Thomas Merton

Early Essays, 1947–1952

Edited with an Introduction by
Patrick F. O’Connell

Foreword by
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Foreword

The publication in 2013 of Thomas Merton’s Selected Essays, each essay being carefully explicated in the context of Merton’s biographical and literary development by Patrick F. O’Connell, was a major event in recent presentations of Merton’s work. That volume of 512 pages provides ample evidence of Merton’s skillful and capacious intelligence in his assaying a variety of topics that arrested him throughout his writer’s life. Now complementing his selection of the finest examples of Merton’s work as essayist, O’Connell has turned his attention to Merton’s early forays into writing for Catholic magazines in the latter part of the 1940s.

The monk who writes these early essays is not yet the Catholic household name he would become after the publication of his autobiography The Seven Storey Mountain in 1948. While they do not compete with his mature work, these initial essays, collected together for the first time, valuably expose Merton’s appropriation of the classical and traditional sources that point to the significance of contemplation as the goal of all Christian living. In these dozen essays, Merton imbues his words with the perceived force of authority gained not only through intense study but also through personal experience as he enumerates the decisions to be enacted by all Christians so as to eschew the claims of materialism, the

“spirit of the world,” and convert their minds and hearts toward union with God. In a remarkable essay, “Contemplation in a Rocking Chair,” Merton unsparingly outlines the necessary acts of continuing renunciation required by any Christian who hopes to receive the gift of gifts, the grace of “infused contemplation,” through which God is perceived as directly as is possible to a human being on this side of eternity. His attack on a style of Christian meditation and living that might be called “contemplation lite” becomes a consistent Merton emphasis in all his later teaching. He always emphasizes that no technique of meditation can evade the rigorous discipline of enduring dark nights of the soul. Merton never declares that the true contemplative is happy and a satisfied success, or that the journey to contemplation allows anyone to be all right with the world.

After only six years of monastic living at Gethsemani, Merton began to teach in these essays and publicly to hand on to others his own existential grasp of what must be sacrificed and abandoned if one is to be graced with “infused contemplation,” which he defined as “an experimental knowledge of God’s goodness ‘tasted’ and ‘possessed’ by a vital contact in the depths of the soul. By infused love, we are given an immediate grasp of God’s own substance, and rest in the obscure and profound sense of His presence and transcendent actions within our inmost selves, yielding ourselves altogether to the work of His transforming Spirit” (6). Merton never abandoned this ideal but to his mind literally understood formulation. He deepened and expanded his definition of infused contemplation in his books The Climate of Monastic Prayer3 and The Inner Experience4 and in the essays published as Contemplation in a World of Action,5 but he never abandoned his belief that

5 Thomas Merton, Contemplation in a World of Action (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971).
contemplation as surrendering to the work of the transforming Spirit is the goal of every person’s spiritual practice. His personal journals, his poetry, and his correspondence with others provide ample clues to his own inner experiences of “God’s goodness” and his own “vital contact” with God’s mercy in “the depths” of his soul. The voice in these first public essays is young, but to anyone who has long pondered Merton’s mature writing on contemplation it is immediately recognizable.

Merton’s personal journals for the years 1945–1952, presented under the title *Entering the Silence,* provide clues to the climate of inner turmoil Merton experienced in these years, which helps to explain his consistent, publicly stated sense of a conflict of interest between his desires to be a literary artist and a contemplative monk. Even before he entered Gethsemani in 1941, he intuited (if only tentatively, because he did not destroy all his premonastic writing but entrusted it to others) that he would have to renounce vocalizing his “false self”—the artist who wanted fame by communicating the sound of his own voice—in order to discover his “truer self” in contemplation, as a monk who listened in silence for a voice that was not his own. Even as he longed to be silent so that the voice of Christ could utter itself in him, he found himself inexorably caught up in the adulation of his readers and all the business that attends a prominent literary career.

One of the most important essays in this volume is “Poetry and the Contemplative Life,” in which Merton presents the goals of the artist-poet and those of the contemplative as incompatible. In this article’s formal pronouncements, Merton lays bare the knot within his inner experience that in time might have been loosened but never fully untied:

> Now it is precisely here that the esthetic instinct changes its colors and, from being a precious gift becomes a *fatal handicap.*
> If the intuition of the poet naturally leads him into the inner sanctuary of his soul, it is for a special purpose in the natural

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order: when the poet enters into himself, it is in order to reflect upon his inspiration and to clothe it with a special and splendid form and then return to display it to those outside. And here the radical difference between the artist and the mystic begins to be seen. The artist enters into himself in order to work. For him, the “superior” soul is a forge where inspiration kindles a fire of white heat, a crucible for the transformation of natural images into new, created forms. But the mystic enters into himself, not in order to work but to pass through the center of his own soul and lose himself in the mystery and secrecy and infinite, transcendent reality of God living and working within him.

Consequently, if the mystic happens to be, at the same time, an artist, when prayer calls him within himself to the secrecy of God’s presence, his art will be tempted to start working and producing and studying the “creative” possibilities of this experience. And therefore immediately the whole thing runs the risk of being frustrated and destroyed. The artist will be cheated of a gift of tremendous and supernatural worth, and be left with nothing—but the experience of an artist. And instead of passing through the sanctuary of his own soul into the abyss of the infinite actuality of God Himself, he will remain there a moment, only to emerge again into the exterior world of multiple created things whose variety once more dissipates his energies until they are lost in perplexity and dissatisfaction. (14)

Here is the literary clue to Merton’s inner experiences of his own bad faith, his “dread,” as he explains it in The Climate of Monastic Prayer. He is consistently disappointed with himself for only being a writer who can write beautifully about the contemplative life without achieving the contemplation that is the goal of Christian life. To his credit, Merton deeply realized, even on his first tasting of artistic achievement in the profession of his autobiography, that the greatest threat to receiving the grace of contemplation is celebrity. He intuited from the start that his desire to teach on contemplation would be undercut by any of his unstated desires to become a Christian guru. Repeatedly in the journals collected in Entering the Silence, Merton warns himself that his new-won fame and the nascent formation of a cult of personality around his
literary self by his readers would be the flaming sword that barred him from passing “through the center of his own soul [so as to] lose himself in the mystery and secrecy and infinite, transcendent reality of God living and working within him” (14).

In his essay “The Contemplative Life: Its Meaning and Necessity,” Merton enunciates his enduring faith, for which he was criticized by some, that “Contemplation is the fullness of the Christian life. It is the deep and supernatural and perfect experience of God, which we were all created to enjoy in heaven and which those who listen to God, on earth, and make the sacrifices which He asks of them, may taste even before they enter into heaven: quaedam inchoatio vitae eternae (a certain beginning of eternal life—St. Thomas)” (108). He always counters this faith, however, by recognizing that the gift of the “perfect experience of God” (108) is only granted to those who by ascetic renunciations have separated themselves “from the violence and greed and injustice and cruelty of this world, with all its noise and shallow appeals to passion and its crass stupidity” (115). Contemplation for Merton never becomes a passive and “soft way.” It is hard and only for those who long for the gift of God’s presence within them by “penance, renouncement and prayer” (115).

Obviously these essays have started my engines. I would say more, but my enthusiasm for these topics in Merton’s writing has already led me to exceed the bounds of a brief foreword to an important work. Yet I cannot close without acknowledging the debt any serious reader of Thomas Merton owes to the scholarship of Patrick F. O’Connell. His annotations to Merton’s teaching conferences in particular, numbering seven volumes in the Monastic Wisdom Series of Cistercian Publications,7 are a tour de force of

detail, wide learning, and impeccable scholarship that brings Merton’s conference notes alive, rendering them cogent and important for a contemporary audience. In Patrick F. O’Connell, Merton’s writing has found one of its most gifted readers and interpreters. I praise his achievements without fear of challenge and wish him many more years of continued good work.

Jonathan Montaldo

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Acknowledgments


The following articles have been reprinted by permission of the Merton Legacy Trust:

“The Trappists Go to Utah,” Commonweal (August 29, 1947)

“Death of a Trappist,” Integrity (November 1947)

“A Christmas Devotion,” Commonweal (December 26, 1947)

“A Trappist Speaks on People, Priests and Prayer,” The Messenger of the Sacred Heart (April 1948)

“Contemplation in a Rocking Chair,” Integrity (August 1948)

“Is Mysticism Normal,” Commonweal (November 4, 1949)


“Christ Suffers Again,” Action Now! (March 1952)

“Poetry and the Contemplative Life”

“Active and Contemplative Orders”
The following permissions were in process at the time of publication:


From Harcourt, Brace: Thomas Merton, “Active and Contemplative Orders.”
Introduction

On November 5, 1947, Thomas Merton wrote to his friend and former Columbia professor Mark Van Doren,

I am tremendously busy with writing. Magazines are beginning to be after me, and I have to do a lot of judicious refusing. I can only write for magazines on condition that I keep myself in one field & on one plane—and the nearer it is to mystical theology the better. My superiors have more or less let me go off on my own & make all my own decisions as far as writing is concerned with the one exception—they won’t let me give it up.¹

At this point Merton had been a member of the monastic community at the Abbey of Gethsemani in rural Kentucky for almost six years, and up until the previous few months he had published nothing² as a monk but poetry,³ though he had already written the

³ Merton had published three volumes of verse by this time: Thirty Poems (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1944); A Man in the Divided Sea (New York: New Directions, 1946); and Figures for an Apocalypse (New York: New Directions, 1947). Individual poems had appeared in Catholic Art Quarterly, Chimera, The
autobiography that would make him famous when it came out the following year, along with various other prose works on monastic topics that appeared over the course of the next couple of years. But between July 1947 and March 1950 he would publish eleven substantial articles for a general audience in various Catholic periodicals, on topics related directly or indirectly to contemplation, with an additional short piece appearing in March 1952. Half of these articles appeared in the lay-edited magazine The Commonweal (as it was then called), where he had been publishing poetry since mid-1946; four pieces came out in rapid succession in the last six months of 1947, with the final two in late 1949 and early 1950. The other six appeared in five different publications—Integrity, The Messenger of the Sacred Heart, The Dublin Review, Cross and Crown, and Action Now!—between November 1947 and March 1952.

The earliest of these articles, “Poetry and the Contemplative Life,” as its title suggests, explores the interface between the work of the literary artist and the vocation of the contemplative that continued to absorb Merton’s attention in theory and in practice until the very end of his life. Two of the other Commonweal articles


from 1947, “The Trappists Go to Utah” and “A Christmas Devotion,” as well as “Death of a Trappist,” which appeared in Integrity in November of that year, deal with mysticism only tangentially, the first and third addressed to the widespread fascination with and curiosity about the lives of those belonging to the strictest monastic order at the time established in the United States, while the Christmas article considers the meaning of the Incarnation from a perspective that differs radically from the usual focus on the crèche and on the coming of Christ as Savior and Redeemer.

The 1948 article in The Messenger of the Sacred Heart, entitled “A Trappist Speaks on People, Priests and Prayer,” is addressed to an audience that would probably find the notion of contemplation exotic and alien to their own lives and thus emphasizes intercessory prayer, while the 1950 Lenten article “Self-Denial and the Christian,” the last of the Commonweal pieces from this period, focuses more on the ascetic than the mystical dimension, though it affirms the continuity between these two phases of the spiritual life. The final “early essay” included here, “Christ Suffers Again,” a brief piece that appeared in Action Now! in March 1952, emphasizes the paschal identification of the poor and oppressed with the crucified Christ and thus looks forward to Merton’s more socially conscious writings of the last decade of his life.

The rest of the articles correspond closely to the description Merton gave to Van Doren of a concentration on “one field & on one plane—and the nearer it is to mystical theology the better.” They are most akin in focus and tone to The Ascent to Truth, Merton’s most systematic attempt to develop a theology of the mystical life, on which he was working during this same period. In a February 15, 1949, journal entry, Merton writes of this project, which has not yet been given its final title:

However, about The Cloud and the Fire, I have in mind something that needs to be done some day: the dogmatic essentials of mystical theology based on tradition, and delivered in the context and atmosphere of Scripture and the Liturgy. In other

words a mystical theology that is not a mere catalog of “experiences,” many of them outside the range of the ordinary economy of the Gifts, but a book that drinks contemplation de fontibus Salvatoris [from the wellspring of the Savior] and exploits all the mysticism there is in the Liturgy and in revelation: an objective mysticism, integrated with the common intellectual heritage of the Church as a whole and yet with its full subjective application to the experience of the actual or potential mystic, the concrete and individual contemplative. The contemplation of the Mystical Body in all its members. Reverend Father thought it was a good idea to work towards it and to take it step by step, getting the various parts up as magazine articles first of all.8

While the magazine articles were not incorporated per se into the book, they explore many of the same ideas and themes.

The third of Merton’s four Commonweal articles of 1947, “Active and Contemplative Orders,” first engages the issue of contemplation and its role as the foundation of authentic apostolic action, while his piece for the same journal almost two years later, “Is Mysticism Normal?,” presents a nuanced positive answer to the title’s question that both affirms the normative character of mysticism and explains its apparent rarity in the lives of the majority of Christians. Substantial articles in three other journals, one each for the years 1948–1950, develop further the basic positions found in the pair of Commonweal essays. “Contemplation in a Rocking Chair,” published in the August 1948 issue of Integrity, critiques an attitude toward contemplation that tends to underplay the commitment required to remain open to the transforming power of God in prayer. “The Contemplative Life: Its Meaning and Necessity,” which appeared in The Dublin Review in Winter 1949, addresses various stereotypes that keep Christians from recognizing the centrality of contemplation for the life of the church and the lives of individual members of the Mystical Body. Finally, “The

Primacy of Contemplation,” in the March 1950 issue of *Cross and Crown*, revisits issues first raised in “Active and Contemplative Orders” and restates Merton’s basic position, as found in the title, in response to criticism of the earlier article.

By March 1950, Merton had virtually stopped writing shorter articles and did not resume doing so regularly until late 1956.⁹ Both his success and his struggles in book-length projects of the period no doubt played a significant role in this shift of focus: *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *Seeds of Contemplation,*¹⁰ his book of meditations published the following year, made him a household name in Catholic circles and encouraged him to continue writing full-length works, while the difficulties he experienced in trying to bring to completion *The Ascent to Truth*, his most theologically complex work, preoccupied his attention around this time. But already in mid-1948 he had also been advised by Cistercian Vicar General Gabriel Sortais (soon to become Abbot General of the Order) not to become too committed to periodical publication. In an August 20, 1948, journal entry, Merton writes, “Dom Gabriel told me not to let myself get roped into any magazine as a collaborateur, i.e., not to get my name on the mast-head as a staff writer, and be slow to accept work. They are all commercial. They ruin you. Told me to refuse book-reviews except in exceptional cases.”¹¹ By early 1952, as his godfather Ed Rice began planning

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his photo-magazine *Jubilee*, Merton wrote to his friend Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr, “I am supposed to have backed out of the magazine field altogether. The Abbot General definitely told me to keep my name off the masthead of any magazine—even as advisor.”

As early as September 1947, however, when only the first two *Commonweal* essays were in print, Merton was already thinking about gathering them together for a book, writing in his journal on September 25, “My heart burns in my side when I write about contemplation in an article or anywhere. . . . I don’t feel these articles for *Commonweal* are useless, and they may make a book.” The idea is still on his mind in the spring of 1950 when he writes to his agent Naomi Burton on Holy Thursday about the possibility of James Laughlin of New Directions, which had issued *Seeds of Contemplation* and four volumes of Merton’s verse, publishing “the collection of articles, which will soon enough be big enough for a book. . . . The articles are solid enough.” By the end of the year he is mentioning “that collection of articles” in a December 21 letter to his other main publisher, Robert Giroux of Harcourt, Brace, and he brings it up again in letters of January 20 and February 4, 11, and 13, 1951.

The last of these letters refers to the publication of *The Ascent to Truth* and says that the book of essays “can follow later,” but in fact he shelved the project indefinitely, and a volume containing these pieces never appeared. Consequently most of this material has remained virtually unknown to Merton readers and even to scholars, though the articles represent a significant component of Merton’s writing career during the period that saw the publication of his autobiography, his ordination to the priesthood, and the beginning of his work as a teacher of the young monks and novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani. While not equal in importance or achievement to the major essays he wrote on a wide variety of

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14 *The Tears of the Blind Lions* had appeared in 1949.
topics in the final decade of his life, this group of shorter writings documents Merton’s early efforts to comprehend and explain the meaning of contemplation within and beyond monasticism and to bring a clearer and more accurate understanding of key elements of Cistercian life to American Catholics and others.

Thus the present volume is intended to realize at long last Merton’s own original plan of publishing these essays as a group and so to make available a previously little-recognized and underutilized resource for understanding and appreciating a crucial transitional phase in his life as both monk and writer. The essays are grouped into two parts—the first consisting of the six essays published in *The Commonweal*, the second of the six essays that appeared elsewhere—a division that allows the audience to read sequentially the pieces found in Merton’s favorite outlet for his prose during this period and then to consider chronologically the expanded audience he sought to reach in the variety of publications and differing audiences of the remaining essays. Each of the essays is preceded by an introductory headnote providing whatever information is available on the circumstances of composition and publication along with brief indications of major points raised in that essay.

For the three essays that were reprinted in some form subsequent to their initial periodical publication, textual notes listing all variant readings are provided in Appendix 1. A second Appendix reprints the article “States of Life” by John Fearon, O.P., a critique published in *The Thomist* of Merton’s *Commonweal* article “Active and Contemplative Orders,” followed by Merton’s own extensive journal comments on Fearon’s article. Together with Merton’s later article “The Primacy of Contemplation,” these pieces provide comprehensive documentation of a controversy that left Merton himself both chastened and bemused.

Particular thanks are due to Peggy Fox, Anne McCormick, and Mary Somerville, trustees of The Thomas Merton Legacy Trust,

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16 For an overview of Merton’s writings in this genre, see “Merton the Essayist,” the Introduction to *Selected Essays*, ix–xviii.
for permission to publish this edition of Merton’s early essays, and to Jonathan Montaldo, former director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University and editor of numerous Merton works, including *Entering the Silence*, the second volume of Merton’s journals, and *The Intimate Merton,*¹⁷ for his gracious and insightful foreword to this volume.

Part I

Articles from *The Commonweal*
On May 14, 1947, Thomas Merton wrote in his journal, “yester-
day . . . I signed the contract for *Figures for an Apocalypse* with
New Directions and heard that Commonweal got the *imprimatur*
[ecclesiastical approval] on an article on Poetry and the Contem-
plative Life, which I rather wanted to get back from them, but they
want to print it” (*Entering the Silence*, 74). The article referred to
appeared in *The Commonweal* July 4, 1947, 280–86, and in slightly
revised form in Merton’s third book of verse (93–111), mentioned
in the same journal entry. The text included in the present volume
draws on both versions of the essay: see Appendix 1 for a list of
variants and the choice of readings made in each case. The essay
consists of a lengthy introduction followed by a three-part central
section and a brief conclusion. Its introduction focuses on the
contemplative life as the normal culmination of spiritual devel-
opment, though Merton argues that it remains a pure gift that
relatively few are ready to receive in their earthly lives. He then
turns to the relationship of contemplation and art, pointing out
first that contemplation has much to offer the poet and encourag-
ing Catholic writers to lead lives of active contemplation that will
draw them closer to Christ through the disciplines of liturgy,
penance, prayer, and spiritual reading. He next makes the case
that the converse is also true, that poetry has something valuable
to offer contemplation because of the analogy between authentic
aesthetic experience and mystical prayer. But he also indicates
that beyond a certain point poetry and contemplation can begin
to pull in different directions: whereas the infused contemplative
experience is passive and receptive, allowing God to do his
transforming work within the soul, the artistic experience remains active and creative, interested in what happens within the artist, however significant it may be in itself, primarily as raw material for the art. In artistic activity the higher good risks being sacrificed for the lower, the perfecting of the soul for the perfecting of the work. Merton concludes that while poetry can be of great assistance during the early stages of contemplative life, to cling to artistic activity as one moves toward the higher levels of infused contemplation is to risk arresting further spiritual development. He does, however, leave some room for coexistence of the two: personal moral certainty or the desire of a religious superior that one should continue to write for the benefit of others could be a sign that in a particular case a “ruthless sacrifice” of one’s art is not called for. Some comfort may be taken from the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas that sharing the fruits of contemplation is more meritorious than simply enjoying them oneself, and there is no one better prepared than the artist to articulate “what is essentially inexpressible.” Already in the spring of 1950 Merton indicated an apparent dissatisfaction with the way the piece ends, writing to Naomi Burton that he “would rewrite the conclusion” if the article were to be reprinted in a collection of his essays (Witness to Freedom, 127). In 1958, once again in Commonweal, Merton published a revised version of this essay as “Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal” (Oct. 24, 1958, 87–92), in which he presented a more capacious view of contemplation and a more flexible understanding of its relationship to artistic creativity (for a comparison of the two versions see Patrick F. O’Connell, “Poetry and Contemplation: The Evolution of Thomas Merton’s Aesthetic,” The Merton Journal 8, no. 1 [2001], 2–11). But the original version reprinted here remains a significant milestone in Merton’s developing theory of art and a helpful guide to his personal struggles with his own practice as a poet in the late 1940s.

The term “contemplative life” is one that is much mistreated. It is more often used than defined, and that is why arguments about the respective merits of “active” and “contemplative” orders generally end nowhere. In the present article I am not talking about
the contemplative orders, but about the contemplative life. It is a life that can be led and, in fact, must eventually be led by every good Christian. It is the life for which we were created, and which will eventually be our everlasting joy in heaven. By the grace of Christ we can begin to lead that life even on earth, and many in fact do so begin. Some of them are in cloisters, because the vows and rules of religious orders and congregations make the necessary work of preparation easy and, as it were, almost a matter of course. But many more “contemplatives” are out in the world. A lot of them may be found in places like Harlem and wherever people suffer, and perhaps many of these have never even heard the word “contemplative.” And yet on the other hand, not all those who are in contemplative orders are contemplatives. Through their own fault they miss the end of their vocation.

The contemplative life is a life entirely occupied with God—with love and knowledge of God. It can be considered from three points of view, as it were in three degrees. There is first of all possible a kind of natural contemplation of God—that of the artist, the philosopher, and of the most advanced pagan religions. Then there is the contemplative life in the usual sense of the word: a life in which a baptized Christian, making full use of all the means which the Church puts at his disposal—Sacraments, Liturgy, penance, prayer, meditation, spiritual reading and so on—strives to conform his will with God’s will and to see and love God in all things and thus to dispose himself for union with Him. This is active contemplation, in which grace indeed is the principle of all the supernatural value and ordination of our acts, but in which much of the initiative belongs to our own powers, prompted and sustained by grace. This form of the contemplative life prepares us for contemplation properly so called: the life of infused or passive or mystical contemplation.

Infused contemplation is nothing but the fullness of the Christian life—the flowering of grace and the gifts and beatitudes which perfect the work of the three theological virtues.

Far from being something esoteric and dangerous, infused contemplation is given us as the normal term of the Christian life even on earth. Omnis qui ad Dominum convertitur contemplativam vitam
desiderat said Saint Gregory the Great, and he was using contemplation in our sense: to live on the desire of God alone; to have one’s mind divested of all earthly things and united, in so far as human weakness permits, with Christ. And he adds that the contemplative life begins on earth in order to continue, more perfectly, in heaven. Saint Thomas echoed him with his famous phrase: *quaedam inchoatio beatitudinis*. Saint Bonaventure goes farther than any of the other Doctors of the Church in his insistence that all Christians should desire infused contemplation. And in his second conference on the Hexaemeron, applying Christ’s words in Matthew xii, 42, he says that the Queen of the South who left her own land and traveled far to hear the wisdom of Solomon will rise up in judgment against our generation which refuses the treasures of infused wisdom, preferring the far lesser riches of worldly wisdom and philosophy.

Infused contemplation is an experimental knowledge of God’s goodness “tasted” and “possessed” by a vital contact in the depths of the soul. By infused love, we are given an immediate grasp of God’s own substance, and rest in the obscure and profound sense of His presence and transcendent actions within our inmost selves, yielding ourselves altogether to the work of His transforming Spirit.

Now whether we speak of contemplation as active or passive, one thing is evident: it brings us into the closest contact with the one subject matter that is truly worthy of a Christian poet: God as He is seen by faith, in revelation, or in the intimate experience of the soul illumined by the gifts of the Holy Ghost.

Consider, for instance, what a tremendous mine of literary inspiration is in the liturgical life. The liturgy itself contains the greatest literature, not only from Scripture, but from the genius of the Patristic and Middle Ages. The liturgy stands at the crossroads of the natural and supernatural lives, and exploits all the possibilities of both in order to bring out every possible meaning and implication that is in them with respect to our salvation and the praise of God. It surrounds those founts of all supernatural vitality, the Sacraments, with a music that is perfect in its dignity, and ceremonies that are most meaningful by reason of their tremendous
dramatic simplicity, not to mention all the resources of pictorial and plastic art still unknown in this land which has never yet possessed a Chartres or an Assisi.

The liturgy is, then, not only a school of literary taste and a mine of marvelous subjects, but it is infinitely more: it is a great sacramental built around the six Sacraments which surround the greatest Sacrament Who is Christ Himself dwelling among us even unto the consummation of the world.

Christ on the Cross is the fount of all art because He is the Word, the fount of all grace and wisdom. He is the center of everything, of the whole economy of the natural and the supernatural orders. Everything points to this anointed King of Creation Who is the splendor of the eternal light and the mirror of the Godhead without stain. He is the “image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature . . . in Him were all things created, by Him and in Him . . . He is before all and by Him all things consist . . . in Whom it hath pleased the Father that all things should dwell . . . for in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead corporeally,” that in all things He may hold the primacy (Colossians, i and ii).

And yet Catholic poets and writers generally, although they might possess the key to these treasures through a love of Christ that would not shrink from the self-denial required to live a complete and integral Christian life in defiance of the standards of comfort-loving American materialism, prefer to struggle along in the wake of indifferent and mediocre secular models, singing the same old cracked tune that the Georgians inherited from Tennyson and Swinburne and of which even the children of our modern world have long since grown tired.

Of course, it is no wonder that we can’t all live like a Saint John of the Cross. But we might at least read him! He is one of the greatest Catholic poets. How many Catholics have ever even heard of him? And yet every time you open a Catholic anthology you will come across something by Alexander Pope who was baptized a Catholic, indeed, and died one, but who wrote as a deist. Contemplation
Thomas Merton would at least open our eyes to the value of our own tradition, even if we did not have the courage to follow our models to the limit in order to come somewhere near the intensity and perfection of their writing.

No Christian poetry worthy of the name has been written by anyone who was not in some degree a contemplative. But that does not mean that every contemplative is necessarily a great poet. Poetry is an art, a natural skill, a virtue of the practical intellect, and no matter how great a subject we may have in the experience of infused contemplation, we will not be able to put it into words if we do not have the proper command of our medium. That is true. But let us assume that a man already has this natural gift. If the inspiration is helpless without a correspondingly effective technique, technique is barren without inspiration.

Christ is our inspiration, and Christ is at the center of the contemplative life. Therefore, it would seem fairly evident that the one thing that will most contribute to the perfection of Catholic literature in general and poetry in particular will be for our writers and poets to start leading lives of active contemplation. In other words, to lead the full Christian life in so far as they can in their state. That means not necessarily entering a monastery, but aspiring to perfection by the use of all the manifold means that the Church puts at our disposal. It means a solid integration of one’s work and religion and family life and recreations in one vital harmonious unity with Christ at its center. The liturgical life is the most obvious example, but it is hard enough to find a parish where the liturgical life is anything more than a bare skeleton. Nevertheless, any man or woman in the world who wants to can make a very fair attempt at becoming an active contemplative and even dispose himself for the graces of infused prayer. And the best disposition is an efficacious desire to arrive at a deep and intimate and personal and loving knowledge of God through Christ.

If such a desire is efficacious, it will not shrink from penance and sacrifices; it will seek them. It will not be bored with prayer, but prayer will become the life of our soul, and we will be able to carry on affective prayer everywhere. We will read Scripture and above all the contemplative saints—John of the Cross, Teresa of
Avila, John Ruysbroeck, Bonaventure, Bernard and so on. And God will not make too many difficulties about giving us His wisdom. . . .

It is obvious, then, that contemplation has much to offer poetry. But can poetry offer anything, in return, to contemplation? Can the poetic sense help us towards infused contemplation, and, if so, how far along the way?

We have said that the poetic sense may be a remote disposition for mystical prayer. This needs explanation. And the first thing that needs to be stressed is the essential dignity of esthetic experience. It is, in itself, a very high gift, though only in the natural order. It is a gift which very many people have never received, and which others, having received it, have allowed to spoil or become atrophied within them through neglect and misuse.

To many people, the enjoyment of art is nothing more than a sensible and emotional thrill. They look at a picture, and if it stimulates one or another of their sense-appetites they are pleased. On a hot day they like to look at a picture of mountains or the sea because it makes them feel cool. They like paintings of dogs that you could almost pat. But naturally they soon tire of art, under those circumstances. They turn aside to pat a real dog, or they go down the street to an air-conditioned movie, to give their senses another series of jolts. Obviously for such people art is not even a remote preparation for even the lowest degree of contemplation.

But a genuine esthetic experience is something which transcends not only the sensible order (in which, however, it has its beginning) but also that of reason itself. It is a supra-rational intuition of the latent perfection of things. Its immediacy outruns the speed of reasoning and leaves all analysis far behind. In the natural order, as Jacques Maritain has often insisted, it is an analogue of the mystical experience which it resembles and imitates from afar. Its mode of apprehension is that of “connaturality”—it reaches out to grasp the inner reality, the vital substance of its object, by a kind of affective identification of itself with it. It rests in the perfection
of things by a kind of union which somewhat resembles the rest of the soul in its immediate affective contact with God in the obscurity of mystical prayer. A true artist can contemplate a picture for hours, and it is a real contemplation, too. So close is the resemblance between these two experiences that a poet like Blake could almost confuse the two and make them merge into one another as if they belonged to the same order of things. And yet there is an abyss between them.

Nowhere has this resemblance between the experiences of the artist and of the mystic been better treated than in the long and important article on “Art and Spirituality,” by Fr. M. Leonard, S.J., in the “Dictionnaire de Spiritualité.” This theologian stresses the dignity of the esthetic intuition practically to the limit. He gives it everything that it is ontologically able to stand. He insists that the highest experience of the artist penetrates not only beyond the sensible surface of things into their inmost reality, but even beyond that to God Himself. More than that, the analogy with mystical experience is deeper and closer still because, as he says, the intuition of the artist sets in motion the very same psychological processes which accompany infused contemplation. This would seem to be too much: but no, it is not. It fits in with the psychology of Saint Augustine and Saint Bonaventure and the latter’s notion of contemplation per speculum, passing through the mirror of created things to God, even if that mirror may happen to be our own soul.

The Augustinian psychology, which forms the traditional sub-stratum of Christian mystical theology, distinguishes between an inferior and superior soul. Of course, this is only a manner of speaking. There is only one soul, a simple spiritual substance, undivided and indivisible. And yet the soul in so far as it acts through its faculties, making decisions and practical judgments concerning temporal external things, is called “inferior.” The “superior” soul is the same soul, but now considered as the principle or actus primus of these other diverse and multiple acts of the faculties which as it were flow from this inner principle. Only the superior soul is strictly the image of God within us. And if we are to contemplate God at all, this internal image must be re-formed by grace, and then we must enter within ourselves by recollection,
withdrawing our faculties from external things into this inner sanctuary which is the substance of the soul itself. The majority of people, even those who possess the gift of sanctifying grace, never enter into this inward self, which is an abode of silence and peace and where the diversified activities of the intellect and will are collected, so to speak, into one intense and smooth and spiritualized activity which far exceeds in its fruitfulness the plodding efforts of reason working on external reality with its analyses and syllogisms.

It is here that contemplation really begins. It is into this substance or “center” of the soul, when it is suitably purified of images and attachments to sensible things, that the obscure light of infused contemplation will be poured by God, giving us experimental contact with Himself without the medium of sense species, which are, in any case, utterly incapable of apprehending Him.

And yet even in the natural order, without attaining to God in us, the esthetic experience introduces us into this interior sanctuary of the soul and to its inexpressible simplicity and economy and energy and fruitfulness.

Obviously, then, when the natural contemplation of the artist or the metaphysician has already given a man a taste of the peaceful intoxication which is tasted in the supra-rational intuitions of this interior self, the way is already well prepared for infused contemplation. And if God should grant that grace, the person so favored will be much better prepared to recognize it, and to cooperate with God’s action within him. And this, as a matter of fact, is a tremendous advantage. The artist, the poet, the metaphysician is, then, in some sense already naturally prepared and disposed to remove some of the principal obstacles to the light of infused contemplation. He will be less tempted than the ordinary man to reach out for sensible satisfactions and imaginable thrills. He will be more ready to keep himself detached from the level of feeling and emotionalism which so easily make the devotion of less wary souls degenerate into sentimentality. The mere fact of the artist’s
or poet’s good taste, which should belong to him by virtue of his art, will help him to avoid some of the evils that tend to corrupt religious experience before it has a chance to take root and grow in the soul.

If only we realized how much the work of the Holy Ghost is impeded in our souls by our insatiable emotional vulgarity—a vulgarity which we innocently bring with us into the House of God and coddle next to our heart our whole life long, never suspecting that it is a dead and poisoned thing. And the saddest of all is that this domestic enemy is nourished and encouraged by so much of the so-called pious “art” that infects the atmosphere of the Church in so many quarters. If there were no other proof of the infinite patience of God with men, a very good one could be found in His toleration of the pictures that are painted of Him and of the noise that proceeds from musical instruments under the pretext of being in His “honor.”

Mystical contemplation is absolutely beyond the reach of man’s activity. There is nothing he can do to obtain it by himself. It is a pure gift of God. God gives it to whom He wills, when He wills, and in the way and degree in which He wills. By cooperating with the work of ordinary grace we can—and, if we really mean to love God, we must—constantly grow and progress in charity and union with Him by our good works. But no amount of generosity on our part, no amount of effort, no amount of sacrifice will necessarily and immediately gain us progress in mystical prayer. That is a work that must be done by God acting as the “principal agent” (the term is that of Saint John of the Cross). If He is the principal agent, there is another agent: ourselves. But our part is simply to consent and to receive, and all the rest that we can do amounts to the more or less negative task of avoiding the obstacles to God’s action, and keeping our own selfishness and sensuality out of His way. Saint Bonaventure tells us in many places that prayer and ardent desire can persuade God to give us this gift, and that “industria” on our part can open the way for His action. The term industria stands for active purification, and Saint Bonaventure means, by that, precisely the same thing that Saint John of the Cross talks about all through the “Ascent of Mount Carmel,”
namely the voiding and emptying of the soul, clearing it of all images, all likenesses of and attachments to created things so that it may be clean and pure to receive the obscure light of God’s own presence. The soul must be stripped of all its desires for natural satisfactions, no matter how high, how noble or how excellent in themselves. As long as it rests in creatures, it cannot possess God and be possessed by Him, for the love of the soul for creatures is darkness in the sight of God. If we love created things and depend on them and trust in them rather than in God, it will be once again a case of God’s light shining in the darkness, “and the darkness did not comprehend it” (John i. 5).

There is no need to insist on this, since it is the common doctrine of Christian mystical theologians. The one big obstacle to “unitive” or “connatural” or “affective” knowledge of God by infused contemplation (the terms are those of Saint Thomas and his followers) is attachment to human reasoning and analysis and discourse that proceeds by abstraction from sense images, and by syllogizing, to conclusions. In other words, a man cannot at the same time fly in an airplane and walk along the ground. He must do one or the other. And if he insist on walking along the ground—all right, it is no sin. But it will take him much longer and cost him much more effort to get to his destination, and he will have a much more limited view of things along his way. And the even greater obstacle to union with God by pure and infused love, or wisdom, is love of one’s own satisfactions, attachment to one’s own pleasure, the desire to rest in one’s own achievements and in the work of one’s own powers and will. If God is to do the work of infusing contemplation into our souls, we must not be busy with our own natural activity, which, ipso facto, excludes and prevents this complete freedom of action which God demands in us. All He wants from the mystic is cooperation, peaceful consent, and a blind trust in Him: for all this time, since the soul does not act, it remains blind and in darkness, having no idea where it is going or what is being done, and tasting satisfaction that is, at first, extremely tenuous and ineffable and obscure. The reason is, of course, that the soul is not yet sufficiently spiritualized to be able to grasp and appreciate what is going on within it. It remains with nothing but the
vaguest and most general sense that God is really and truly present and working there—a sense which is fraught with a greater certitude than anything it has ever experienced before. And yet if we stop to analyze the experience, or if we make a move to increase its intensity by a natural act, the whole thing will evade our grasp and we may lose it altogether.

Now it is precisely here that the esthetic instinct changes its colors and, from being a precious gift becomes a fatal handicap. If the intuition of the poet naturally leads him into the inner sanctuary of his soul, it is for a special purpose in the natural order: when the poet enters into himself, it is in order to reflect upon his inspiration and to clothe it with a special and splendid form and then return to display it to those outside. And here the radical difference between the artist and the mystic begins to be seen. The artist enters into himself in order to work. For him, the “superior” soul is a forge where inspiration kindles a fire of white heat, a crucible for the transformation of natural images into new, created forms. But the mystic enters into himself, not in order to work but to pass through the center of his own soul and lose himself in the mystery and secrecy and infinite, transcendent reality of God living and working within him.

Consequently, if the mystic happens to be, at the same time, an artist, when prayer calls him within himself to the secrecy of God’s presence, his art will be tempted to start working and producing and studying the “creative” possibilities of this experience. And therefore immediately the whole thing runs the risk of being frustrated and destroyed. The artist will be cheated of a gift of tremendous and supernatural worth, and be left with nothing—but the experience of an artist. And instead of passing through the sanctuary of his own soul into the abyss of the infinite actuality of God Himself, he will remain there a moment, only to emerge again into the exterior world of multiple created things whose variety once more dissipates his energies until they are lost in perplexity and dissatisfaction.
There is, therefore, a tremendous danger that one who has the natural gift of artistic intuition and creation will be constantly cheated of the infinitely superior gift of the union of the soul with God which surpasses all understanding. He may well receive the first taste of infused prayer, for, as Saint John of the Cross says, that is granted to relatively many souls, and often quite soon in their spiritual life, especially in a monastery: but, because of this tragic promethean tendency to exploit every experience as material for “creation” he may remain there all his life on the threshold, never entering in to the banquet, but always running back into the street to tell the passers by of the wonderful music he has heard coming from inside the palace of the King!

What, then, is the conclusion? That poetry can, indeed, help to bring us rapidly through that part of the journey to contemplation that is called active: but when we are entering the realm of true contemplation, where eternal happiness begins, it may turn around and bar our way.

In such an event, there is only one course for the poet to take, for his own individual sanctification: the ruthless and complete sacrifice of his art. This is the simplest and the safest and the most obvious way—and one which will only appall someone who does not realize the infinite distance between the gifts of nature and those of grace, between the natural and the supernatural order, time and eternity, man and God. For the esthetic experience, like everything else temporal, lasts a moment and passes away. Perhaps it enriches the soul with a fuller natural capacity for further experience of the same order—but all such experience will end at death though we will eventually get it back with our bodies. Mystical prayer, on the contrary, enriches man a hundredfold more both in time and in eternity. It purifies the soul and loads it with supernatural merits, enlarging man’s powers and capacities to absorb the infinite rivers of light which will one day be his beatitude. More than anything else it forms Christ in the soul. We become the sons of God, says Saint Thomas (In Matth. v), in so far as we
participate in the likeness of God’s only-begotten and natural Son, Who is begotten Wisdom, Sapientia genita. And therefore by participating in the Gift of Wisdom man arrives at sonship of God. And Saint Bonaventure adds that wisdom (that is mystical contemplation) is the crowning of Christ’s work in souls on earth. Haec sapientia reddit hominem divinum et Christus venit hanc docere. This wisdom makes man divine, and it is this that Christ came on earth to teach (Coll. ii in Hexaemeron).

The sacrifice of an art would seem small enough price to pay for this “pearl of great price.” But there is a further complication, which we can only adumbrate, before closing this article. What if one is morally certain that God wills him to continue writing anyway? That is, what if one’s religious superiors make it a matter of formal obedience to pursue one’s art, for some special purpose like the good of souls? That will not take away distractions, or make God abrogate the laws of the spiritual life. But we can console ourselves with Saint Thomas Aquinas that it is more meritorious to share the fruits of contemplation with others than it is merely to enjoy them ourselves. And certainly, when it comes to communicating some idea of the delights of contemplation, the poet is, of all men, the one who is least at a loss for a means to express what is essentially inexpressible.