

To Charles Cameron

Charles Cameron, a twenty-year-old student reading theology at Christ Church College, Oxford University, wrote asking Merton's views on poetry after having read his essay "Message to Poets" in the April 1964 issue of El Corno Emplumado, a reading which, he said, left him "a dervish full of ruah." He asked Merton: "How many zany monks are there at large in the church now?"

November 29, 1964

It is good to get letters like yours but bad because I can't answer them most of the time but thanks for writing. It makes me feel somehow I am in contact with the human race . . . It would seem that the human race is altogether a bad thing to be in contact with, since this prevents one from thinking himself to be an angel but since I have long ago found it difficult to do this and since there has been the Incarnation and since being a gnostic upsets me and since many other things, I will settle for being in contact with the human race. But when it comes to expressing opinions there you have me. I will at great cost to my apparatus produce one opinion about poetry: I like Stevie Smith. This immediately leads to another, that I like very much Peter Levi SJ. The fact that two opinions came out instead of one seems to indicate that liking Stevie Smith agrees with the apparatus.

All I say about being a dervish is ok and I mean it except here you get beaten for being a dervish. I am bruised for this all day long. It is all very well to be a dervish in print in Mexico and yes I imagine you are right about Cuerno if it were in Spain at least. But here in the monastery

it is best not to be dancing. As to the chant, I cannot even force the beginning of an opinion on that one out of the crevices in my head. I am going to some of it in about ten minutes, I'll tell you that much.

Returning to opinions about poetry I do like the small things that are all over the *Aylesford Review*. Bro. Antoninus was here. He attaches great importance to touching water when he is in a place. When he was here he found water and he touched it, and I have a picture of him doing this. I think it is a very good picture of him, whereas other pictures of him when he is not touching water are obscure and unreal. If he comes to Oxford, will there be something better for him to touch than that unclean river? Perhaps a good pond or something. I was at Oxford in many mists taking an exam and trying to sleep in rooms on High Street as a result of which I went to Cambridge. But I admit that the river at Cambridge is even dirtier and no one I ever knew there was interested in water in any case. I admit I was bullied into rowing in the Clare third boat for a while, in preparation for a longer career in the fourth boat. When I ought to have played rugger, I was a fierce man at rugger. No longer.

Now about politics. A. J. Muste and a lot of good people, mostly from Liberation and so on, were here last week and there was a retreat and we came out with no solution to anything except a hope that is so close to despair that it seems to be one and the same thing. Apart from that I promise you a difficult time with all popery, but with all her wrinkles and spots the eglise is who she is. And I will refrain from any opinion on the end of the third session of the Second Vatican Council, which has persistently been read in our refectory as the Vatile Council. God bless you, no rejections at all. Welcome if you come here, but write first so I will know about it.