

Words, War and Silence: Thomas Merton for the Twenty-First Century

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Throughout his writing life, Thomas Merton was preoccupied with the dangers of language. Here he is writing on December 2, 1940:

The world is full of the terrible howling of engines of destruction, and I think those who preserve their sanity and do not go mad or become beasts will become Trappists, but not by joining an order, Trappists in secret and in private – Trappists so secretly that no one will suspect they have taken a vow of silence. We are surrounded by noise, so much noise that the statement that we will be silent will be drowned out, so there is no point in adding that statement to all the others, to the din of guns. . . . What is the sense of opening your mouth in a bombardment to say you will be silent?¹

From 1940 right to those extraordinary maturing years, in the early and mid-sixties, Merton kept an eye and an ear open to what was being done to language, in the climate of militarism, rivalry and international anxiety. And when in 1968 he wrote his great essay on “War and the Crisis of Language”² he picked up these themes with a new energy and a new depth. In his words, “The incoherence of language that cannot be trusted, and the coherence of weapons that are infallible, or thought to be: this is the dialectic of politics and war, the prose of the twentieth century” (*NVA* 235). *The prose of the twentieth century* – that extraordinary and destructive vortex of corrupted language and intensified, polished, professionalized violence – that’s prose, and that’s why – as he says – it is the poet who has to be “most sensitive to the sickness of language” (*NVA* 234).

In these essays and in many of his letters and journals of the mid-sixties, Merton reflects on where that sickness arises, and how it works. You could summarize much of what he says, I believe, in these terms: the world of prose is a world in which language is used as a means of power. Language has to do with conflict and advantage. Language has to do with

1. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 267.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980) 234-47; subsequent references will be cited as “*NVA*” parenthetically in the text. The essay first appeared posthumously in *The Critique of War: Contemporary Philosophical Explorations*, ed. Robert Ginsberg (Chicago: Regnery, 1969) 99-119.

the submission of the other. But the paradox is that where language is only about power, the environment created is one of a final, deadening banality. When language is only about power you can finally only talk about yourself, and there is, as we all know, no subject in the universe so short-term fascinating and so long-term boring as ourselves.

Merton wants to identify, in his own context, that desperate and death-dealing banality of language, which modern militarized society produces. He was fascinated by Hannah Arendt's extraordinary reflections on Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem and fascinated by what Arendt herself called "The Banality of Evil" as it was revealed in Eichmann. What Merton found most terrifying about this pathetic minor bureaucrat who had so efficiently served the Third Reich's mass murderers was that he was an entirely ordinary person, quite incapable of saying anything memorable or indeed really intelligent. Eichmann didn't know how to talk, and that is what Evil does; ultimately it robs us of the power of speech. And I believe that it was in part his wrestling with what Hannah Arendt wrote about Eichmann that produced Merton's intensified sense, in the mid-sixties, of the dangerous state of language. So he wrote in his journal on June 6, 1965:

The whole picture is one of an enormously equipped and self-complacent white civilization in combat with a huge, sprawling, colored and mestizo world (a majority!) armed with anything they can lay hands on. And the implicit assumption behind it all, as far as *Life* and apparently everyone else is concerned, is that "we" are the injured ones, we are trying to keep peace and order, and "they" (abetted by communist demons) are simply causing confusion and chaos, with no reasonable motives whatever. Hence "we," being attacked (God and justice are also attacked in us), have to defend ourselves, God, justice, etc. Dealing with these "inferior" people becomes a technical problem something like pest-extermination. . . . America is oversimplifying all the questions – reducing them to terms which make sense to us only and to no one else, and expecting others to see things our way, since our way is by definition the only reasonable one. Hence the fatal breakdown of communication.³

And he goes on with initially a rather puzzling swerve of reference:

Wives of astronauts talk by radio with their husbands in outer space; a priest of St. Meinrad's in Peru can call Jim Wygal and talk to him

3. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 253-54; subsequent references will be cited as "*DWL*" parenthetically in the text.

on the phone he has in his car, while he is driving around Louisville. And what do they have to say? “Hi! It’s a nice day! Hope you are feeling good, I am feeling good, the kids are feeling good, the dog is feeling good, etc., etc.” (*DWL* 254)

A fatal breakdown of communication. What’s left is banality. And that I think is what’s behind that rather chilling phrase about the “prose” we live in: the incoherence of language that cannot be trusted, and the coherence of weapons that are infallible.

Let’s spend a moment looking a little more closely at the argument in that passage from the journals of 1965. Merton is speaking of the reduction of complex questions, complex conflicts between states and civil orders, the reduction of such questions to “our terms” alone. The whole situation is cast in the terms that leave me and us at the center of things, which means of course that ideas of God and justice and meaning live here, where I happen to be. And if meaning is bound up simply with where I happen to be at any one moment, there is no real exchange going on. And if there is no real exchange going on, there is no learning going on. And if there is no learning going on, there is no newness happening. And if there is no newness happening, I am indeed imprisoned in banality. The dog is feeling good.

It is a matter of consolidating just one account of what’s reasonable, what’s obvious. What is obvious? What is reasonable? I am. And so you are by definition not obvious and not reasonable, and therefore I don’t really have to listen to you, because I don’t need anything from you, whether in word or deed. What emerges is a static view of language in which growth cannot happen. And a static language, which simply labels things efficiently, doesn’t have to be completely untruthful but it is so one-dimensional that it makes us untruthful. There are truthful statements which make us untruthful, because in representing what they represent, they allow no room for learning, no room for change.

It’s in that context, to go back to some of Merton’s essays on war in the 1960s, that he can speak about some of the corruptions and crises of language in the propaganda of war – for example in the famous essay, “Target Equals City” (*NVA* 94-103). And in the rather more developed essay he wrote in that period, “Justice in Modern War,”⁴ we find him writing about the process by which, in the last days of the Second World War, and increasingly in the rhetoric of the 1950s and ’60s, any concentration

4. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) 58-67; subsequent references will be cited as “*PPCE*” parenthetically in the text.

of population in an enemy environment came to be regarded as a target. “Any city at all,” he writes, “by the mere fact of being a city, was now a ‘military target’” (*NVA* 99). The word “target” and the word “city” had become completely identified.

In this environment, what’s going on, Merton suggests, is a shaking up of our whole notion of reason and sanity. By identifying reason with what we can cope with, what we understand, where we live, we are putting in question the idea of our sanity – we are so reasonable as to be mad. And here, in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, are some of his thoughts about reason and sanity. Once again, we are back with Eichmann:

The sanity of Eichmann is disturbing. We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. We rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism, madness, destruction. And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the *sane* ones who are the most dangerous. It is the sane ones, the well-adapted ones, who can without qualms and without nausea aim the missiles and press the buttons that will initiate the great festival of destruction that they, *the sane ones*, have prepared. What makes us so sure, after all, that the danger comes from a psychotic getting into a position to fire the first shot in a nuclear war? Psychotics will be suspect. The sane ones will keep them far from the button. No one suspects the sane, and the sane one will have *perfectly good reasons*, logical, well-adjusted reasons for firing the shot. They will be obeying sane orders that have come sanely down the chain of command. And because of their sanity they will have no qualms at all. When the missiles take off, then, *it will be no mistake*.⁵

We could, I think, without too much adaptation, read that passage in the light of what some people say about the terrible danger of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of rogue states. Because of course rogue states will use nuclear weapons unreasonably, whereas So does sanity mean being in our right mind? Sanity, it seems, as defined in the logic of our militarized world, means something very strange indeed. It means the restriction of reason to where I am, who I am, what I understand.

And war is above all the context where language comes to be about power. In that environment, which is all about contests of power, victory depends on stripping the enemy of meaning, not just overcoming the enemy but rendering them meaningless. By treating ourselves, and ourselves alone, as reasonable, what we do, of course, is to say of the other, there

5. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 46-47; subsequent references will be cited as “*RU*” parenthetically in the text.

is no meaning there. But the cost, as Merton makes very clear, is that we strip meaning from ourselves. When we deny that there is any reason or meaning outside where we are and who we are, when we deny the possibility of learning or growing, what of course happens is that we end up talking about “the dog being fine.” We have nothing really left to say.

And so Merton traces the continuity between war’s impact on language and the impact of an entire adversarial and self-reflexive culture. And I believe that if he were commenting on the twenty-first century he would find plenty of material to confirm his instincts: a world of self-reflexive culture, of polarized politics, of reductive, banal and trivial accounts of human nature, a thinning and a shrinking of language and what it can say and do, and a one-sided view of reason.

The Lesser Evil

There’s one particular context in which he has something to say about reason which comes through in a couple of his essays in *Peace and the Post Christian Era* on “Theologians and Defense” (PPCE 75-88) and “The Legacy of Machiavelli” (PPCE 47-57). In these two essays, Merton mentions what had become by the mid-1960s something like received wisdom in some Catholic, and not only Catholic, ethical circles. He’s analyzing the way in which people speak about “the lesser evil” in times of war. He points out that doctrines about the lesser evil, doctrines about those deeply tragic situations where you end up doing something that you never meant to do to avoid something still worse, those doctrines are developed in the history of Christian ethics as a form of making sense of something chaotic that *has happened*: you have been put in an impossible situation, you have acted as best you could, you have done something which is perhaps objectively terrible, and perhaps it helped to avert something worse, and there may therefore be absolution.

But what if you turn that on its head and, so to speak, treat it as a forward-looking policy. What if you say that the lesser evil is something you need positively to plan for? In other words, instead of thinking there are circumstances in which you will lose your bearings and terrible things will happen, you coldly and reasonably calculate that in the future you will do something which is far less than ideal so as to avoid something further down the line. You will plan for the immoral. So the doctrine of the lesser evil, instead of being a way you look back on a chaotic and difficult experience, make some kind of sense of it in the presence of the mercy of God, you treat it instead as a policy that allows you to avoid radical demands. You know that you will not be able to fulfill the demands of the laws of God, so in advance you let yourself off the hook.

Now that's a very interesting point about shifts in the language of moral theology, and perhaps a slightly technical one. But I think that what Merton is driving at here is really something about power. Imagine: I think forward; I say, the time may come when I will, with a great deal of rational calculation, do something which is not particularly impressive from a moral point of view, but I will be right to do it. I will be innocent. I will have reason for doing it. And so I take to myself the ultimate power of innocence. Thus a doctrine which is initially about the ultimate weakness and vulnerability of asking for absolution after you've made a mess, becomes a doctrine about how you take to yourself the power of innocence in advance. You know in advance you will be right to do something wrong. That's power, very impressive and substantive power.

And I contrast that frame of mind with the reflection of Merton's contemporary, the great Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose writings made such an impact on Merton in the early 1960s, Bonhoeffer getting involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler, knowing perfectly well that Christians do not go around assassinating people, knowing that he couldn't see any other way of responding to the horror of his environment, knowing that in the light of that he would be guilty and need absolution. Now that's a very different frame of mind than one that begins by saying I will declare myself innocent in advance. That's what Merton is trying to direct our attention to, a set of ethical formulae, a style of ethical rhetoric, which empowers us by saying in advance, it will all be alright, even when we do something wrong.

And so rationalizing extreme situations and extreme choices in advance is one way of paralyzing our moral imagination, leaving us without challenge, without unsettlement, without inner conflict. Conflict is removed from the interior to the exterior – the conflict within myself when I contemplate the appalling choices that I face individually, that we face corporately, that internal conflict is externalized, as the only conflict that matters is between me and the other, us and the stranger (an issue as deeply connected in Merton's mind with the race question in the United States as it was with the Cold War): no inner collision, only a conflict between my reasonable place and the unreason of everybody else; my meaningful existence and everybody else's meaningless existence.

Reason and Reasoning

Pope Benedict spoke frequently about the way in which our North Atlantic civilization seemed to be drifting away from reason. And I think he had a great deal to adduce in support of that. But my reservation would be that I would prefer to talk about reasoning rather than reason, because I

think that reasoning is something we do together. The more we talk about reason the more we think it is something that goes on inside our heads, whereas reasoning is something we do with others. I'd like to say that we are in danger not of becoming a society devoid of reason but a society that is short of reasoning. "Come let us reason together" is a line from the prophet Isaiah (1:18), and one worth bearing in mind in this context. Reasoning is the practice of discourse-sharing, words that open rather than close. And what Merton is commending to us is a reasoning mind, not a reasonable mind, but a reasoning mind.

In all these analyses of the paralysis of language, the corruption, the banality of language that comes in a militarized and polarized world, in that context what Merton wants us to do is reasoning. Reasoning reveals what I didn't know I knew, and what I didn't know I didn't know. Reasoning refreshes and renews what I say. Reasoning delivers me from cliché, because, with luck, the person I'm reasoning with will say that's nonsense, or that's obvious. To speak about reasoning in this way is not to deliver ourselves over into some kind of relativist or indeterminist point of view. The process of reasoning is all about looking for a fuller opening into what it is that language is trying to cope with, a reality which is much greater than where I stand, much greater than what I am and what is obvious. Reasoning together acknowledges that I cannot make the world meaningful on my own. And if there is one fundamental principle of faith, perhaps it is this. This is not a world in which I can make sense on my own. I can't make sense without my maker, and I cannot make sense without my fellow creatures, human and non-human.

So Merton's protest against the corruptions of language by war, by violence, by the polarization of late modern society, Merton's cautions, lead us back to that vision of a reasoning humanity. He speaks in a brief essay on war, the last of the "Seven Words" comprising Section II of *Love and Living*,⁶ of the essential unreason of war. Though sustaining itself, he writes, by a massive pseudo-logic of its own, war is in fact a complete suspension of reason. This is at once its danger and the source of its immense attraction. War suspends reason, war suspends reasoning. War assumes that for this time there is nothing to learn and there is nowhere to grow. And in such an environment, what we have to do as people who believe that language is something more than just the reflection of the good estate of our dogs, what we have to do is to restore poetry and imagination as necessary for social well-being.

6. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 128-32; subsequent references will be cited as "*L&L*" parenthetically in the text.

We need strange, difficult, new words; we need a constant battle against cliché. To say we need reasoning is actually quite often to say we need unreasonable, eccentric contributions to our discourse. I think that is partly why Merton so loved writing his Joycean, macaronic, anti-language poems and prose. He wanted to show that language was a great deal stranger than anybody might imagine, and that you could do some really extraordinary things with it if you put your mind to it. Those letters that he wrote to Bob Lax,⁷ poetry included in *The Geography of Lograire*,⁸ all of that is Merton's testimony to a language which is the absolute opposite of "the dog is well," etc., the opposite of banality, challenging, a kind of reasoning which is certainly not rational argument in the usual sense, but an engaged shared exploration, which is the essence of reasoning.

Necessary for social well-being, yes, necessary for a society that is willing to learn, because learning is somewhere near the heart of whatever it is that pushes back against a world that is all about power and contest and rivalry. Learning is paradoxically a situation in which power and weakness, advantage and disadvantage, are always being renegotiated. To say "teach me," is for me to say, "You know what I don't know." For you to say, "This is what I want to teach you" is for you to say, "I want you to have the power that I have." Learning constantly shifts and renegotiates these apparently rigid exclusive terms of power and powerlessness, of advantage and disadvantage, and that's why real teaching, real pedagogy is always transformative. Merton knew this very profoundly and of course he knew it not least in connection with some of what was going on in his lifetime in Latin America. And it's a lesson that we have singularly failed to learn, I think, in the North Atlantic world, where increasingly, political and economic pressures drive us to reduce learning to the acquisition of sane, socially useful skills. Merton thought otherwise.

Keeping Silence

But a model like this, a model of language bound in with reasoning and shared exploration – that implies of course the inevitability of silence. To learn is to receive. Discourse means an alteration of speech and silence. Discourse, reasoning together is about time, patience and listening.

If somebody were to advertise at the present moment some mysterious method whereby we could take the time out of learning something,

7. See Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *A Catch of Anti-Letters* (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews and McMeel, 1978); Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax*, ed. Arthur W. Biddle (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

8. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969).

if somebody were to promise us that within twenty-four hours we could acquire a skill, we'd all be queuing up because we hate taking the time of learning. Sometimes people want answers to very large questions, ethical and spiritual questions, now, and yet we know that there are questions that could only be answered in the time it takes to live them through – time and patience and listening.

And I think that sense of discourse which absorbs what the other is saying, feeds back for the other to absorb, has something to do with one of the most notable and sometimes almost comical features of Merton's writing, what I and others have called his ventriloquism, his ability to pick up straight away the idiom and the rhythm of whoever he's taking to and whoever he's writing to.⁹ It is one of the most marked things when you read a collection of his letters; you suddenly realize he is sounding remarkably like Czeslaw Milosz, or Suzanne Butorovich – he sounds like a Polish poet, a Sufi mystic or a Californian teenager as he writes. He picks up the rhythm; he picks up the idiom. We can say that this is in some way a kind of weakness, a kind of desire to be liked or to be approved of, but I think it's much deeper than that; I think there's something in Merton that genuinely seeks to find in the other a voice in which he can speak as well, so that the discourse can advance.

Thus far Merton has offered a diagnosis of what happens to language in a militarized, polarized world; he's offered a diagnosis of what it is for unreason to take hold of us; and he has implicitly and explicitly offered a model not of reasonableness but of reasoning, a reasoning bound in with time and patience, with silence and listening, a reasoning which allows me really to be molded by the other as I mold them, in which I cannot make meaning for myself by denying meaning to the other. And as soon as you put it like that you can see how this principle maps onto a whole range of issues that Merton is concerned with, how it maps onto what he has to say about race, how it maps onto what he has to say about interfaith: I cannot affirm meaning for myself by denying meaning to the other – not, as I've said, in a relativist spirit, not in an indeterminist spirit, not in a bland anything-goes spirit, but in the knowledge that whatever meaning comes alive for me, it comes alive in discourse, in reasoning, in engagement.

Merton is good on silence partly because he's often so confessedly so very bad at it himself. He knows why he needs it, in other words. His own passionate "logorrhea," at times, the pouring out of words, is at the same time an appeal to the other: speak to me and I will listen. I speak

9. See Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011) 66.

like this; I talk, I write endlessly, paradoxically, so that you know, if you say something, I will hear it. Oddly enough, it seems to have worked for so many of his correspondents and his friends.

Our present culture crises are of course as much about how we listen as how we literally keep silence. The challenge of our culture is not simply can we be silent enough, but is the nature of our silence receptive or not? There are silences of resentment, there are silences of fear, there are silences where someone has silenced another, and there is the silence that comes with open hands and open heart, and says, "Here I am, speak, your servant is listening," words we speak not only to God, like Samuel in Scripture (1S 3:10), but to one another: speak, your servant is listening.

Love and Learning in God

Finally I want to say a little bit about the theological framework in which Merton places all of this. None of this comes from nowhere; none of it is just Merton making things up. He frames it within a picture of the nature of God, God who is neither speech nor silence in the usual sense, God whose speech is such that it sounds like silence, whose silence is so intense that it sounds like speech. How is this?

I think the answer is in part that God is by definition beyond the contests of power. God is not a competitor for power, one of the most fundamental principles of all the traditional religions of our world. God is not a competitor for power: in God is all peace, all stillness, all fullness, all meaning. And that is true of God not because God has won a battle with creation, and subdued creation, but because God is God. Blindingly simple, in some ways, and it feels almost embarrassing to say something so obvious. And yet how much of our religiousness seems to be based on a not very well hidden anxiety that God cannot look after himself. Some years ago a book was published with the title *What Will Happen to God?*¹⁰ It was a book written out of a very deep and painful anxiety about changes in the church. I could understand the emotion from which it was written, but I couldn't quite understand and still can't where that title came from.

One of the central affirmations, I think, of classical Christian theology and indeed lots of other theologies is that, if I can put it rather bluntly, nothing happens to God; or, God is not the sort of reality to whom or to which things just happen. To be a creature, our glory and our danger, is that we are the sort of beings to which things just happen. That is what it is to be a creature; that's what it is to be human: things just happen to us. But God is not the kind of reality to whom things just happen. God

10. William Oddie, *What Will Happen to God? Feminism and the Reconstruction of Christian Belief* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

is God. God is free, God is sovereign, if you want to use that sort of language. God is not at risk from competition. God is not resentful of the life that God has brought into being. Right from Plato onwards, people have said, “There is no envy in the divine nature.” God has nothing to worry about. Because our life is held so entirely in an infinite generosity, what is there for God to be jealous of in us? And yet so much of our religious language assumes, doesn’t it, that God is really quite worried about status and safety, and if human beings are doing well that’s rather bad news for God, and if God is doing well that’s rather bad news for humans. If only we could break through that fundamental spiritual and theological misunderstanding, we might, I daresay, begin to learn something.

Because God is beyond contests of power, the one thing we can say with some confidence and security about God, is that the anxieties about speech and silence in our world just don’t apply. God doesn’t talk so as to silence us. What God does, is, says, is both supremely silent, supremely communicative. In *Love and Living*, Merton writes: “So silent is His speech that, to our way of thinking, His speech is no-speech” (*L&L* 18). What God does, says, and is, is the single act of love in which all words are spoken and heard. And in our reasoning, our attempts to reason together, explore together, to manage maturely and joyfully that alternation of speaking and listening, of speech and silence, for all that to make sense we need some awareness of that infinite context in which speech and silence are one, in which all there is, is gift. Look at it from one angle and it is speech, it is God making sense to us; look at it from another angle, it is silence, God being simply God, for us – a single act of love in which all our words are spoken and heard.

Re-creation in the Word

For Merton as for any Christian theologian, the human destiny is re-creation in the word, through the Incarnate Word. Again, from *Love and Living*, his essay on “Rebirth and the New Man in Christianity” (*L&L* 192-202) sums this up with particular eloquence. What’s given to us in Christ is new being, a new mode of self-transcendence, a new way of being ourselves – not just locked up in ourselves, but in that constant reaching out to, listening to, absorbing, exchanging with the other. Our new being, our new mode of self-transcendence, is a liberation from the contests of power, and therefore it is a liberation into both speech and silence in a new way.

If we are aware of the new being, the new mode, the new creation, aware of the infinite gift that surrounds and sustains us, our words will not be the defensive banality of a reason that is restricted to my own terms,

my own safety. My silence will not be a fearful or anxious holding back. I shall somehow learn to speak in such a way as to build connection. I shall learn to keep silence in such a way as to be built, to be fed. Why is it that we speak of the gift of the Holy Spirit as the gift of connectedness, the gift of tongues, that Spirit which is also the Spirit of silence: because both our speech and our silence in the new creation are of the Spirit. All people are now known to God as one.

[All] are now seen as created, redeemed, and loved by God, and all are “one in Christ” in the sense that all are known to God as One Man, the universal Man, Christ, the Son of God. . . . The idea of “new birth” is at the very heart of Christianity, and has consequences of profound importance. If this is forgotten – as it so often is – then not only the individual Christian believer but also the Christian community and the society which has traditionally been regarded as Christian all become involved in inner contradictions which eventually lead to crisis. This, in turn, means that many will begin to experience their Christian life as an insoluble problem from which they either escape by disbelief or which they try to meet by some kind of emotionalism or doctrinaire rigidity. (*L&L* 193-94)

Merton contrasts this renewed speech and silence with the empty *neophilia*, the empty obsession with the new and the fashionable, which contemporary society pushes at us, which just intensifies our anxieties: am I being new enough? Am I being up-to-date enough? (see *L&L* 195). That’s not the problem, says Merton. The Gospel is all about renewal, all about new creation, all about new forms of self-transcendence, and a new access to speech and silence – and that has nothing to do with what tickles your boredom, what keeps you from going to sleep.

Christ vs. Prometheus: The Generosity of God

Perhaps the most profound thing he has to say about all this is found in his meditation on Prometheus, in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (*RU* 79-88). Prometheus, you remember, is the classical hero who is condemned to an eternity of torment because he attempts to steal fire from Heaven. Merton reflects on how profoundly attractive to us is the figure of Prometheus because we assume God is keeping something back; God’s hand needs to be forced; some great hero has to go and get what we need from God. And that heroism, that struggle, has a truth about it. We have to become who we are by risk, by venturing something, but we cannot do it by imagining we have to steal our life from God. Guilty, frustrated, rebellious, fear-ridden, Prometheus seeks to assert himself, and fails. His mysticism

enables him to glory in defeat.

But if we move away from the false God that Prometheus is trying to tangle with, and think of what the true God does, you can see how the story and the figure of Jesus Christ becomes a kind of mirror image, a reversed image, of Prometheus. Instead of the hero who goes boldly to steal fire from Heaven, to make God gracious and generous, here is the figure who embodies the grace and the generosity, the gift of the infinite, in human form: completely the opposite of Prometheus.

No one was ever less like Prometheus on Caucasus than Christ on His Cross. For Prometheus thought he had to ascend into heaven to steal what God had already decreed to give him. But Christ, Who had in Himself all the riches of God and all the poverty of Prometheus, came down with the fire Prometheus needed, hidden in His Heart. And He had Himself put to death next to the thief Prometheus in order to show him that in reality God cannot seek to keep anything good to Himself alone. Far from killing the man who seeks the divine fire, the Living God will Himself pass through death in order that man may have what is destined for him. (*RU* 87-88)

This essay on Prometheus is, to my mind, one of Merton's greatest theological reflections, which deserves far more attention. While it may seem a long way from where we started, with astronauts speaking to their wives or Eichmann in Jerusalem, the connection should be clear. If God is the God we say God is as Christians, but also if God is the God all people of traditional faith say God is, God is not afraid of us. It is because God is not afraid of us that God both speaks and is silent with us. Remember: "So silent is His speech that, to our way of thinking, His speech is no-speech" (*L&L* 18). If we understand that weaving together of speech and silence in the God who is not afraid of us and not anxious about us, we begin perhaps to sense our own tangles being unpicked, to sense that our own fears, our own reasonableness, can be broken open without destroying us.

That is the mystery into which Merton seeks to draw us, a mystery into which we learn to advance, in which we learn to live, by all sorts of interlocking paths of life: by silence, by the sheer bloody discipline of the contemplative life, shutting up, sitting still, and listening, by the action in the world which seeks to build lasting, truthful, creative relationships, especially with those we find most strange or most elusive to us; by that consistent pressure in the public sphere which challenges all those aspects of our public life and public discourse that seek to make banal and static our speech and anxious and destructive our society. In all those paths, Merton led and leads. So much of what he writes in the

1960s about these matters seems to echo more strongly than ever in this second decade of a new century, where so much of what he identifies as poisonous and destructive in North Atlantic civilization, seems to have anchored itself more deeply than ever.

And what are we as believers, as people seeking to live contemplatively, to live justly, what are we going to do about it? We could talk about justice, we can talk about peace, and we do, but ultimately, the justice we speak and the peace we seek have to be anchored in that deep transformation to which Merton calls us, the transformation of what we say and what we don't say, the transformation that happens in the true silence where we hear that infinite, that indescribable word, which is God's sheer gift to what God has made. Contemplation is never an alibi for not acting, nor is acting an alibi for not contemplating. Part of Merton's greatness is that he refuses the cliché of separating those two. He obliges us to think them through again and again in inseparable connection, and perhaps not least important, obliges us to think them through in terms of what ultimately we believe as deeply, as passionately, about the character of God.