THE FUNERAL ORATION OF THOMAS MERTON, AS PRONOUNCED BY THE
COMPASSIONATE BUDDHA

by Father Daniel Berrigan s.j.

Assembled sirs. the courtesies afforded us by the Dali Lama,
by the Abbot of the Trappist Fathers
and by the vergers of your cathedral, are deeply felt
and enter as a sombre joy into our heart’s stream.

the Christ himself (to whom be all praise) were better designated
to speak for this monk, brother and son.
but the absence of your god, decreed by a thousand malevolent crises,
an endless sussuration of anger, a skill in summoning his very scripture against him —
these make possible a vacuum into which my voice moves.
I hear your choice, approving; one god at a time. better an unknown god, a tedious
or torpid one, an import, than that holy son, native to your flesh.
better a subtle millenial smile, than anger and infected wounds.
better me than he. so be it; I shall speak.

the assumption of this monk into ecstasy,
the opening of the crystal portals before that glancing spirit!
he was (I speak a high and rare praise) neither too foreign, too christian,
too strenuous after reward, to attain eternal knowledge.
in his mortal life, he refused direction from these pylons
standing like sign posts in your land, impermeable, deadly smooth,
hard to the touch as the very membrane of hell.
he detested their claim upon the soul, he exorcised their rumors.
he refused to grant attention to their hieroglyphics.

(I too have been a guest in your cities. I have been conducted with pomp
through your martian workshops, and heard with a start of fear
the incantations offered by your choral genius.
indeed your aim is clear; the saints, the innocent, the visionaries
are the target of your encompassing death wish.
but the Buddha knows no disdain; he stoops low to enter your labyrinthe,
to uncoil its secrets, to bare its beast.
the Buddha, a length of rope, a dog in the dust; according to the parables which I embrace
once more, in tribute to this man.)

the monk has attained god, for reasons which bear scrutiny.
he had first of all attained man. does the nexus trouble you, issuing as it does
from a mouth so neutral, so silent? or so you conjure me.
Gioconda after all, is paid only to smile. she does so; her value mounts and mounts.

but the monk Merton, in his life and going forth
makes it expedient, if only for an hour, that a blow be dealt
your cultivated and confident myth. if the gods are silent
if even to this hour, Christ and Buddha stand appalled
before your idols, if we breathe the stench of your hecatombs
still, the passage of a good man restores all;
in a sign, it brings the gods to earth,
even to you. for once, for a brief space, we measure with rods the incalculable gulf
between yourselves and the creative dream. for a space of words,
we quicken your sluggish hearts in pursuit of the sovereign will.

o makers and unmakers! I shall shortly be borne
in a flowering cart of sandal, into high heaven; a quaint apotheosis!
the routine slaveries once more possess you
man and god, Buddha and Merton, those years, this hour, fold in like a dough.
the blows of the kneading fist withdraw, the times are your own.
wars, the readying of wars, the minds whose inner geometric
is an ever more complex web; conflict, games of death, checks and counters —
I leave you, your undoing, promethean doers and despoilers.

a hope?
Christ and Buddha together have fashioned a conundrum. hear it.
the hour of your despoiling is the hour of our return.
until then, the world is yours, and you are Moloch's, bound hand and foot
upon a wheel of fire.

the monk Thomas I take up in lotus hands
to place him in the eternal thought
a jewel upon my forehead.

THE DEBATE by Agnes Denes
Courtesy: Ruth White Gallery, New York