual transformation for having entered into that relationship. But the poem is about more than just the relationship between a tiny rock and a person, that inanimate yet seemingly sensate pebble and the human individual. As I have demonstrated that the poem's essential symbols invite religious interpretation through meanings in common with traditional Christian understanding, it is thus possible to interpret the relationship between the pebble and the speaker as also symbolic of a divine/human one. It would be reasonable to ask: what does the development of that relationship do for the speaker, and, by extension, what would the development of a relationship with a divine being do for the speaker as well? “The Buddha Holds Out a Flower” can perhaps offer some insight.

This kōan contains two primary *dramatis personae*, Buddha and Mahākāśyapa, considered the Buddha's first disciple and the one who assumed leadership after the Buddha's death. Henrich Dumoulin notes that Mahākāśyapa is referred to as “the first of the strict observers of the rule” within Buddhist scriptures (Dumoulin 1988 8). The kōan's two main symbols are the flower and the smile, which represent things that are silent. Symbolically, the flower indicates something which has developed one form but began in another, as flowers grow from seeds. Similarly, the smile indicates a change in form, specifically of cognition or emotion, which developed from some other state. The altered state becomes outwardly recognisable by the smile. Taken together, these symbols of silence portray a situation in which knowledge has been transferred from one individual to another without formal textual study or teaching. Mahākāśyapa has thus gained access to something not readily apparent through another. Technically nothing has been given, nor has anything been taught, although it may seem that way from initial reading of the text, through a typical sense of the word

“entrusted” (Grimstone 43). The kōan emphasises method as much as content, with insinuation that the method is a portion of the content itself. It thus established a tradition often referred as a form of special silent transmission outside formal teaching. This silent transmission of the dharma eventually became the primal source for the lineages so influential in Buddhist thought and central to Buddhist monastic experience in those meditative Mahayana schools of Buddhism; taken literally, it established the Buddha himself as that very source (Welter 75-76; 94).

Figuratively speaking, though, silent transmission also illustrates the Buddhist concept of samadhi, usually translated from Sanskrit as total self-collectedness, or unification of mind, and interpreted as total involvement of the whole personality; in his commentary to accompany Case 6, translator Sekida explains what is usually missing from most of those interpretations: a distinction between different kinds of samadhi (Grimstone 42). Sekida’s distinction can provide some value for a deeper reading of “A pebble,” particularly in regard to its treatment of the theme of relationship. He articulates these distinct kinds as Absolute, meaning total involvement with no object or activity, and Positive, meaning total involvement with some object or activity; becoming well-versed in the former allows an individual to enter the latter “at will” (Grimstone 42). To cultivate this state is to cultivate intimacy with the object or activity with which one is involved, culminating in recognition of the “beauty of its [the object’s] essential nature”; connecting his analysis to the Flower Sermon, Sekida writes: “In this case the Buddha held out a flower as a demonstration of his positive samadhi: his oneness, his closest intimacy, **with** the flower and **through it** the universe” [my emphasis by bold text] (Grimstone 42). In other words, gaining knowledge of the full meaning of the universe through both the flower and the Buddha, in other words by deepening his relationship to both, Mahākāśyapa was able to access an essential nature of being.

In light of this context, just as the flower within the kōan became an access point to something greater, the pebble within Ku Sang’s poem also appears to achieve the same symbolic function, as mediator for Relationship. The pebble can perhaps also be understood in a larger symbolic sense, as possibly representative of a relationship with God as mediated by Jesus. This would be feasible considering the discussion of Jesus as mediator from the previous poem. Additionally, one could interpret the flowers of Grace as playing a similar role in the poem as did the Buddha’s flower to Mahākāśyapa. In particular, the flowers have an inward orientation, their intangibility and content, Grace, blooming as an aspect of their being. Perhaps Grace was there all along (i.e. hidden or otherwise misunderstood), in similar conditions as the pebble itself. The Buddha’s flower is a demonstration, a symbolic representation of something much larger than itself,

in Buddhist terms, oneness with the universe. The flower functions as a mediator, through which Mahākāśyapa understood a new intimacy with the Buddha but also the Buddha's own intimacy with the flower and through it, the universe. With this context in mind, Ku Sang's "A Pebble" seems to bring into the open some hidden mystery, although the poem does not fully reveal its content to a reader but only references its significance through the speaker's emotional change. The sentiment has sympathy with other Biblical text, such as Jesus' conversation with the twelve disciples in Mark 4: "Nothing is to be hidden except to be disclosed, and nothing concealed except to be brought into the open. If you have ears to hear, then hear" (Mark 4:22-23). Perhaps to search for God through a relationship with another helps disclose what may not be originally heard by a single individual searching alone.

“On suffering”

Still another way a human can search for God is to examine the circumstances embodying the human condition, a search which perhaps has the most overlap with Hillis Miller’s observations about post-medieval literature. Within “On suffering,” Ku Sang retains a sense of hope and, conceivably, this could be a starting point for any search for God. The poem opens with its speaker in a predicament yet the poem’s trajectory eventually culminates with a sense of the human condition which conquers instead of succumbing to that predicament.

The poem begins in motion and that motion is not tranquil. Instead, the speaker experiences a tense environment, dominated by an external, impersonal “They.” “They” is compared to bad weather, in the verb “storming,” which brings to mind powers which have the ability to cause significant destruction, often through violent action, and that are ultimately beyond human control. The impersonal force takes human shape within the metaphor as it is subdivided by age and choice of weapon, its actions and style further shaped by its manner, “rough pursuit” Within the stanza, the phrase’s placement provides structure as it partitions the stanza as a whole, perhaps to highlight the distance between the speaker and the group, its collective nouns and pronoun “boys,” “men,” and “They,” replaced after the phrase by the speaker’s singular “I.” The split calls further attention to the opposing forces, adding metaphorical distance between the speaker and “They.” Although the exact circumstances which caused the speaker’s wound are unclear from the text, what has become clearer is the speaker as object of the initial pursuit; a reader can straightforwardly imagine a likely purpose for the “dung-bound millet stalks,” the speaker the intended recipient of their deployment. The speaker’s attempts to hide as they occur within the second stanza appear to confirm just such a notion. Having begun in general terms, the speaker’s attempts are repeated in stages of ever-increasing specificity of place. The increase in specificity also increases emotions of urgency, the three repeated acts of concealment countering the three distinct utterances from the mob: “insults,” “deep disgrace,” and “shouts of anger.” The repetition lends greater significance to the ultimate location of cover, the hearse, seen here as refuge from the onslaught of the outside world. The hearse as symbolic of death positions the upcoming dream’s context as an outgrowth of those metaphors of death.

Concealment in the hearse provides respite and reveals a transformation. The atmosphere settles down, becomes “cool,” and “light,” and there is no further mention of the ‘mob’ outside the hearse from this point onwards in the poem. Relief has been found and the fact that it happens in a hearse suggests a poetic sentiment, taken to its full extension: that some relief can be found in the

death that a hearse symbolises. Death in real life provides relief from life's circumstances. Just as with the word pursuit earlier, "approach" acts as a borderline. The word completes the adjective clause which describes the hearse, and provides a discernible starting point for the description of a dream. The speaker describes the dream's content in a manner which blurs the sense between sleep and death, weaving a mixture of characters and images: corpse, sweetness, moon, dream, and girl, woven together just as the poem itself says ("weaving a scene from my sweet dream"). Death associations are a constant subtext within the dream's similes, such as the corpse, the harvest moon (a specific label for a moon occurring at a specific time of the year - around the autumnal equinox, a time which leads towards the symbolic 'death' of winter), the statue, and the log.

The girl plays an interesting role within the dream as she is split into two states of being by the lotus flower's emergence. Before its emergence, she acts primarily as a healer, but the adjective "sly" suggests that something else may be at work. Sly indicates a cleverness in concealing appearance, lending additional texture to the line "a dream within my dream," with the implication that she is perhaps not as she initially presents herself, as events within dreams are but themselves representations of another reality. Following the lotus' blossoming (expressly identified as a "flower of love"), the girl has lost her identity and humanity. She is now but "that other love," the lotus flower's appearance placing what she initially offered into a new perspective, now lacking the same value as it previously did. The poem articulates: "she stood there alone, like a statue, a log," or someone now motionless, perhaps lacking life. The reference to scarlet shoes invites thoughts of her as a temptress of some kind; she has become different without them, maybe losing some of her power, again helping a reader to think that the surface appearance does not equate to what is underneath that surface. A reader is inclined to think that they might have been a source of her strength, her love, and her healing powers; now that her condition has changed, a reader notices poignantly that previously she only "**seemed to be** pouring sweet oil upon my wounds," and could consider her presence and actions as an illusion. It is a dream after all and the girl perhaps but a dream within that dream.

This new perception reinforces a notion that the healing is something intuited by the speaker as false. The speaker explores a true dream and a false one within it. But the emergence of the lotus flower, arriving via isolated reference, implicitly bears a new level of awareness and possesses a truer type of love. The lotus is contained in lines that have no relationship to any other actions going on around them. Perhaps the poet is suggesting the view that that which is sufficient needs no other ornamentation. The poem closes in imitation of a funeral procession with references to the

colourfully decorated hearse and the irony of “joyful” keening. The final lines leave circumstances still unresolved in a state of suspended tension which may also be precisely a state of suspended animation. The girl, this time referenced as “my darling,” and with a reader still unsure if she is of real or false substance, must wait three days to discover what happens next. Both she and a reader are left but with their own patience, in anticipation for what is to arise on that third day. The speaker thus leaves us still in a state of suspended tension, although the sense of tension under which the poem closes is positive, compared to the negative tension from which the poem started.

In a manner similar to that within “A pebble,” the poet has outlined two kinds of motion in “On suffering,” the initial external movement found in the mob and the speaker, and another internal movement found within the speaker’s dream. The external motion possesses sharp immediacy and critical intensity. Within the dream, a reader still observes motion, but that motion is subtler and follows the speaker’s mind from one image to another, in the same way many dreams work, images woven together which may not always make immediate sense but can reveal one’s subconscious. While dreams can have multiple interpretations when individual images or events are isolated, taken together, these specific images within the speaker’s dream suggest a need for healing, with an ultimate outcome the exact opposite of that offered by the mob.

Although not completely certain from the poem, the mob’s intent appears conclusive and intentional: death, symbolised but not fully realised, by the hearse. The poem concludes with the mind’s ultimate response, perhaps something hidden within the speaker’s subconscious and only able to be fully revealed by the process of dreaming. That response is the promise of death’s conquest, suggested by the victory to be achieved on the third day, inviting thoughts of the Resurrection. The speaker could be said to be under a lot of “heat” coming from the mob outside. He cools down on account of two actions which, although presented as similes, arrive in parallel to the feelings with which they are synonymous – blood and wine; cool and light. The first two are among the substances upon which the Christian doctrine of Transubstantiation is built, as the substance of wine offered at a service is believed to be changed into the blood of Christ at the Consecration (Catechism 346-348). It describes blood, wine and healed wounds, all within a hearse which neither man nor ghost dares approach. What is it in approaching the hearse and its connotations of death that causes the speaker’s timidity? The answer seems to arrive as the poem continues.

“On Suffering” holds out for the promise of a life after death, real or abstract, to be found on the third day mentioned in the final stanza of the poem. In fact, the poem ostensibly blurs the

two (life and death) throughout, first as the speaker clings to life as he escapes the mob, and saves it within the hearse, a symbol for death, and second, as he describes the dream sequence which surreally interweaves sleep, death, injury/healing, and life. Finally, the blurring of life and death culminates in the resurrection reference which completes the poem altogether, which in Christianity represents the ultimate victory over death itself. While death is one of the few things that every human has in common with every other and the treatment of which is generally a central purpose of both religious and poetic activity, Christianity's answer is its resurrection hope, a life after death to be found in an eternal heaven.

In fact, as this poem unfolds, it is possible for a reader to see the speaker as a Christ-like figure, with some of the poem's details possessing similarity to the story of Christ's Passion, the embodiment of that resurrection hope. As Jesus bears his cross and is making his way towards Golgotha, the Gospel of Matthew relays: "and plaiting a crown of thorns they placed it on his head, and a stick in his right hand. Falling on their knees before him, they jeered at him: 'Hail, king of the Jews!' They spat on him, and used the stick to beat him about the head" (Matt 27:29-30). A reader can observe a resemblance between the stick used to beat Jesus and the hoes and dung-bound millet stalks within "On suffering." Additionally, the anonymity and irrationality of the assembled crowd in the Gospel account seems similar to the anonymous "They" within Ku's poem: "'Then what am I to do with Jesus called Messiah?' asked Pilate; and with one voice they answered, 'Crucify him!' 'Why, what harm has he done?' asked Pilate; but they shouted all the louder, 'Crucify him!'" (Matt 27:22-23). "A brow from which blood thickly oozes," brings to mind the crown of thorns. The fact that the speaker hides within the hearse could perhaps allude to Jesus hiding in death over the course of the three days between the crucifixion and the resurrection; "following the road towards Limbo," appears to reinforce that perception. The girl within the dream invites comparison with Mary Magdalene, as someone who cared for Jesus' body after the crucifixion. All allusions seem subtle, perhaps applied in a manner similar to the blurring of wakefulness and the dream. But while the poem's speaker undergoes a series of events which appear to mimic Christ's Passion, two key differences remain between the poem and the Gospel narrative. The first is that in the Gospel, Jesus does rise on the third day, as promised, while the poem's speaker still awaits that promise. The second is that Jesus fully experienced the cruelty of his crucifixion and suffered a death. A reader is unsure, though, as to how much to accept or reject the speaker's dream recollection as real, and actual death within the poem exists only referentially.

Entering into dialogue with Buddhism – “Kyozan Respectfully Declares It”

“On Suffering” offers an almost surreal series of events in which a state of dreaming is interwoven with the subjects of life and death to culminate in a final hope for salvation, “on the third day to come.” Conrad Hyers suggests the subject of salvation provides a bridge between Christianity and Buddhism via Rinzai teaching and technique. He observes: “They [Rinzai teaching and technique] offer a means of salvation...By pursuing kōan-zen under a qualified master, one may hope to be illuminated as to the true nature of one’s predicament and be emancipated from that predicament by being rescued and returned to one’s original nature and true home. Trapped as if by a pervasive condition of Original Sin, one nevertheless is moved by the dim remembrance of the primal Garden of one’s being” (Hyers 14-15). The kōan, “Kyozan Respectfully Declares It,” seems fitting for a comparison between Ku Sang’s surreal treatment of life and death as it, too, contains a dream as its dominant image. “Kyozan Respectfully Declares It” is case 90 of the *Shōyōroku* (English: *The Book of Equanimity*). Case 25 of the *Mumonkan* (English: *The Gateless Gate*) is essentially the same kōan, with almost the same content (although with noticeable differences in some details and the accompanying verse), and a different title, “Kyozan’s Dream.” I am using the English translation from the *Shōyōroku*, but cite commentary from the *Mumonkan* as well.

The kōan contains some similar imagery to “On Suffering.” The first and most dominant throughout is that of the dream. It sets the kōan into a place which has only a resemblance to the real. All events thus exist in a setting which is only related to reality. In Buddhist cosmology, Maitreya is a future Buddha and, when thought of in combination with the dream, may point to either Kyozan’s future or the example that he provides to the student of the kōan. The kōan’s main character is Kyozan – a Zen master who lived from 890-814 B.C.E and was one of the founders of the Iggyo School, one of the five Chinese schools of Zen, a school which promoted the careful consideration of both sudden enlightenment and its gradual cultivation (Grimstone 87; Shishin Wick 49). As Gerry Shishin Wick puts the principle another way: “Seeing clearly is one thing..., but integrating it into your life is something else. Insight is sudden, integration is gradual” (Shishin Wick 50). Kyozan’s appearance in the kōan seems to metaphorically stress this insight/integration aspect of the dream sequence. Does the dream itself give insight? If so, then how does one integrate into life outside the dream? Sekida’s commentary on the kōan is insightful. He comments: “Dreams reveal the innermost secrets of one’s mind...Consciousness is often placed in a dilemma and has to conceal forbidden thoughts from itself. But the stored internal pressure does not remain dormant; it

constantly knocks at the door, asking to be admitted once again onto the stage of consciousness and thereby to have itself discharged” (Grimstone 88). He continues by relaying a Zen saying, pertinent to the surreal nature of Ku Sang’s poem: “With holy ones, dreams and wakefulness make one and the same stream” (Grimstone 88). In essence, what Sekida and Shishin Wick both seem to emphasise is the blur between wakefulness and dream state, perhaps indicative of distinctions between reality and an ideal.

The verse speaks to an ideal state of being which can make a student of the kōan wonder where this ideal state exists. Is it just in a dream state or can it be achieved while awake? A key phrase is “...to be appointed and not give way.” The phrase seems to say that, in the dream, Kyozan is able to stand and accept Buddhahood. Figurative statements provide the description of the state of being, the similes “heart peaceful as the ocean,” and “liver capacious as a peck.” Just as the kōan concludes with the paradox of Kyozan declaring something that is “beyond all words,” so does the verse highlight a paradoxical action, in “stopped using medicine for illness.”

At no time in “On Suffering” does the speaker mention closing their eyes, although the dream and corpse references could lead a reader to think so, as dreams normally arise from sleep. Knowing this detail further blurs the sense of dream and wakefulness, with “Kyozan Respectfully Declares It” offering an expansion of the poem’s message with regard to what it means to dream and what it means to be awake. As an extension, both poem and kōan could lead one to ask what it means to die, just as Ku’s poem does. In one way, Ku’s answer is a Christian one, the promise of the Resurrection and its promise of salvation, the victory over death which I already mentioned. Salvation in its Buddhist sense, however, means the realisation that both the objective world and the self are empty and to understand that is to free oneself from suffering, the most basic of which is the predicament of life and death, set in motion by birth, something to which the Buddha referred as the cause of suffering itself (Hyers 14-15). “On suffering’s” speaker dreams of a salvation found three days away. But how does he integrate that sense of salvation into his daily life? Conrad Hyers perhaps hints at a possible answer. “A Modern Rinzai master, Shibayama Zenkei, teaches that the goal of Zen training is for the self ‘to die’ and then to be ‘revived’ as the self without form. Having been brought back from the depths into which one has been plunged by the kōan, one can begin to live in the freedom of a ‘new man’” (Hyers 18). So it could be then that “On suffering’s” speaker wishes for this type of death, for him to be found in the salvation offered by resurrection on the third day. His self must die to achieve the integration.

“Myself”

Lastly within this chapter, I examine a poem which crafts an expansive concept of the self. An important way to understand God is to reflect on transformation of the self as a result of one’s faith. Ku Sang’s “Myself” describes just such a reflection and its speaker establishes an assertive tone from the very first words. “It is...” This simple declaration sets up a state of being which, it will be seen over the course of the poem, accumulates until the very last word, although an astute reader can perceive the substance of “it” from the title. The use of “it” also allows for objectivity in the poem’s frame of reference.

The poem develops symbols as it proceeds, one dominant symbol per stanza, each presenting an image against which the speaker’s concept of self is to be compared. Every one of these self-contained moments reflects the passing of a life itself, life’s beginnings made apparent by allusions to birth in the first stanza, as the development moves towards “opposing nihility” and “unknown death,” culminating in the poem’s penultimate word, “Eternity.” In a way, this presentation imitates the way a life unfolds, also from birth to death. The repetition of “and” conjunctions, as well as the adverb, “too,” creates a process of accumulation, whereby each understanding of the self is added to that which came before it, continuously expanding in scope.

The poem’s first stanza speaks of beginnings, roots of emotion and children still in the womb evoking thoughts of subjects that have been conceived but not yet in their fully realised states. These subjects must still evolve into full-grown state. The second stanza evokes the formless, the shadow, and the “deep-sea fish” that needs no eyes due to its existence in a location devoid of light. The stanza also declares, in paradox, that, once born, humans emerge into a darkness of “six senses.” The declaration offers the paradox perhaps to draw attention to the distance between the spiritual potential of the foetus and the world entered by birth. The stanza contains some of the same thoughts of lack of form, but here, however, a reader notices contrast from the more positive symbols of the first stanza. In that first stanza, roots of being have a link with plants, trees, and other symbols of life’s origins. The emphasis is life itself. The second stanza describes something shadier, still intangible, but with a darker gist, as in the negative connotation of sin, the shadows, and the “deep-sea” (also a place of darkness). The mood suggests a warning, but the inclusion of “more than,” indicates that such a condition can be overcome.

The third stanza appears to combine the two previous contrasting stanzas, in the juxtaposed doctrines of Buddhism and Christianity, articulating the states of being into which every human is born. Each poses the notion, Original Sin and Karma, that some of what makes us human has

already been determined for any individual human being. Original Sin is Christianity's doctrine of which one aspect explains a state of humanity which finds itself distant from God. Karma reflects Buddhist doctrine of which one aspect regards current life circumstances as based upon the efforts of a previous one. The two philosophies are juxtaposed in the poem and seemingly formed together along with the clay that composes the work made in the potter's kiln. While the obscure darkness offers another statement of something mysterious, its use reinforces the sentiment of that which must be moulded, crafted, or created from a formless substance.

The sense of bringing form to the formless crafted in mystery permeates the poem, as contrasts of space are manoeuvred to highlight the seemingly small together with the grandiose without full explanation of how they became that way. The small is juxtaposed with something larger, grander, more immense, even that which cannot be fully grasped by the human mind, such as the "cosmic vastness," and "the boundless void/reaching beyond billions of light years." If the speaker proclaims that what is hidden inside the small is grander, and, by comparison, what is inside the speaker, a human, is "more than/the ether," a reader is invited to adjust perspective of humanity in general if that reader possesses a narrow view, or, at least, to recognise humanity's overall inner possibilities. The speaker repeats it often enough throughout the poem to support grander notions of the self. The sense is that "Myself" is an invitation to a reader to also think this way about themselves.

As a reader comes to the conclusion of the poem, the theme of recognising the full potential within the small, confronts its primary conflict and, perhaps, an ultimate reason for the importance of such recognition. As mentioned previously, the poem has images and statements of ever-increasing expansion from the womb through to "the boundless void." Despite this, something exists which can nullify it all: "unknown death." A person must recognise that they are greater than even this death, and retain the knowledge that they are "more than...and more, too, than." Death is presented as an obstacle but one that can be overcome. The poem concludes with a single statement of space and time which places both at their ultimate expanse, eternity. Throughout the poem, the speaker has accentuated concepts of self through addition. In the end, all that is needed is the final statement to finally reveal what "it" is, which poetically encompasses all the others and reflects back to the opening pronoun of the poem, "It is...Myself."

Entering into Dialogue with Buddhism – “The World-Honored One Points to the Earth”

The kōan, “The World-Honored One Points to the Earth,” contains similar images of small and grand, fragile and powerful, the potential within, and how to reveal that potential. The usual kōan reveals a conversation between a Zen master and student. This kōan contains the *dramatis personae* of the Buddha, the World-Honored One, and Indra, a deity within multiple religions of South Asia. Indra is said to rule over the realms of death and rebirth and is considered a guardian deity in Buddhism; the Buddha is understood to have overcome the cycle of death and rebirth, considered as one who achieved Great Enlightenment, “the enlightenment of all the Buddhas and patriarchs” (Dumoulin 1988 6). Their conversation, then, can be interpreted as a dialogue between one who has overcome the realm which the other commands.

In that conversation, a reader observes two primary and distinct images, the temple and the blade of grass. By stating that a blade of grass can function as a temple, the temple can theoretically be anywhere, something reinforced by the verse, “taking what’s at hand, use it freely.” As Shishin Wick says in his commentary on the case, “experiencing growth in our life requires developing a larger vision unconstrained by our usual limited mind...Doing so requires great awareness.” (Shishin Wick 18) Of note is the observation that it is the body that enters the red dust; the act of ‘extending a hand’ is encased within a subordinate clause. To extend a hand is a gesture of compassion and the reference to the place in the main case where the Buddha points to the earth. “Within the dust he can be host,” the kōan states. The phrase invites comparison with a Biblical phrase which also uses the subject of dust to remind humanity of the formlessness from which it began, just as the clay in the poem. The Biblical phrase is found in Genesis: “and only by the sweat of your brow will you win your bread until you return to the earth; for from it you were taken. Dust you are, to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19).

According to Wick’s commentary, “Everywhere life is sufficient. Just be who you are, and don’t restrict it” (Shishin Wick 19). By doing so, one can achieve the abolition of nonduality, the recognition of subject-object and the state of pure cognition that leads to awakening, in its Buddhist sense. In this context, then, “Myself” reads not just that a person is greater than the contrasting items presented in each stanza, but that one must realise them in order to recognise the greater self. Perhaps the message one can take is to act the greater self (Shishin Wick’s ‘Just be who you are, and don’t restrict it’), the self that is more than six senses and sevens sins, in order to not succumb to

them. One realises the greater self by becoming that very self, the self that is “more than...and more than...and more, greater.”

This concludes close study of Ku’s works. I have observed four expressions of a search for God: the appeal to a mediator (as in “Jesus of Nazareth”), the change effected by a deepening relationship (as in “A Pebble”), reflection on the human condition (as in “On Suffering”), and the inward reflection to understand the self (as in “Myself”). Brother Anthony has observed, “it is because his Christian faith gives him the assurance that nothing is wasted, nothing lost, that Ku Sang can also confront directly the pains and abuses of the present age without fear or disgust (Teague 27). Each of these four poems confronts some aspect of human life directly, offering them to the reader in such a way that does not express fear, a direction in which “A pebble” could easily turn, or disgust, a response which would be reasonable when considering the mob’s actions in “On suffering.” The poems embody the comments made by interpreters that I reviewed in the previous chapter and offer direct testimony that to encounter Ku Sang’s poems is to encounter not just his life, but some aspect of all human life as well.

CHAPTER 4 – THOMAS MERTON

More than half a century after his death, Thomas Merton's search for God, as recorded in his poetry, retains ongoing relevance for anyone who wishes to explore his search process. In the opening chapter of his own contribution to the field of Merton studies, John Moses calls Merton's sustained relevance a "continuing fascination," and conjectures that this is at least partly because Merton embodied personal contradictions so much a part of the human condition. Moses writes: "It was as though a clash of temperaments, a clash of personalities, had been built into the man. He needed solitude and he needed people. He pleaded for freedom to pursue his monastic vocation in his way, but he was held and nurtured by the community. His commitment to the religious life never wavered, and yet he needed contacts outside the monastery – from all parts of the world, from all traditions of faith. At different times and in different ways, the monk and the writer and the contemplative and the social critic and the ecumenist were at war with one another, or at the very least wrestled with one another for space and time and energy" (Moses 4).

The appreciation of Merton's search for God has evolved and taken on many forms. Merton wrote profusely and, as demonstrated in Moses' quotation, was a complex man, a quality at least somewhat responsible for such ongoing fascination. Yet, despite the overall amount of attention paid to Merton's work, and not just by the four scholars mentioned in an earlier chapter, some of his early poetry composed before 1950 has remained relatively unexplored. While some interpreters may have considered the early material not among Merton's best poetic work (Kilcourse and Woodcock among them), these early poems accurately reflect Merton's initial growth as both poet and monk, and thus his initial steps in his search for God. During this period, Merton was figuring out how to be both a poet and a Trappist monk. A detailed analysis of selected poems from this period can thus be valuable to understand how his search for God developed in that poet/monk context.

In his own journals, Merton would look back to some of this early poetry with a highly self-critical eye, yet also able to sense evolution in his own poetic development. A few select journal entries, written over the fall and winter of 1947-48, are telling for his own recognition of that development, illustrating a desire to produce good work and glimpse into the wisdom he gained from the search process. His entry for October 16, 1947 is utterly critical: "Last October's edition of *Collectanea*¹¹ with a review of *A Man in the Divided Sea* got here. The monks of Chimay were very

¹¹ *Collectanea* – *Collectanea Ordinis Cisterciensium Reformatorum*, a Cistercian journal published by the Abbey of Chimay, in Belgium

fulsome. They said I was everything and had the making of a great poet. And I am fed up because it isn't true" (*Journals*, v. 2 125). Similar thoughts appear later on in the same month. October 26th expresses the following: "Correcting page proofs on *Figures for an Apocalypse*, I am disgusted with the verse I have been writing...Last night at *Salve*¹² what I felt was this: 'Lady, if you want this dubious talent returned, I gladly give it back!'" (*Journals*, v. 2 128). He certainly did not eschew his talent, whether dubious or not, and later on that winter articulated a different awareness, a glimpse of maturity even, within his poetic process. For February 21, 1948, he records, "I have discovered there is no law forbidding me to read over the poems I have written and make changes. Lent helps me to make cuts. When my stomach is empty, I can see more easily where the poem is too full. So I have pulled the stuffing out of some of the new ones, which is what I should have done with *Figures for an Apocalypse*, but it is too late now" (*Journals*, v. 2 170). The poems to follow these statements would make such cuts, removing some of what George Woodcock would interpret as archaic devotionalism. Merton reflected on his own shortcomings and perhaps, rather than give up poetry altogether, made something of the possibilities for personal literary reflection within the 8-year gap between 1949's *The Tears of the Blind Lions*, and 1957's *The Strange Islands*. During this time, he held positions of serious academic responsibility. He began giving orientation classes for novices on Nov. 16, 1949 (the day after the publication of *Tears*), and was officially appointed Master of Scholastics on May 20, 1951 (Berman 28; 32). Regardless of whether there were other reasons as to why he muted his poet's voice or the additional responsibility to serve God and Gethsemani by teaching novice monks was itself simply too much, the seeds of reflection had indeed already been planted, in what Thérèse Lentfoehr called a "growing nuance of spiritual vision in a continuum of monastic experience, as his sensibilities, already acute, opened ever more widely to God" (Lentfoehr 16).

With this context in mind, I have chosen four of Merton's poems from this early period for close study, each of which contains subject matter important to his search for God. Looking closely at these poems will provide a window into exactly how, using Sister Lentfoehr's words, he opened more widely to God. The poetic methods of search are, first, the appeal to a mediator, observed in the form of a saint. Merton wrote many poems which built upon a dominant quality present in a saint. I examine, "An Invocation to St. Lucy," which makes a request for consolation on behalf of the world, contrasting multiple images of light and dark for its thematic development. Second, I

¹² *Salve – Salve Regina* (English: Hail, Holy Queen) In *The Waters of Siloe*, Merton describes *Salve* this way: "An antiphon in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the Cistercian Order it has been the custom since the thirteenth century to sing the *Salve Regina* after Compline, every evening, before the monks retire to the dormitory" (Merton 1976 366).

examine search conducted through an attempt to establish direct and personal communication with God. One of Merton's poems reflecting such a search method is "Two States of Prayer," which also establishes a contrast between two extremes to make its point. The third poem, "Clairvaux," reflects a search which has taken Merton to a sacred place, in the tangible form of a monastery. In the poem, Merton contemplates on the stability offered by a single religious place to construct a poetic architecture which parallels its spiritual and physical content, in devotion to one of the Cistercian Order's founding monasteries. Fourth, and finally, I examine Merton's own self-reflection, in the form of a poem which expresses the soul's transformation as a result of searching for God. "The Transformation: For the Sacred Heart" articulates the sense that, in order to be transformed, the old self must die, both an initial death and in a process of constant renewal.

“An Invocation to St. Lucy”

As observed in the chapter on Ku Sang, one of the ways in which an individual can search for God is through a mediator, someone who has lived their life in such manner that they have been deemed to have been close to God, or at least closer than the average human, and can therefore “be instructive in attempts to live the Christian life” (Cunningham 8). In that chapter, I referenced Paul’s first letter to Timothy and its assertion that Jesus is the “one mediator between God and man.” Christianity, and Roman Catholicism in particular, however, has developed the practice of looking to others beyond Jesus, those who imitated him, to act as additional mediators between themselves and God. This practice originally stemmed from Paul’s own terminology (specifically through his use of the Greek word *agios*, or sacred) to greet and describe members of the early Christian communities deemed to be holy for their association with God through Jesus (such as in Romans 1:7, Philippians 1:1, and Colossians 1:2) (Cunningham 9). Beginning with the early Christian martyrs, Christian tradition has also come to distinguish some members of the Christian community apart from others due to attributed extraordinary holiness, and bestowed the term ‘Saint’ as a formal designation (Cunningham 9-10). St. Lucy is among these early martyrs and the subject of an early Merton poem of appeal, entitled “An Invocation to St. Lucy.”

Within *A Man in the Divided Sea*, “An Invocation to St. Lucy” follows closely after “St. Paul.” St. Paul was, of course, the man of apostolic renown, and responsible for many of the founding documents of Christianity, many of which communicated the importance of faith; St. Lucy, in many ways, picked up the gauntlet he had laid down and was martyred for her own faith, most notably for her personal chastity in commitment to Christianity. Conceivably, St. Lucy held a deep personal significance for Merton as St. Lucy’s Day, December 13th in the Church Calendar, was also the day that he officially crossed over into the cloister as a choir monk, admitted as a postulant into Gethsemani after three days in the monastery’s guest house and a required interview with Dom Frederic Dunne, the abbot in 1941 (Mott 210-211). Descriptions of light or settings in which brightness is a dominant image are often coexistent with emotions of radiance, joy, and fulfilment. The tone of this poem, however, is subdued and pessimistic, quite unlike Merton’s other early poetry to various saints or his thought on other facets of the Catholic Church, as he explores in “St. Lucy,” the tension of a light without radiance, joy, or fulfilment.

The speaker begins in the vocative, beseeching the Saint not only for himself, but for all humanity, using the first-person plural pronoun, “we.” Any “I,” either explicit or implied, is absent.

“An Invocation to St. Lucy” mostly lacks the vocative’s customary companion, the imperative. The imperative surfaces only three times (“Show us,” “Hallow the vespers,” and “Console our solstice”), towards the poem’s end. Such parsimony and delayed use in a piece with such intercessionary tones seems conspicuous. In its place, a reader observes event descriptions which each can be traced back to the aforementioned first-person plural, signaling a communal lamentation turned mostly inward, sometimes in pity, sometimes in collective self-contempt, rather than in response to the actions of an outside entity.

In light of these syntactical observations, the poem’s winter setting can be interpreted as external to the speaker, indicative of a general atmosphere of more global proportions. In Merton’s other poems reflecting a more personal winter, even when utilising a communal “we” in appeals, winter provides a background in order that a spring or summer shines through, such as in “Evening: Zero Weather” where “we have eyes no more for the dark pillars or the/ freezing windows,/...For we are sunken in the summer of our adoration,/And plunge, down, down into the fathoms of our secret joy,” with a symbolic emphasis on acts which either conquer the winter completely, or resurrect from it. Thought of resurrection does not occur here, however, and the winter/summer opposites have a decidedly different relationship. Winter is educed by one of its characteristics and, works together with its seasonal opposite in exclamation, “frozen!” and “summertime!” Both act in this poem to reinforce winter’s hold, for doors are set “shut against” that very summer, thus limiting summer’s ability to conquer anything. Behind such doors, little is to be seen of summer’s hope; gloom and doom jump out from each stanza – for example, “walkers in the murk and rain,” “our cheerful towns have all gone out,” “The fields are flooded and the vine is bare,” and “now the world is frozen!” The diction of the poem’s verbs in particular leaves the speaker and the people of the world in various helpless states. “Lost,” “gone,” “Locked,” “are shut,” and “forsaken” collectively remove thoughts of hope both through construction of external barriers and feelings of being left behind as a result of those constructions. A reader notices no verbs to counteract these constraints, with even the poem’s conclusion leaving a reader with a sense of resignation. “Console our solstice with your friendly day,” is not regularly seen as language of hope, nor triumph. The sense of despair is given additional stress by the assonance of “-sol,” which accentuates thoughts of the sun (for “-sol” is the linguistic root of sun), and, specific to this poem, its absence. The console/solstice assonance, by drawing attention to the sun, instead effects the taste of a meek request for comfort, to deal with something that is perhaps already lost. The speaker invokes St. Lucy not for the removal of such woeful conditions, but simply for a strength to exist in their midst.

When compared with its immediate surroundings in the pages of *Collected Poems*, “St. Lucy” is preceded by the aforementioned “St. Paul,” in which Merton utilises the same light subject and symbolism but with a much more positive tone – “I find my Easter in a vision.” Immediately following Lucy is a poem to St. Thomas Aquinas which contains similar topical material but is utilised towards very different ends (“His eyes were always cradles for the Word of God,” and “...the grey monks’ Cistercian “*Subvenite*”/Follows Aquinas in his ransomed flight,/And loses him amid the cheering cherubim.” Use of the Latin word for relief and the image “cheering cherubim” seem to support Woodcock’s critical commentary on Merton’s archaic devotionism. Additionally, Merton penned a poem about St. Agnes (a woman with a historical martyrdom story similar to that of St. Lucy) that articulates Agnes’ beauty at multiple points within the poem and finishes filled with hope: “Where all towns sing like springtime, with their newborn bells/Pouring her golden name out of their crucibles.” These three saintly invocations (Paul; Thomas Aquinas; Agnes) are more positive in tone than that within “An Invocation to St. Lucy.”

A reader could easily consider the poem an anomaly and leave the interpretation at that. Two supplemental perspectives, however, lend additional layers of meaning to the close reading and invite a reader to consider the text for deeper religious possibilities. These perspectives are the ways in which the poem’s form resembles and diverges from that of a Psalm, and Ignatian thought on consolation and desolation.

Psalms of Communal Lament

In this first aspect, “An Invocation to St. Lucy” possesses similarities with approaches found in the Psalms, particularly those of communal lament. The *Rule of St. Benedict* prescribed recitation of the entire Psalter over the course of each week (Benedict chapt. xviii). The Psalms are a key aspect of worship in monastic life and it would be understandable for the form and content of the Psalter to materialise in Merton’s poetry. Many individuals have reviewed the Psalms independently for theological, historical, and literary content, most building upon foundations laid by such scholars as Hermann Gunkel. Roughly 16 or 17 psalms classify as communal laments, although it is generally acknowledged that concrete distinctions between individual and communal laments can sometimes blur, and are open to alternatives of interpretation (Gillingham 216; Mandolfo 115; Anderson and Bishop 56). Gillingham, Mandolfo, and Anderson have observed patterns of thematic development

in psalms of communal lament which seem to match up, at least partly, with “St. Lucy.” The places at which they deviate illustrate an aspect of Merton’s poetic statement.

Carleen Mandolfo has outlined a 5-part structure as typical to lament psalms: Invocation; Complaint; Request; Expression of Confidence; Vow of Praise (Mandolfo 115-116). She also offers some interesting observations about lament language, observing that it “might be considered one of humanity’s earliest attempts to grapple with the conundrum of God’s role in human suffering. This relationship is made especially explicit in some of the communal laments that seem to demand that God make good on His covenantal commitment to the people as a whole.” Additionally, she notices that “the language of reassurance and that of complaint sit side by side...without either getting the final say. Within a single psalm one or the other position might receive more emphasis, but within the entire lament corpus one should note an unresolved tension between expressions of faith and doubt” (Mandolfo 125-126). Bernhard Anderson defines an analogous structure, also of five components – Address of Praise; Complaint in Distress; Protestation of Innocence; Petition for Deliverance; Concluding Praise – through comparison with the “Prayer of Lamentation to Ishtar,” placing the Israelite Psalms of Lament into a wider regional context, with the proposition that “this literary form, mediated through the Canaanites, influenced Israelite worship very early in the history of worship, providing a pattern for composers of psalms” (Anderson and Bishop 51-53).

“An Invocation to St. Lucy” shows some resemblance to the patterns described previously. The first stanza opens with the invocation, the direct address, “Lucy.../We.../Look for the fogs to open on your friendly star.” The second and third stanzas make their complaint by describing the distress being endured (“the fields are flooded and the vine is bare”; “now the world is frozen”; “this is the way they’ll make our beds for ever”). The third stanza reflects the request, the petition for deliverance (“Martyr.../ Show us some light”). It is at this point, though, that an observable change in the traditional pattern appears. Instead of an expression of confidence and concluding praise, one finds only additional petitions for deliverance, “Hallow the vespers and December of our life.../Console our solstice.” The speaker seems less than confident of relief, calling attention to impressions of “unresolved tension between expressions of faith and doubt” as Mandolfo has mentioned. A possible explanation for this variation in the pattern may derive from lines which occur earlier in the poem, within context of the speaker’s invocation.

The aforementioned request, the petition for deliverance, is common to Psalms of communal lament. Petitioners, however, need to identify exactly from what they wish to be delivered. In the Psalms, this object generally takes the form of Israel’s external enemies, either in

human form (such as potential invaders, or the unfaithful) or in the form of nature (pestilence, or drought, for example). The speaker's object, though, is distinctly not external. Instead, the object is internal, in the very same humanity making the petition, identified as responsible for its own suffering, such as in "We have long since cut down the summer of our history," and "our stubborn will." The internal focus seems to suggest that the speaker requests humanity's deliverance from itself, since the causes of the wound appear self-inflicted.

Consolation/Desolation

The ultimate thematic trajectory of "An Invocation to St. Lucy" is towards the emotion of consolation. That sense of consolation commences the final line of the poem and is the emotion which has primacy amongst all the other reasons for Lucy's invocation as it unfolds. In secular life, consolation has connotations of comfort, soothing of pain or anxiety, usually from an external source. Another's consolation can alleviate, but generally does not remove distress, or loss. In Christian religious life, however, specifically that informed by Ignatian spirituality, consolation can also refer to interior movement towards God. Past loss becomes instead a present gain. In a letter to Teresa Rejadell, St. Ignatius calls interior consolation a given lesson "which casts out all disturbance and draws us into total love of the Lord. There are some whom the Lord lights up in such consolation" (Ignatius 132). He continues: "all hardships are ultimately pleasure, all fatigues rest. For anyone who proceeds with this interior fervour, warmth and consolation, there is no load so great that it does not seem to light them... And all this is for our profit" (Ignatius 133). This form of given lesson within St. Lucy can be seen possibly as full recognition of the negative state of affairs within the poem, which can also be interpreted as a recognition of absence from God.

Even though a Trappist, Merton was familiar with Jesuit spirituality. His pre-monastic journal entries mention an ongoing practice with the *Spiritual Exercises* (*Journals* v.1 135; 219). St. Ignatius articulates his thought on the subject of consolation in those very exercises, drawing noteworthy distinction between consolation and desolation. Rule 3, one of St. Ignatius' "Rules by which to perceive and understand... the various movements produced in the soul," observes three specific conditions for consolation, "when any interior movement is produced in the soul that leads her to become inflamed with the love of her Creator and Lord... when one sheds tears that lead to love of one's Lord,... [and] to every increase of hope, faith and charity, to all interior happiness that calls and attracts a person towards heavenly things and to the soul's salvation" (Ignatius 348-349).

Ignatius places consolation's opposite, spiritual desolation, in direct contrast to these three conditions. Desolation is described as "darkness and disturbance in the soul,...anxiety arising from various agitations and temptations....a lack of confidence in which the soul is without hope; one finds oneself thoroughly lazy, lukewarm, sad, and as though cut off from one's Creator and Lord" (Ignatius 349). Taken together, the poem's sense of consolation can thus be interpreted not just as a soothing of pain but actual movement of the soul, specifically the collective soul of greater humanity, towards God. "An Invocation to St. Lucy" thus appears to be a request for this movement, an indication that the overall tone may not be as pessimistic as upon initial impressions. Instead, "An Invocation to St. Lucy" communicates hope for communal movement towards God.

Entering into dialogue with Buddhism – "Ummon's 'Everybody Has His Own Light'"

At the heart of St. Lucy's name is the word "light" with no coincidence that her Feast Day was placed in December, her light a hope in the darkness of the northern hemisphere's winter. The theme of light as victor over darkness provides a starting point for dialogue with Buddhism; one of the cases from the *Hekiganroku* (English: *The Blue Cliff Record*) utilises the exact subject.

Ummon lived in the ninth and tenth centuries, notable as one of the greatest Zen masters; he is the teacher most quoted in ancient kōan collections (Shishin Wick 38). Typical of kōan tradition, he speaks in paradoxical statements, both here presented as absolutes. One who tries to see their own light finds darkness in **everything** instead; **nothing** is presented as better than blessing things; "seeing is non-seeing, non-seeing is seeing," for example. Forming the kōan's core, everything and nothing are the two extremes, presented together most likely for the recognition that they are one and the same. That distinction finds embodiment in a specific place, "the halls and the gate," in other words, right in front of the individual, as the halls and the gate would be to a monk studying under Ummon.

Translator Sekida's commentary upon this kōan reveals a wisdom, a light that aligns with Buddhism's position on that very dichotomy. Sekida says, "You are the light itself. If you try to reflect upon yourself, your subjectivity is turned into objectivity" (Grimstone 368). In addition, just as the individual is the light itself, so, too, "truth is not remote but is under your nose" (Grimstone 368). In its Western connotation, light symbolism and even the sense of enlightenment itself, have taken on the notion of a sudden insight, with the coinciding assumption that life should somehow look, feel, or be radically different because of the experience. But this is not the sense attributed by

Buddhism. Instead, Paul O. Ingram states that this conception of light is grounded in the merit-acquiring practices of Buddhist soteriological disciplines: “light symbolism in Buddhist tradition stands for that ‘wisdom’ which a buddha or bodhisattva possesses because of his encounter, by means of light, with the very structure of reality in all its ‘suchness.’ Knowing the light, one becomes the light; encountering the real, one becomes the real...In other words, one does not experience the light of wisdom until he does something in the form of meditational disciplines, moral perfection, and devotional practices” (Ingram 339).

Buddhism advocates for the removal of ignorance by development of its opposite, wisdom, which allows the individual Buddhist to escape from the burden of time. In his influential text, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Mircea Eliade has said “All the images by means of which we try to express the paradoxical act of escaping from time are equally expressive of the passage from ignorance to enlightenment (or, in other words, from ‘death’ to ‘life’)” (Eliade 1958 82). This imagery is expressed in Case 86. “The halls and the gate” are right under the noses of the students of the kōan itself. The fact that the student cannot see them reveals an element of ignorance, a student still baffled by the extremes of everything and nothing. Once a student is fully aware of “the halls and the gate,” that student has successfully passed to a state of enlightenment.

Furthermore, the concept of enlightenment in Buddhism is akin to becoming awakened, and comes with a slight variation of symbolism and metaphor, although towards a similar end in terms of wisdom. Patrick Henry and Donald Swearer have observed that Buddhism and Christianity both make use of the wakefulness metaphor, but with different meaning. Jesus asks his followers to “remain awake for you do not know on what day the Lord is to come” (Matt 24:42). They note that “Buddhist wakefulness,” however, “is the individual’s own resolution of suffering and tension. Christian wakefulness heightens tension, anticipating a resolution promised for the future. This resolution, which may include intensified suffering, depends not on individual achievement, but on renewed divine intervention” (Henry and Swearer 55). Perhaps this helps to elucidate the speaker’s appeal to St. Lucy on poetic terms. The request for intervention and the poetic treatment of consolation (alongside its counterpart, desolation) as thematic fabric may ultimately point towards wishes for renewal and just such an anticipated resolution promised in the future. The poem’s trajectory towards the word consolation can be seen, then, to extend even beyond the limits of the poem itself, to the resolution of tension found in Christian belief in the eternal. In order to get there, the speaker, along with the humanity for whom he writes, must be patient, and continue, ever wakeful, ever watchful, and ever working, for renewal. While it can be a request for St. Lucy to

soothe the communal feelings of loss, it can also be seen as movement towards God and an appeal in which the model is asked to shine a beacon so that the individual or community can find their own way. Francis Clooney himself observed a similar experience in a piece he wrote on Mother Teresa. “To be a (canonized) saint is not to be on a pedestal or to be a blueprint for others to follow but rather to be a kind of light, to show us how to walk our own way of holiness” (Clooney and Stosch 362). St. Lucy provides just such a beacon.

“Two States of Prayer”

Another way to search for God is through direct communication. Discarding the mediator, this approach tries to establish an unbroken line. While this search method often occurs in vocal, communal expressions of praise, thanksgiving, or appeal, an individual search for God commonly necessitates individual expression. Paradoxically, silence often forms the beneficial vehicle. Even within an order which already emphasised silence and a contemplative approach to the monastic vocation, Merton went out of his way to research the eremitic foundations of Christian monasticism, translating sayings of the Desert Fathers¹³ and using their example to advocate for the hermitage he inhabited during the latter stages of his time at Gethsemani. Merton even flirted with transfer to other orders, specifically the Carthusians and the Camaldolese, both Catholic religious Orders that view eremitic seclusion a key component of their approaches to monastic life (Berman 24; 26-27; Mott 230; 271; 273). Merton’s attraction to this form of life seemed to be the way it removed exterior distractions, such as the events of the larger world, other people, and noise, so that he could focus inward, in contemplation of God. In “Two States of Prayer,” Merton explores the expression of the contemplative life within his own Cistercian tradition, here using winter’s metaphorical possibilities once again for paradoxical effect.

“Two States of Prayer” reveals a world enclosed in silence, but only after a fervent expression of prayer, implied as a prayer of secular intentions, receives exposition:

Our prayer is like the thousands in the far, forgotten stadiums,
Building its exultation like a tower of fire,
Until the marvellous woods spring to their feet
And raid the skies with their red-headed shout: (CP 150)

The excerpt presents a potent, almost aggressive species of prayer. The tone is untamed (“wild October”; “own the land like lions”) and loud. A multitude – “Our prayer”; “thousands” – speaks as one voice, paralleled by the woods’ own “red-headed shout.” Multiple references to fire suggest a sharp intensity and passion. The poem gives pause to the fervour with the isolated rhythm of:

This is the way our hearts take flame
And burn us down, on pyres of prayer, with too much glory. (CP 150)

¹³ The book is *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century*. Translated [from the *Verba Seniorum*] by Thomas Merton. Sheldon Press, 1974.

These lines furnish a warning of too fervent (and public) a prayer, which not only could damage one's own self but also has the potential to destroy the crowd along with it: "burn us down...with too much glory." It seems that prayer is applied ironically, its construction conceivably the very same cacophony of secular experience which would later be expanded within *Cables to the Ace*, published in March of 1968.

The anaphoric conjunctions which follow the warning change the direction and tone of the poem, and offer a possible alternative to the fervour. Chronologically speaking, it is important that the contemplative opportunity is acknowledged second, which sets it into counterpoint with the preceding "exultation." This order accentuates the second state of prayer as the result of an individual search, perhaps even a revelation, counter to that very public, very collective exultation; indeed, within the poem one is asked to "look," for what is eventually stated in the poem's closing line, "treasure [kept] like a kingly secret." The technique also comprehends the more vocal, passionate form of prayer conceivably as a default mode of operation while acknowledging the existence of something more, something which must be uncovered to be understood, as in "conceals" and "half buried."

The speaker increases the feeling of paradoxical contrast in these latter stanzas. The first state of prayer, communal and vocal, is decidedly blunt. The second, a very private, quiet form of prayer, "outshin[es] all the songs of June with radiant silences," reveals "farms,...in their winter coats/...warm as sheep," and is sure to notice that "[w]hile folded in the buried seed/The virtual summer lives and sleeps." The paradox is stressed here. In order to uncover this state, though, one must go searching. The speaker gives hints about where one is to look: in those very places of paradox.

Look where the landscape, like a white Cistercian,
Puts on the ample winter like a cowl¹⁴
And so conceals, beneath the drifts as deep as quietude,
The ragged fences and the ravaged field. (CP 151)

In other words, look where nothing will be living, look where you can't see anything, and listen where you can't hear anything either, in fulfilment of the paradox.

¹⁴ A monk's cowl achieves two complementary objectives. When pulled over the head, it both reinforces a sense of anonymity and covers the eyes in order to reduce input from external visual stimuli.

Only in these latter stages of the poem does the speaker incorporate time markers, suggesting that this second state of prayer involves some effort, and perhaps requires some patience. Four months are mentioned and treated idiosyncratically. First, the months appear out of regular calendar order, October; December; June; November. Additionally, accompanying descriptors elucidate a reason for each month's existence. October is "wild," December offers "light" via its mornings, June engenders songs, and November analyses. November is the only month presented in the nominative, the originator of an action; the other three materialise in subordination to a separate dominant idea within the line. Lastly, November's original action is also presented in the past tense, suggesting perhaps that understanding can only happen after a period of reflection, the knowledge that November contained "bankruptcies" only revealed after the effort of the analysis.

The final stanza also offers examples of heightened contrast. November's analysis is inward and the object of its analysis is found in everyone, the collective "our bankruptcies." The object of the poem's search, however, is singular and external. Ultimately, the motif of finding summer in winter's setting resurfaces with the poem's finally word giving some indication as to the special nature of what one is to find as a result of the search – it is a "secret." At the same time, the poem is left somewhat suspended, for, of course, the actual composition of the secret is never revealed. It is, after all, a secret.

To gain a deeper sense of the poem's religious possibilities, even beyond the images within the poem itself, a reader can consider Merton's own immersion in the history of Christian mysticism. He read widely and wrote extensively on the contemplative way as a legitimate pathway to God. Perhaps Merton took to St. Bernard and the Order with which Bernard is known for similar possibilities as Dante did in *La Divina Commedia* (McGinn 1994 162-163). Both looked to St. Bernard, considered as ideal contemplative and key figure in Cistercian history, as a guide on the pathway to God. Merton valued the contemplative conditions of Cistercian life. The mystical way itself can be seen as a process and has been interpreted as occurring in defined stages, which variously correspond to forms of purgation, illumination, and unity. Their collective description of the soul's movement towards God roughly aligns with the poem's structure. Purgation can be thought of as a "period of self-stripping and purification," an ascetic period of preparing the soul to come in contact with God, a "state of pain and effort" (Underhill 131; 169). Illumination is considered a state in which, after the soul has been adequately prepared, and with effort, that individual becomes aware of divine presence (Underhill 169). Unity is "the true goal of the mystic

quest,” a “state of equilibrium” in which the soul is one with divine presence that it has been seeking (Underhill 170).

As mentioned previously, the poem’s two-line stanza is an important transition point. The anaphoric conjunctions, “But when...But by,” signal a change of direction and tone. The content of their corresponding stanzas also roughly aligns with Christian mystical steps towards God, specifically the steps of purgation and illumination, which eventually lead to a sense of inner order, an inner calm and unity with God. The first “But...” introduces a stanza which articulates a cumulative process of purgation once the initial flames of passionate prayer have been extinguished. The progression of verbs, “Scattering...Clouding....saddening....slaughtered,” could elucidate the steps within a soul’s transformation as much as the stanza’s negative mood. In a fashion akin to other poems, a smaller grammatical statement is surrounded by periphrasis. At the heart of the stanza is the emergence of grief, “Sorrow begins to bully.” Its object, “the bare bars/Of those forsaken cages,” seems a nod to a strict anchoritic approach of discipline and asceticism, with “thought lies slaughtered” suggesting a personal ego fully stripped away, without fuel to continue burning the previously mentioned flame of fervent prayer.

The second “But by...” provides the rough equivalence of illumination, indeed beginning with the “light,” which contributes the saving grace of actual light of morning to overcome the darkness of night-time and also invites comparison to the birth of Christ, an event which the church has traditionally observed in December, to achieve an analogous purpose. Insight is achieved through understanding the paradoxes presented in the stanza, revealing a greater depth to experience. Again, periphrasis surrounds a simple grammatical statement: “Look where the landscape.../Puts on the...winter.../And...conceals.” perhaps verbally obscuring the essential point within a poetic statement which mimics a mystical approach itself.

The closing two stanzas contain multiple allusions to a sense of unity, a place of stasis in which the emotion in the poem has calmed down. Conditions are distinctly different than they were at the poem’s commencement. Whereas the low hills were previously ready to pounce, “lie/With open eye/And own the land like lions,” they now “lie still.” The “Sabbath,” traditionally a day devoted to prayer and rest, is now kept, and the speaker describes positive, more comfortable states of existence, in such phrases as “warm as sheep” (which also brings to mind the name, Lamb of God), “penitential peace,” “radiant silences,” “folded in the buried seed” (and that seed’s potential), “the virtual summer lives,” and “treasure.” The third use of an important conjunction and adverb, “but now” also signals that things are not as they used to be, with “our Christmas mercies” perhaps

indicating that the “kingly secret” (another reference to the Birth of Christ as the tradition is placed on the Christian calendar in December) may not be so much of a secret after all; one simply needs to start looking in the appropriate location.

An Invitation to Dialogue with Buddhism – “What the Holy Ones Have Not Preached”

“Two States of Prayer” works off its polarities, the states of prayer presented as contraries. The poem establishes clear distinctions between these extremes with the latter offered as a more favourable choice. Another case found within the *Hekiganroku* is an appropriate text to juxtapose with this poem for it seeks to get the student of Zen to understand “true” preaching and, like all kōans, how to tell what is true and what is false. The kōan is Case 28 and points to the importance of silence to uncover insight.

Nansen, who also appears in other kōans, was a Tang dynasty (He lived from 834-748 B.C.E.) Zen master perhaps better known for his more striking performance in a different kōan, “Nansen kills the cat” (Grimstone 59). After his own enlightenment in 795, he settled on Mount Nansen (he and the mountain bear the same name) in eremitic solitude (Grimstone 226). Case 28’s main subject recounts a discussion which seeks to uncover truth and has within it an important question: “where do you find it?” Just as Case 86 revealed a situation of ignorance in which enlightenment was right under the student’s nose yet was not recognizable, here Case 28 opens up additional thoughts about “where?” The case also contains internal paradox, embodied as extensive dialogue and many questions essentially become nullified by a concluding statement which appears to refute the entire conversation preceding it: “I have talked quite enough.” This very statement parallels the first line of Setchō’s Verse, a summation of the entire theme, “patriarchs and Buddhas have not preached.” As translator Sekida mentions in his commentary: “There is a saying that Zen truth cannot and should not be preached. One must learn Zen for oneself and master it for oneself” (Grimstone 221). The mirror symbolises the statement, feasibly to get the student to look at themselves, instead of outward, suggesting that a student can find clarity within, as in “the clear image.” The synesthesia within the final line of Setchō’s Verse is meant to symbolise the unity of pure cognition. The nostrils stand for one’s “reasoning, conceptual understanding of things” while the mouth represents one’s “intuitive cognition of them” (Grimstone 223). Together, the nostrils and mouth reflect the kōan’s internal paradox. One perceives intuitive cognition (something silent) in the mouth, which normally would vocalise what is preached, or spoken. The paradox seems to

reaffirm what Merton is saying within “Two States of Prayer,” providing some additional nuance. Inherent understanding, i.e. what is to be understood, is actually already in place. The second, contemplative form of prayer simply uncovers it. The stress is thus placed upon the effort of extracting something from within. If there are places in this world in which “preaching” exists and indeed dominates, it would make sense to observe counterparts, places in which “no preaching” (Merton’s “radiant silences”) instead hold sway.

In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton wrote: “The real purpose of meditation is this: to teach a man how to work himself free of created things and temporal concerns, in which he finds only confusion and sorrow, and enter into conscious and loving contact with God... You have only really meditated well when you have come, to some extent, to realize God” (Merton 1972 217-218). In other words, when Merton looked inwards, into a mirror perhaps similar to that within the kōan, he anticipated, within the limitations of his humanity of course, that God would look back. Such is the contrast laid out in “Two States of Prayer,” where one can search for the treasure, kept as a kingly secret, if one is careful to not run after preachers, no matter the content of their sermon. Instead, one has a better chance of finding God if that individual works themselves free of default patterns of exaltation and instead moves towards an individual state of realisation.

“Clairvaux”

A third way to search for God is to locate and investigate those places where he is said to dwell, places which have been expressly made for the purpose of moving closer to him. For Merton, the monastery was exactly this place and he composed many poems devoted to the monastery as a subject. Most often, his subject was Gethsemani in Kentucky, but “Rievaulx: St. Ailred” and “Clairvaux” are also included. Clairvaux Abbey was one of the first monasteries of the burgeoning Cistercian order, one of its four original ‘daughter houses’ by Cîteaux, the first Cistercian Abbey and mother house (Leroux-Dhuys 174). The poem’s subject and thematic development concurs with an observation made by Merton’s official biographer, Michael Mott: “It would be hard to exaggerate the importance of place for Thomas Merton” (Mott 205). The historical Clairvaux Abbey was given much of its spiritual and intellectual life by St. Bernard, a theologian and Doctor of the Church. Merton revered him perhaps most of all for his part in giving life to the Cistercian order, done in response to what he (Bernard) saw as the excesses and other “useless decorations” of the Benedictine church of the 12th Century (Merton 1976 13). Perhaps drawing inspiration from Bernard, Merton took the opportunity to give Clairvaux Abbey a poetic life, and his poem unfolds in three distinct parts, each respectively developing the subjects of St. Bernard himself as Abbot and founder, the Abbey and its monks, and the Liturgy within the Cistercian monastic order into which St. Bernard infused that spiritual and intellectual life.

Part I

In Part I, the speaker relies on spatial metaphors of sky and earth to connect the activities of the Abbey with its divine purposes for being. The poem repetitively insists that the abbey is a special and sacred place, in part due to possession of attributes also possessed by the sky. In addition, the Abbey itself is provided its own voice, effected through an opening quotation attributed to it, which suggests that the Abbey is more than just a building, and perhaps has an agency of its own. The quotation emphasises Clairvaux’s seclusion, thrice repeated – “Hidden,” “away from men,” and “model of all solitudes.” The quotation feels boastful, reflective of a universally prominent stature, such as in “model of all solitudes,” “picture of contemplation,” and “the figure of all prayer.” Such a boastful opening is an indicative feature of Merton’s early work, a feature in which one or more of a poem’s *dramatis personae* speak of renunciation and loss of self, while articulating that message with a contradictory suggestion of self-importance (Bowman 19). The quotation attributed to the Abbey

(beginning with “hidden in this heaven-harbor”) does appear to carry a tone of self-importance, yet, despite its periphrasis, at its core is the simple grammatical form of subject-verb-object, “Bernard built me,” which could easily be overlooked but which grounds the boastful appositives encircling it. The simple grammar also introduces the *dramatis persona* of Bernard, perhaps suggesting that Bernard’s simple act lies at the core of so many other aspects of his Order. Bernard is always present in the background for having been the source of the building which is the source of so much ink, even though the speaker will continue with the descriptions which reinforce self-importance through the rest of Part I and does not mention the Saint again until Part I’s close.

From the opening quotation, the speaker then follows on as if in a conversation with the Abbey itself:

Your inward look is ever resting
 Upon your central garth and garden, full of sun,
 Your catch-light cloister.
 In-turning, Peace-finding, living in a mirror that attracts
 the noon (CP 127)

Despite being inward-looking, the Abbey “catch[es] the light” from above, simultaneously attracting sky-based energy and also reflecting it, the “mirror that attracts the noon.” The monastery is seen as at once a place within the world but not exactly of it, for it has common traits with the sky. The description of the monastery’s “heart” brings all the sky’s energy to the monastery’s centre and “humility” is almost ironic here because so much is said about the building in order to arrive at humility as the stanza’s final word:

Down-looking, down, not up, within, not out,
 Downdrawing all the sky into your quiet
 Well or pool or mirror-lake of clear humility. (CP 127)

Part I abounds with Woodcock’s “archaic devotionism,” and Bowman’s “suggestions of self-importance.” The descriptors, “Holy, immense.../The vaulted heaven, full of liberty,” “O white, O modest cloister,” “Jealous, double-dealing world,” and “but oh, how all the light-and-shaded bays are garlanded with life,” all exalt the Abbey itself. The language suggests the Abbey as a special place, and the repetition offers variants on the relationship between the inward gaze of the Abbey in its concrete place on earth and the energy produced by the limitless sky.

St. Bernard returns at the close of Part I, alongside the results of what his building has produced, the fruits of his initial labour: “You have foreseen what vintages the Holy Spirit,/...Will

trample in His press.” The speaker issues thanks and praise for the Abbey’s source, Bernard, with a wine metaphor. Bernard is the Vintner and the monks become the vintages. Significance is given to the results of monastic life. “Arbors of stability and rule” (stability is one of the vows of Trappist monks) use the energy of “the strong sun” and, in turn, eventually bear fruit, “His Burgundy,” a reference to wine and additionally the French province near Clairvaux. Part I demonstrates a clear structure with the introduction, development of the section’s main idea, and a return to Bernard, who now witnesses the change as a result of his efforts.

Part II

In Part II, the speaker links the place and the events that occur there. The arches which hold up the abbey are compared to the liturgy sung within it and additional sky imagery builds upon the energy, power, and warmth that was established previously in Part I:

These arches live together
Like psalm and antiphon,
And spend the light across our pavements
Spilling on warm stone all the sweet, drawn day: (*CP* 128)

This section’s nouns emphasise things that possess weight: “stones,” “stress,” “gravity,” and “heaviness.” These nouns equate with the monastery’s own seriousness, perhaps to underscore the importance of what the monk goes there to achieve, or to carryover the substance of “stability and rule” from Part I. The poem’s heaviness does not succumb, however, but is instead overcome by verbs of liberation which accompany those serious nouns, such as the enjambment of “stress of charity/sports with weight,” along with “laughs,” “destroying,” “forgetting,” “flying up,” “arching over,” and “transfigured.” This contrast between heaviness and liberation embodies a paradox of monastic life, one to which Woodcock refers as “sacramental mediaevalism,” that “obedience to harsh mediaeval rules on the grounds that the paradoxical result was spiritual freedom” (Woodcock 50). Clairvaux’s “stability and rule” has thus unbound the Brothers collectively so that they need “Never fear, almost forever!” A reader gets a sense that the speaker is attempting to embody the idiom, “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

Part III

In Part III, the speaker turns to more abstract imagery, particularly sonic, in order to highlight events within the monastery's walls.

Now fall, time, slow bells spending,
Spilling the hours, oh the night-song, day-song,
All the intervals, work's end (*CP* 129)

Whereas in Part II, stress was applied to something concrete, in Part III, the ethereal receives the stress, epitomised by the notion of interval. In musical terminology, an interval represents the movement from one concrete, recognised note to another. The speaker thus features the formlessness by the hint of form: the formless interval of music represents the formal work interval of monastic life. One of the characteristics of Cistercian monastic reforms was what they considered a return to the original spirit of St. Benedict's *Rule*: a simple, direct experience of monastic prayer and work (*ora et labora*). The monastic day had balance and rhythm, a quality, also in Part III, with the sounds of bells throughout acting as equal gestures to the prayer (*ora*) and work (*labora*). The sounds of the intervals reach everywhere in Part III: "Into the deep wood and farthest forest...sheepfold wheat and rye-field...reading by the door-sill...praying in uncarven choir-stall." Bells embodied the calls to the intervals of the monastic day.

Merton has split "Clairvaux" into three distinct parts. As I have shown, each part draws attention to a specific feature of Clairvaux – its founder, its Brothers/Abbey, and its Liturgy. Each of these features contributes valuable information to a Christian reader as the poet applies metaphors with religious significance, such as wine as transformation, religious architecture, and bells as the work of the Holy Spirit and Liturgy, for example. Specifically, Bernard is compared to a vintner, a winemaker who, by his actions of founding "Clairvaux," bears fruit in its monks, the "vintages [of] the Holy Spirit." The metaphors of fruits of labour and wine, in particular, have a long Christian tradition of interpretation. Additionally, the use of the verb "transfigured" in Part II invites comparison with the documented story of the Transfiguration of Jesus, and the verb's proximity to "square stones are angels," "stress on one another," and "Brothers," provides an extra level of authority to the monks and their Abbey. Finally, Part III's request to "keep us in His wounds" induces thought of the wounds suffered during Christ's Passion, further affirmed by the aforementioned "dawns our glorious rescue."

Each of these parts functions as part of a greater whole; as they are each part of a single poem, of course, they therefore contribute a collective meaning. A reader could perhaps observe a triptych at work. Collectively, these three parts appear to trace a linear progression of time, from builder (“Bernard built me” is the core of the very first line) to individual monastery (“These arches live together/Like psalm and antiphon”) to institution (“Our everlasting priceblood hour by hour you distill,/Spilling us grace like gold, our Christ like Gold,/Grace-blood into our peace you send, Christ-blood, rich without end.”). The progression reflects a journey which begins with a renunciation of the world, “Abbey, whose back is to the hills whose backs are to the world,” and finds completion in “our sweet, certain, everlasting home.” The final tercet places the natural progression of time (the entire day found in four short words: “midnight, noon and evening/Dawns”) into balance with the depiction of the monastery’s collective worship (“hymn...antiphon...psalm”) hinging upon the assonance of “dawns” and “psalm.” Closing polysyndeton slows down the rhythm of the final line to finish in dramatic fashion on the very word that provides a major source of liturgical worship in a Trappist monastery – “psalm.”

While each part addresses a distinct facet of the Abbey that functions as part of a greater whole, they also reflect a facet of the Abbey’s physical history, for, in fact, there was not one, but **three** Clairvauxs, known as Clairvaux I, Clairvaux II, and Clairvaux III (Fergusson 52). Terryll Kinder observes: “Cistercian architecture was created to serve Cistercian monastic life; the relationship between form and function should be considered indissoluble” (Kinder 13). The Cistercians, in particular, gave serious attention to building design, taking much of their inspiration from Bernard’s own *Apologia*, and its appeal for removal of embellishment. Peter Fergusson has described the significance of the Order’s approach to its structures: “Architecture embodies ideas, reflects identity, and gives physical form and expressive meaning to values...Sensitivity to architecture’s expressive power surfaces in Cistercian writing and legislation in the twelfth-century, and it can also be inferred from the passionate attention given to planning and design in the order’s buildings. No other monastic movement showed as great a preoccupation with architecture or implicitly acknowledged the powerful nature of its art” (Fergusson xxv). It appears that this connection between monastic life and architectural design was the sentiment upon which Merton drew as he gave Clairvaux its poetic life, binding together the destinies of Bernard, building, and brothers as Cistercian architecture and life were bound together as well.

Eventually, the historical Clairvaux was turned into a prison in 1808 (at one time notably housing members of the Résistance) and remains as such in contemporary times (Leroux-Dhuys

175). Merton was inspired enough by this situation to compose a separate poem, entitled “Clairvaux Prison,” highlighting the contrast between the structure’s contemporary use and that of its original. Considering the way in which Merton brought together the poetic and historical within “Clairvaux,” perhaps the distance between the Abbey’s current conditions and its original also “force us to reflect on the meaning of freedom” (Leroux-Dhuys 175).

Entering into Dialogue with Buddhism – “When the Bell Sounds”

“Clairvaux’s” bells stand out as a key image within the poem as they reflect an important facet of the Abbey’s operation. The bell itself is a concrete symbol of the structure of the monastic day, as its sound signals a change of the day’s intervals. The kōan, “When the Bell Sounds,” provides warning, though, about placing the bells themselves above what they are trying to get the student to understand.

The Ummon of Case 16 of the *Mumonkan* is the same Ummon of Case 86 of the *Hekiganroku*. Mumon Ekai was the monk who compiled various kōans into the single collection of the *Mumonkan* and, in *Two Zen Classics*, editor A.V. Grimstone notes that it was likely that “Mumon may have drawn on *Hekiganroku* in compiling his own collections”(Grimstone 17; 20). In “When the Bell Sounds,” the bells, as they provide structure to the monk’s day when they ring, are a symbol of conditioned behaviour. This kōan takes up the subject of conditioned behaviour to make a statement on liberty and restraint, much of the same matters at play in Merton’s monastic vocation, the subject of previous commentary on his poetry and his life, and pertinent themes within “Clairvaux.” In similar fashion to other kōans, Case 16 begins with extremes: a statement which characterises a space without defined boundaries, “vast and wide,” and a question which sets limits within that space, “Why...put on your seven-piece robe at the sound?” The kōan documents a gap between the two, how one recognises that gap, and then either moves to close it or leaves the gap in place. Metaphorical equivalents of liberty and restraint emerge by juxtaposing something general and something specific. To call into question conditioned behaviour at the bell’s sound also implies a reduction of the bell’s power over those who respond to its sound without thinking. Following the kōan from start to finish, a reader observes the two extremes slowly work their way together over its course, using the images of family to demonstrate unity and the large number 1000 to express separation, wound around the pivot point of realisation, the representation of Sekida’s “unhindered mutual interpretation of phenomena” (Grimstone 66).

The kōan entertains opposites and works to abolish them. The synesthesia of “hearing with your eye” suggests that the ringing of the bell in the monastery is meant to trigger not just a habitual response to its sound. It actually signifies something much more than just the noise to change intervals within the monastic day, and more than just an obedience to that sound. If a student obeys just the sounds and forms, then they are simply acting on human conditioning, they are thus restrained because the source of their movement is external. But, “the true Zen student,” getting beyond the sounds and forms to the unhindered mutual interpretation of both sound and **person**, instead of sound and form, finds liberty. Sekida’s commentary refers to this as a state where “all experiences of sensation and all mental activities are concentrated in one act of pure cognition” (Grimstone 67). To be sure, a bell itself has a physical presence, and also a physical place it inhabits. Substance and location themselves provide tangible qualities binding the bell to things finite. But the sound itself is something intangible and a student must get beyond mere conditioned response to the sound in order to achieve a sense of unity with the absolute which that sound signifies. Sekida’s commentary on Setchō’s Verse is summarily illustrative: “There is a Zen saying that unity without differentiation is a false unity... Their individuality is preserved, and at the same time they are unified” (Grimstone 67). So it is with the bell’s sound and the absolute.

All three sections of “Clairvaux” exalt some aspect of its existence as a sacred place to find God. In particular, section III draws on bell imagery for its sustenance, to emphasise the ethereal nature of the monk’s life within the walls of the monastery. In light of this kōan, however, the very same bells through which the poem’s monks find the architecture of their monastic vocation must not be considered as the ends but the means to that effect. In “Clairvaux,” the bells seem to be presented as the place where realisation occurs. In paradoxical manner, however, the kōan helps a reader understand that one travels to a specific location in their search for God to transcend that very location. God may be found there, but perhaps it is because he is everywhere.

“The Transformation: For the Sacred Heart”

Last to contemplate but no less important than the other poems to the overall quest, I examine a way to search for God which may initially appear counterintuitive. Instead of looking outward and forward, one turns inward and to the past, observing the pathway already taken, thus documenting changes to the self. By reflecting on the internal adaptations of the soul, the religious seeker observes the trail of God’s work. Some internal structures may be new, other internal things may be the same but have adapted to reflect new wisdom; still others remain stagnant and reveal work yet to be done. Merton’s poem is similar in subject, then, to that of Ku Sang’s “Myself,” but takes an altered approach towards that subject.

The “Transformation: For the Sacred Heart” begins with Merton’s often-used agricultural metaphors and symbolism. The “fruit and wheat” are products of the land, items which begin as seed, and thus must be cultivated, either by humanity or in nature itself, in order to reach full promise. Wine (“love’s vintage”) is used similarly. Wine is at first the grape but transforms into an alcoholic beverage which affects the mind. Winemaking has many steps, both in the cultivation of the raw fruit into maturity and then with the additional steps of the fermentation process. The process is work-intensive and takes time, inviting comparison with Merton’s own maturation process within the monastery. In addition, the miracle at the wedding at Cana-in-Galilee, the story in which Jesus is said to have turned water into wine, comes to mind. John’s Gospel states, “The master now tasted the water turned into wine, not knowing its source, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. He hailed the bridegroom and said, ‘Everyone else serves the best wine first, and the poorer only when the guests have drunk freely; but you have kept the best wine until now’” (John 2:9-10). A reader will also think of the connection between blood and wine, with the human heart (and its counterpart in the poetic Heart) as the organ responsible for the movement of blood throughout the body. Perhaps one of the reasons for the use of the Sacred Heart here is as metaphor for the movement of the spirit of God throughout the body.

As in “An Invocation to St. Lucy,” the speaker employs the vocative; the poem opens with a direct address to the Heart, and a triple appeal is made, “Heart...Smile...sanctify...And...vivify.” Passion surrounds the appeals themselves, “the ardor,” and “June is blazing,” and the hope seems to be that the appeals to Jesus’ Heart shall also become passionately internalised, into the “veins.” At this point in the poem, while certain that the appeals are collective, a reader cannot yet ascertain whether the appeals are for all of humanity, or for the smaller community of just the monks.

The second, more extensive stanza contains material of a devotional character, praising God by two methods. First, the speaker lengthens the space between God and the earth on which humans reside. Then, the speaker accentuates humanity's weakness together with God's inescapability. "We have no time to turn," "those regiments are all around us," "how shall we flee you? You will 'siege us...and force us to a parley,'" collectively imply inevitability. The use of "parley" suggests two parties existing as enemies. The word elicits a question: of whom or what would God be the enemy? Perhaps the speaker references the old, secular version of himself, or perhaps an older religious version of himself (even though this is one of Merton's early poems when considered amongst his entire poetic material, he had already been in the monastery for a number of years before its completion, and it is unclear exactly to which he could be referring). Or perhaps, the speaker even means to reference all humans who have been absent from God and worked outside of his presence. The speaker closes the stanza by reusing the cultivation motif, "vines and garden," seen to act as another reference to the location for the "conflict" with God.

Through the middle of the poem, the speaker's addressee changes. Instead of "Heart," here it is "Lord." The poem has multiple questions within it and almost all are concentrated in this one section (the previously mentioned "how shall we flee?" the only other). Each question seems a variant of the central one: "why are we all afraid of love?" All act rhetorically in juxtaposition between the state of affairs in a future without God and the recognition of the "transformation" which Merton documents here. The three variants on the central question draw distinction between death and life, stressing an appreciation of humanity's choices. The questions reveal choices to remain in winter (and its "fruitlessness") or veer onto a new path, one that will bear fruit; to remain above ground in "fear" or to "fall in the ground and die," (here a metaphor for figurative rebirth in God and the victory over death); to stay the same, or to trust God's plans (their own subtle biochemistry).

To answer these questions, the speaker turns from the collective to the singular, reworking the interrogatives into declarations. The singular appears in future tense perhaps to heighten the anticipation of what is to come but potentially also to reflect the self as a work-in-progress. The present tense acknowledges a current state of affairs, an awakening to a present concept of self-found-lacking. Future action must be taken in order to close the gap between that state and an ideal one. The speaker will listen to the voice, "at last," leave fear behind (here tying together multiple motifs of winter, death, and the implied notion of that which is cultivated and bears fruit after Spring overcomes Winter), allow himself to be killed and allow himself to trust. Trust, in fact

appears to be the emotion which answers the central question: “Why are we all afraid of love?” The speaker appears to suggest that it’s because humanity does not trust what love will do to us and for us, how humanity will be transformed by contact with love. The ability to trust another reveals the speaker’s own transformation. The last line retains significance because of its anticipatory quality. “‘Til I begin to know” demonstrates that the speaker recognises that the process of transformation is just that, a process. Although the speaker has acknowledged an internal shift, such recognition remains separate from knowing the “new life, green life.” Instead, the speaker offers religious transformation as a process of constant renewal and a lifetime of work. Only then can one truly know.

Such a notion of constant renewal finds further thematic development with the second vocative to the Heart. Anguish and prayer are presented as “daily burials,” the constant work that puts things into the ground to “die.” Death does not here have the negative meaning of being permanently extinguished but rather that one thing has died and another new thing has arisen. With constant cultivation, what has been buried can rise again in a new form, the speaker’s own process providing an example for others. This section of the poem seems to adopt the same tone and similar wording as a section of Paul’s letter to the Galatians. “I have been crucified with Christ: the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me; and my present mortal life is lived by faith in the Son of God” (Galatians 2:20). These declarations work to bind the speaker’s life with Jesus through the Crucifixion, further supported as the speaker applies an image of death “among the thorns,” inviting comparison with the image of Christ’s own crown of thorns, worn on the Cross. The poem closes with a level of tension still somewhat elevated but itself transformed. Instead of a tension characterised by uncertainty, as that which marked the poem’s beginning, now this tension exists in anticipation and hope, for the harvest yet to come. The speaker uses the conditional tense: “if I but could/I would begin” and the “h” alliteration draws attention to “heaven-harvests,” joining together the thought of heaven and the anticipated harvest to be found there.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart indicates a devotion to God’s passionate love found in the form of Christ’s own Passion; in other words, it is a devotion to a specific aspect of Christ’s existence as symbolic of a larger love for humanity. Sacred Heart devotion itself has transformed over the years of its history within Christian tradition, taking on various forms at various time periods, such as during Christianity’s beginnings, through the Middle Ages, and during the seventeenth century. Scholar Theresa Sanders notes that veneration of the pierced heart of Jesus

appears around 1000 C.E but with roots emanating from the foundations of Christianity itself (Sanders 48). Jesus' Crucifixion produced five physical wounds, one of them the piercing of his side by one of the soldiers present (John 19:34). Sanders notes that in the early years of the Christian Church, the image of blood and water flowing from Jesus' side as described in the Gospel of John helped interpreters form a link between Jesus' body and Church-as-body, which itself was a well-developed theme in the writings of St. Paul (Sanders 50). In the Middle Ages, however, the pierced heart of Jesus evolved into a symbol of Jesus' love for the individual Christian, adopting imagery specific to individual interpreters: "Even a quick glance at the devotional writings of the Middle Ages shows a remarkable interest in the bleeding heart of Jesus...For some the heart is a refuge — a 'cleft in the rock' where they can rest their souls. For others it is a fire that illuminates the darkness, or a well from which to wash with healing balm, or a chalice from which to drink, or a temple, or a breast for nursing." (Sanders 58) By the time of the seventeenth century, though, Sacred Heart devotion "came to entail a keen sense of the humiliations suffered by Jesus" and emphasised the theme of reparation, or "mending the broken heart of God" (Sanders 67).

But, from the seventeenth century onward, Sanders notes, the devotion, and one aspect of it that perhaps gave Sacred Heart symbolism its power, became the recognition that perhaps it wasn't the wounds themselves that needed to be mended, or made whole, but rather humanity's relationship to those wounds (Sanders 69). Conceivably, one of her observations which appears to speak most to the emotions within Merton's poem is this: even after the resurrection, Jesus still possessed his wounds. As the Gospel of John recounts: "Unless I see the mark of the nails on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side, I will never believe it" (John 20:25). The disciple Thomas comes to believe only as he comes in contact with Jesus' wounds. Sanders declares, "The wounds of Jesus do not ask to be mended. The wounds simply make visible our own fragmentation" (Sanders 71). Merton embraced his own fragmentation, his recognition of that fragmentation a significant contributing factor to his conversion to Catholicism and subsequent monastic vocation. If a reader is to believe the poem, burying himself on a daily basis in the monastery, perhaps to invite more wounds through its penitential observances within a monastic community, seems to have transformed Merton as he came into daily contact with those wounds – wounds of Jesus, wounds of his fellow brother monks, and wounds of his own.

Entering into dialogue with Buddhism – “Rakuho’s Acquiescence”

A key theme within “The Transformation: For the Sacred Heart” is the notion that something inside the person must give way, submitting themselves to God in order for transformation to occur. The kōan “Rakuho’s Acquiescence,” in a similar manner, portrays an encounter in which a student gives way, acquiescing to a Zen master in order to realise enlightenment within a different understanding of self. Rakuho and Kassan were monks of the eighth century of the Soto lineage, Soto itself a distinct sect of Zen Buddhism known for youthful ordination and knowledge of Buddhist canon (Shishin Wick 109). This main case begins with the relative novice, Rakuho, visiting the master, Kassan, and as Rakuho presents himself, Kassan views him as an imposter, the “chicken” in the phoenix nest,” or, rather, one not fully ready to be transformed. As in other kōan, opposites and paradoxes set the framework for the puzzle which the student is meant to unravel, here through the images of “valleys and mountains” and the challenge to make the “tongueless person able to talk.” When he is not able to answer, Rakuho’s perception of self is finally transformed as a result of Kassan’s strike. What Rakuho learned was that he did not actually know as much as he thought he knew. Thus, he acquiesced. He submitted to Kassan and, implicitly, Kassan’s Zen instruction.

In his commentary, Shishin Wick addresses the key early detail that Rakuho does not bow – “as if to say, ‘Well, here I am. What are you going to do with me?’” (Shishin Wick 110). This item suggests pride as bowing would naturally be considered a form of respect shown by student to master. The dialogue itself reflects a series of Rakuho’s missteps, his attempts to show himself as enlightened. The first is the failure to bow, the second occurs when he refers to Kassan’s “fame,” begging indulgence, and third, when he shouts, an act by which masters would often respond to students to get them to realise enlightenment. At each step, Rakuho appears to present himself as enlightened which, although he may perceive himself as such, he is actually not, a reality revealed by Kassan.

Shishin Wick also notes that it is “a very human distortion to identify with a limited aspect of the self” (Shishin Wick 110). It is easy for one to become complacent, or attached, even, to an idea of the self which may encompass only a part of the self. In the case of this kōan, for example, Rakuho seems capable of awareness only of his positive traits. He visits Kassan with a conception of himself that does not appear to match up to the reality, a condition that Kassan understands which Rakuho cannot yet grasp. Rakuho thus requires the conversation which takes place within the kōan

to accept (acquiesce) to the reality of his current self as still unenlightened. Shishin Wick notes that it's much tougher for anyone to recognise and acknowledge the entire self, even the negative, even when full awareness would "open [them] up" (Shishin Wick 110). By ultimately acquiescing, Rakuho has opened himself up, to transformation and to the potential for enlightenment. Similarly, Thomas Merton acquiesced, and opened himself up to God when he entered the monastery. By dying to the ways of the world in the monastery's environment of constant renewal (as he says in the poem: "daily burials," which can be equated to Rakuho's three attempts to demonstrate his enlightenment), he acknowledged his entire self, even his negative sides. Merton detached from his previous, lesser version of himself as he has perceived that self. "Transformation: For the Sacred Heart" indicates that its speaker has lost not just attachment to the old self through metaphorical death, but the self completely, to be resurrected in something new. In light of the kōan's context, perhaps the poem's speaker can thus be considered to have completely acquiesced, finally accepted God completely, without protest. The speaker thus represents the new life made possible by that acceptance, embodied by his transformation.

This concludes the intensive study of Merton. Observing the poems in this way has documented four expressions of a search for God, the appeal to an intermediary (as in "An Invocation to St. Lucy"), the direct and personal call (as in "Two States of Prayer"), the journey to a sacred place (as in "Clairvaux"), and by looking inward to understand the self (as in "The Transformation: For the Sacred Heart"). The poems illustrate how Merton the monk watched Merton the poet as each one bears the essence of his new monastic vocation, so prevalent in his early poetry. They capture his intensity, as he seemed to be trying to make the most of his new faith and establish his new identity within the cloister in contrast to his identity before taking his monastic vows. It does not seem that he could have done so if he had not gone searching for God.

CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

This study's purpose has been two-fold. The first is a response to J. Hillis Miller's observation that post-medieval literature, in part, documented God's gradual withdrawal from the world. As I mentioned in the introduction, I intended my response not as a challenge to Hillis Miller, but as an exploration of two members of a different family than the one he formed within *The Disappearance of God*. I have thus shaped my response as an exploration of the ways in which two twentieth-century Catholic poets searched for God via their poetry. As a reader might expect, these ways possess both similarities and differences. To address them, I offer comparative discussion of the poems from the previous two chapters and I include pertinent additional material from each poet's œuvre as it relates. The second is a consideration as to whether juxtaposing those poems with Buddhist kōans might enrich readings of their work, in recognition of each poet's familiarity with Buddhism, and inspired by a methodology from the field of Comparative Theology. To address this consideration, I review how initial readings of the poems have been informed by the readings of the kōans. I close this final chapter, and the thesis as a whole, by considering my response to J. Hillis Miller's observation in light of what my exploration of these two Catholic poets has offered as a result.

Comparing Ku and Merton

I have consciously selected poems from Ku's and Merton's respective bodies of work which either shared common themes or represented a quality of each poet's unique perspective. One theme which they shared took the form of appeal to God's mediators. Ku Sang appealed to Jesus, as I have shown in "Jesus of Nazareth," but also to St. Christopher through the *St. Christopher's River* cycle most notably. Merton appealed to a large number of different Saints, such as in "An Invocation to St. Lucy," and also to Agnes, Alberic, Malachy, John the Baptist and Thomas Aquinas, among others. Additionally, both poets appealed to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Ku in such poems as "Before the Virgin's Statue"; Merton in "To the Immaculate Virgin on a Winter's Night." Both poets construct their petitions from characteristics specific to each mediator, a common practice in Christian tradition. Ku, for example, draws upon many aspects of Jesus' life in order to call into question traditional human understanding of that life, whereas Merton contrasts the many ways in which humans fall short of the divine ideal with the single characteristic of St. Lucy's 'light.' Examination of the two poems reveals a difference in the way each poet makes their appeals, however. Ku Sang generally structures appeals by portraying a mediator's sanctity in such a way as to

reduce distance between speaker and mediator. Merton, in contrast, retains or extends distance between speaker and mediator.

Ku's descriptions reduce distance between the poem's speaker and mediator by increasing intimacy between them. For example, although the speaker is a stranger to Jesus even through to "Jesus of Nazareth's" halfway point, the distance between speaker and Jesus has been reduced by the poem's completion. The poet achieves this reduction of distance by providing descriptions that offer an intimate picture of Jesus, new ways of knowing him in greater detail that others do not know. In another poem, Ku applies a similar approach so that a reader perceives increased intimacy between speaker and the Virgin Mary, as she exists in a statue. In "Before the Virgin's statue," a reader encounters rather elegant description of intimate details, giving the statue an almost sensate character: "pretty bare feet,/...not at all ill at ease," and a moment in which "slyly the spring breeze stirs/your skirts and the deep blue belt." Perhaps this intimacy can also be inferred from a shared sense of suffering as the statue is given very human emotions:

can you glimpse from here
the kingdom of Jesus your son
who went away, leaving in your silken breast
the wounds of the Seven Sorrows? (*Wastelands of Fire* 51)

Merton's descriptions, however, generally increase senses of awe, and thus distance between the speaker and mediator. Merton, for example, emphasises St. Lucy's powers, the power to console and to bring light to a world gone astray. Throughout the poem, humanity is weak in contrast to Lucy's strength, that strength considered a quality to be bestowed, if it all, for there is no indication of fulfillment within the poem, only the request. Merton applies the same approach, highlighting the strength of the mediator contrasted against human weakness, in other works, such as "St. Thomas Aquinas":

His mind had never smarted with the bitter reek
Of the world's night, the flesh's smoke:
His eyes were always cradles for the Word of God:
His intellect His Bethlehem. (*CP* 98)

Merton's appeals to mediators retained this quality even into his later works, such as in 1968's *Cables to the Ace* where St. Theresa makes an appearance in Cable "82," and proceeds to turn her heart into a dove (*CP* 450).

Inward reflection is a fundamental aspect of any religious individual's being. Observed changes to the self as a result of inward reflection have an important role in these poet's searches for God, especially in the self's transformation as a result of searching. Two distinct mystical approaches to the search for God, one of introspection and the other of unifying vision allow for an interpretation which illuminates the differences between Merton and Ku in their poems which deal with concepts of the self, "The Transformation: For the Sacred Heart," and "Myself." The first, introspection, is characterised by a "withdrawal from all outward things, retreat into the grounds of one's own soul, knowledge of a secret depth and of the possibility of turning in upon one's self"; the second, unifying vision, points to something larger, grander, deeper, "which it indicates but does not fully reveal," and which "shows stages of ascension" (Otto 58-59; 62).

Merton's sense of self, as it is presented within "The Transformation: For the Sacred Heart," has retreated into the ground of his soul. He explores what Otto would describe as secret depth in such metaphors as "fall in the ground," "the darkness and furious waters/of that planting/Seep down," and "daily burials," which stand in contrast to the above-ground world of the first half of the poem. The speaker's initial self is marked by weakness rather than strength, less than, rather than more than. Only when the speaker has adequately allowed the divine into that soul, does the transformation occur. In Merton's other early poems, the self is just as weak, and only transformed by contact with the formal structures of the Church, such as the monastery or various holy individuals. Another example from Merton's poetry which contains this feature is "The Dark Encounter":

Oh night of admiration, full of choirs,
O night of deepest praise,
And darkness full of triumph:
What secret and intrepid Visitor
Has come to crack the sepulchre?
He softly springs the locks of death
In the foretold encounter! (*CP* 112)

In contrast, Ku Sang builds a concept of the self in "Myself" by a process of addition akin to Otto's stages of ascension, each stage "more than,...and, too, more than...and, more than" the previous. Spatial metaphors are set at their extremes, superimposing the poet's concept of self over those extremes and thus releasing the self from any and all boundaries within and including those extremes. Examples include juxtaposition of the oasis spring and desert sand in stanza four, the

millet seed with cosmic vastness in the fifth stanza, and stanza seven's "substantiality such fullness gives," followed immediately by "its opposing nihility."

While "Myself" is built primarily from a process of ascension found within subjects that begin in fragile form – the foetus, the seed, the oasis, the dust, for example - many of Ku's other poems contain similar treatment of a fragile being or intangible object that ascends as multiple experiences accumulate into a single collective. "Spring Chrysanthemums," for instance, contains images of fragile flowers presented collectively as a "single blossoming sign of Nature/in an artificial world" and accumulates a series of other fragile intangibles, glances and looks from various people that together address the theme of awareness, declaring to humanity: "look!" (Ku 1990 62). "Scenes of a summer's day," offers an analogous approach as it accumulates fragile scenes of nature over the course of a single day into a single "primordial scene," culminating in a final stanza supporting a vision which transcends a single period of "present chaos":

As from time immemorial,
hills, villages, fields,
all are unchangingly here,
and even in this land's present chaos
this primordial scene is in itself enough
to restore serenity. (*Wastelands of Fire* 65)

As each poet lived, though, each man retained a unique way of expressing their views on life itself. As Brother Anthony has observed, "it would surprise no one familiar with Korean sensibility that [Ku Sang's] first remembered emotional experience was one of tears" (Teague 24). That experience became poetry, "1" from *Even the Knots on Quince Trees*. The poem of suffering became but one of many, capturing a vision in which the "suffering of humanity and all creation [was] related to the suffering of Christ along the way of the Cross" (Teague 24). "On suffering" quintessentially embodies this journey, as the poem's speaker himself appears to be a Christ-like figure, whose suffering becomes representative of something greater as he weaves his dream. In chapter two, I mentioned a commentator who observed Ku's unique ability to display empathy and mourning for both ally and enemy. This comment was perhaps derived from Ku's appreciation for suffering in all creation, as Brother Anthony has observed, and an excerpt from "7. (Before a war cemetery of North Korean dead)" will further illustrate this quality:

Not far from here the road is blocked,
the homeward road your souls, like mine, must take,

and the mere silence of the empty, desert hills
oppresses my breast like a thousand tons;
so while in life we were only united in hate,
now rather the tragic longing
you were not able to allay
dwells within my aspiration. (*Wastelands of Fire* 95)

“A pebble” points to the sense that there is something greater that is just out of humanity’s reach, and something shrouded in mystery, a mystery which Ku embraced, as I have demonstrated previously. “The pebble’s challenge is a matter of meaning: is there or is there not a “true” and a “false” in life, a possible hope of encounter and meaningful relationship?” (Teague 32-33). For the pebble to reveal so much to the speaker means that there must be some truth, or at least some hope that such truth exists.

In Merton, “Clairvaux” is one of many sacred spaces which receive poetic treatment, and his monastic vocation was often embodied in the monastic buildings themselves. George Kilcourse has noted the following in Merton: “The habitat of the monastery incubates better poems when Merton relaxes his rhetoric against the world, and lets the metaphors unlock the poet’s vision and ear to recreate and interpret simple and sublime experiences” (Kilcourse 58). “The Trappist Abbey: Matins,” and “After the Night Office-Gethsemani Abbey,” provide other examples in which the individual is transformed by having intimate contact with the sacred location, the monastery, and the sacred events that take place there. The closing stanza from “The Trappist Abbey: Matins” illustrates just such a picture:

Wake in the cloisters of the lonely night, my soul, my sister,
Where the apostles gather, who were, one time, scattered,
And mourn God’s blood in the place of His betrayal,
And weep with Peter at the triple cock-crow. (*CP* 46)

“Two States of Prayer” places the search for God on very personal terms, reflecting another side of monastic life, the solitude and silence which complemented the coenobitic aspects of monastic vocation. The word monk itself is derived from the Greek for solitary (*monachos*), or singular, and refers only to those religious individuals who belong to contemplative or otherwise self-contained religious orders. Merton himself was careful in his own descriptions to differentiate the monk from the friar, and the contemplative from the active religious practitioner, and his poem displays his respect for that aspect of life as a way to establish direct and personal communication with God through prayer (Merton 1976 364).

Turning to consider the way in which the kōans have informed readings of the poems, in each case, the Zen Buddhist kōan's reading has added additional nuance to the initial reading of the Christian poem. The kōan's context has not altered the reading of the poem but provided additional context which, as Clooney has observed in his own work, has extended the meaning of what the poem initially offered. In "An Invocation to St. Lucy," for example, the speaker looks outward, to the saint, for the spiritual sustenance to endure in a world gone awry. But when read next to the kōan "Everybody has his own light," the ultimate meaning of which is awareness of what is right under one's nose, in other words, that one possesses the capacity for enlightenment themselves, the perception of the appeal to the Saint adapts. Instead of the outward perspective, mediator as possessor of power, the Saint is perceived instead as a beacon, to apply Clooney's terminology, whose power to mediate is applied by showing a light which awakens a similar power within the speaker. Interpretation of the kōan extends the saintly example to that of shared participant in holy life. Instead of weak/strong contrast, (appeal to the saint because they achieved what the speaker feels that he – and by extension humanity – cannot achieve), the kōan's context suggests that the speaker can achieve it, too.

Along these lines, Nansen's Flower also extended the interpretation of "Jesus of Nazareth." The poet cautions against accepting the testimony of others, that normal ways of understanding Jesus may be unsatisfactory to know the real Jesus. Read in the context of the kōan, which illustrated the importance of unity in order to realise understanding, the poem was read as a statement that one best understands another by "walking a mile in their shoes," to apply the popular idiom. The poem's message can be adapted to express: to know Jesus, live the life he did as much as a human could, forgiving and loving as the Father also forgives and loves, as the poem states..

Other juxtapositions operated in similar fashion. The reading of each poem was not significantly altered but extended, with a deeper meaning to the original interpretation. I do not consider this surprising as I consciously chose juxtapositions which contained related material. This is something that other commentators have noted (a reader will recall the example from *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* that I provided in the chapter on preliminary considerations, which also noticed the similarities between the sayings of Zen monks and sayings of Christian Desert Fathers). None of this is radical, for I suspect that the meaning of any literary text is given additional meaning when read in the context of another text. I thus consider my exploration of these two poets additional testimony that reading material outside of the religious tradition within which that material is written, enriches one's experience of religious reading of text within that home tradition.

To bring my thesis as a whole to its conclusion, I present two considerations. Within chapter two, I suggested that, in light of my response to Hillis Miller's observation, perhaps my work could also contribute something to the mutual understanding of East and West. I offer one item for consideration in that regard. The nature of my response to Hillis Miller – my exploration of these poems – suggests that the location from where someone searches for God is subordinate to the substance of the search itself. In the preface to the Illinois Paperback edition of *The Disappearance of God*, written 37 years after initial publication, Hillis Miller reflected upon his original hypotheses which engendered the book. One of those assumptions was that “there is a kind of spiritual history of the world,” in which “each epoch has a specific ‘spirit of the age’” (Hillis Miller 2000 x). God was once felt as immanent, then it seemed as though he withdrew, and both circumstances were recorded in the literature of each corresponding epoch. After the intervening years of reflection, however, Hillis Miller came to the determination that, “God, wherever he is, does not I think consider it worth his time to appear and disappear like that, especially not for a given nation or region of the world” (Hillis Miller 2000 xi). It would thus seem reasonable to conjecture that it would not matter from what nation or region on earth a poet searched for God. When considered in the light of Hillis Miller's reflection upon his own work together with my examination of Ku and Merton side-by-side, such a detail as nation or region, which can often seem so crucial within the realm of human interpretation, may very well be not worth God's time.

Heeding Larry Shinn's cautionary statements, I do not seek to make a global statement towards unification of the two distinct religions as a result of my exploration, nor even unification of their reading practices, for that matter. Nor do I challenge the relevance of cultural context or personal identity in the grander scheme of an individual's relationship with God or search for him. In offering such a consideration, rather, I draw attention to the act of search itself, the internal movement of the individual, as expressed through the external words of the poem, rather than whether that movement is situated in East or in West. The direct experiences of these two poets are themselves striking comments upon the subject of regional influence. Ku Sang was born in the East yet, in a sense, moved Westward to search for God through a religious faith of Western origins; Merton was born and raised in the West, yet conducted a pilgrimage Eastward as a key component of his search for God. Both worked to close the perceived distance between themselves and God by the act of searching for him. I offer that my consideration renders the concept of nation or region as a facet but perhaps subordinate to the spirit and means of the search itself, insofar as that spirit and means have been exhibited in the poetry reviewed on the pages of this thesis.

That poetry reveals men who were transformed for the sake of searching at all. In Ku Sang's work, for example, the speaker in "Jesus of Nazareth" begins the poem with one understanding of Jesus and achieves a much different understanding of him at the poem's close. In "A pebble," enough has been revealed over the poem's course that the speaker exhibits two dissimilar emotional states: at the poem's start, he is indifferent; at its close, he feels ashamed. In Merton's work, as another example, "Clairvaux" portrays a group of individuals who are changed as a result of intimate knowledge of a sacred place, a place constructed in the spirit of communion with God. "The Transformation: For the Sacred Heart" reveals very vividly the inner changes that occur as a result of searching for God. Both poets demonstrate different starting points and diverse manifestations, but a common structure – the search for God to close a perceived distance and a confidence that he could be found. It may very well then not matter much from where the search for God begins – East or West, in this case. If aware of a distance between self and God, the poetry exhibited here indicates that one should just start searching. God understands the rest.

Furthermore, I also suggested in the introduction that an important aspect of understanding the search for God in the poetry of these two men was "intimate contact at the naked level of the poem," to return to Octavio Paz's terminology. I anticipated that the poems themselves would reveal the details of these men's respective searches and, in light of my exploration of Ku's and Merton's works in response to Hillis Miller, I offer my second consideration. I suggest that poetry itself should be considered an important aspect of that search for God. In *The Bow and the Lyre*, Paz also proposes a connection between religious sentiment and poetry. He at first notes: "The poetic antinomy, the image, does not conceal our condition from us: it reveals it and invites us to realize it completely. The possibility of being is given to all men. Poetic creation is one form of that possibility" (Paz 138). Each of the poems and kōans explored here demonstrates an invitation to realise possibility of being. Each work's beginning is marked by a starting point of confusion, tension, or other condition of miasma, which then becomes clear through some form of revelation or realisation of some possibility, achieved in a religious context. In other words, there is a fundamental movement from one state of affairs to another.

Paz's observation about poetry as revelation shares sympathy with something that Hillis Miller speculated as well. Speaking of a previous spiritual epoch, he noted: "Poetry in turn was, in one way or another, modeled on sacramental or scriptural language. The words of the poem incarnated the things they named, just as the words of the Mass shared in the transformation they evoked. The symbols and metaphors of poetry were inventions of the poets. They were borrowed

from the divine analogies of nature. Poetry was meaningful in the same way as nature itself – by a communion of the verbal symbols with the reality they named. The history of modern literature is in part a history of the splitting apart of this communion” (Hillis Miller 2000 3). Paz underscores that sense of splitting apart when he observes that “the religious experience and the poetic one have a common origin; their historical expressions-poems, myths, prayers, exorcisms, hymns, theatrical performances, rites, and so on-are sometimes indistinguishable...Poetry opens up to us the possibility of being that is intrinsic in every birth; it re-creates man and makes him assume his true dilemma: life or death, but a totality: life and death in a single instance of incandescence” (Paz 139).

Ku Sang and Thomas Merton have both offered records of an incandescence which includes religious belief in poetry’s possibility, as they have combined the religious and the poetic in their search for God. They shared this quality with many other poets, a small sampling of whom I presented in the introduction, and I do not consider them exclusive in this regard. Still, poetry formed an essential means by which they could search and both Ku and Merton articulated poetry’s importance in their lives. *Even the Knots on Quince Trees* could very well be interpreted as treatise to poetry itself as much as it exists as a poetic autobiography. Poetry was the chosen form by which Ku wove his art and his faith together, as he did in his life. As the poet himself affirms in “80” of *Knots*, “I have taken the river as a place for conversions of heart. Just as Christopher, a ruffian in origin, a saint, carried people on his back across a river while he waited for the eternal strong man Jesus, I hoped for immortal poems from the river...if only I imitated his simple devotions my poems too might one day see the light of salvation” (Ku 2004 235). Merton, too, held a similar view as to poetry’s ultimate purpose and the responsibilities borne by the poet in the process of composition. “He [the poet] seeks above all to put words together in such a way that they exercise a mysterious and vital reactivity among themselves, and so release their content of associations to produce in the reader an experience that enriches the depths of his spirit...What we seek in a poem is therefore not an accidental reference to something outside itself: we must seek the inner principle of individuality and of life which is its soul” (Merton 1953 45-46).

I have taken this Merton quotation from *Bread in the Wilderness*. Later on in that book, Merton cites the words of St. Augustine of Hippo, which may themselves eloquently bring together Ku, Merton, and my response to Hillis Miller in a concluding testament to what religious poetry continues to offer to those who explore it. In chapter two of section III of that text (the chapter itself is titled “Transformation in Discovery”), Merton offers the following words from the famous Christian bishop: “‘And yet the very unfamiliarity of Scriptural language,’ says St. Augustine, ‘has its

purpose. The language of revelation is mysterious not in order that its meaning may be concealed from us, but in order that we may be moved to seek it with a more fervent love”¹⁵ (Merton 1953 66).

Ku Sang’s poetry embraced mystery, just as he embraced mystery in his life; Merton’s contemplative path brought him into regular contact with mystery. Not only were these two poets moved to seek the meaning behind that mystery for themselves, but provided their expressions of that mystery within their search for God as a shared offering, a communion, if one will, that has the possibility to restore what Hillis Miller perceived to have been split apart, not only with God, but with any reader as well. As readers explore poetic experiences which contain the possibility to deepen those readers’ own spirits as they read the two men’s work, Ku’s and Merton’s poetry may also move others to seek a more fervent love as well. In that way, in the communion of both poetry and possibility with poetry and reader, these two Catholic poets have offered something to the world which is indeed universal.

¹⁵ original citation from the *Enarratio in Psalmum*, 93, Paragraph 1 and *Patrologiae Latina*, Vol. 37, Column 1189

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