

ARISTOTLE MEETS THE SPIRITUAL CLASSICS:

The Rhetoric of Thomas Merton

by **Mary Murray**

What distinguishes Thomas Merton from spiritual writers of other centuries is neither a twentieth century message nor a twentieth century medium, for as we all know, spiritual classics are timeless. No, instead, something older than the Western Christian spiritual classic made Merton's work so influential and so widely read, and that is his use of complicated rhetorical patterns which Aristotle himself would admire. I will confine this discussion to a comparison of several spiritual classics: Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *The Imitation of Christ*, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Readers can substitute in their own favorites not listed here, but I think you will find that it is rhetoric that distinguishes Merton from the rest, a compelling finding for twentieth century religious writing.

You would think that the spiritual classic of earlier centuries, especially ones closer to the grand influences of Cicero, would bear marks of elegant persuasion. But this is not the case. The purpose of pre-twentieth century spiritual classics is to inform, not to persuade, and hence their texts are notably didactic. The concern, rigor, and forceful nature of most spiritual classics betrays the urgency of the writer to have the devout soul grow closer to God and to grow in harmony with self and neighbor. I will be concerned here with a typical rhetorical pattern that Merton employs, the argument from contradiction. Aristotle termed this argument one of the Possible and Impossible (1392a). It is useful when analyzing Merton's rhetoric to cite the work of modern rhetoricians C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca who have restored and augmented Aristotle's theories of argumentation for twentieth century readers in *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (1969). There they say that the argu-

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ment from contradiction has great and immediate power. It presents readers with a choice and implicitly asks them to dispense with the unreasonable alternative. Given Merton's love of individual choice, this pattern of argumentation is indeed as replete as we might expect in his prose. But let us confine this discussion to how this argument predisposes the twentieth century reader to grow closer to God in ways that religious arguments from earlier centuries do not. Let us begin with a comparison of Merton and Thomas a Kempis on the topic of solitary prayer. Here is a passage from *The Imitation of Christ*:

Leave vain things to those who would be vain, and take heed only of those things that Our Lady commanded. Shut fast the door of your soul — that is to say your imagination — and keep it cautiously, as much as you can, from beholding any earthly thing, and then lift up your mind to your Lord, Jesus; open your heart faithfully to Him, and abide with Him in your chamber, for you shall not find so much peace outside. If you had not gone forth as much as you have, and had not given ear to idle tales, you would be in much more inward peace than you are. But because you took delight in hearing gossip and novelty, you shall suffer sometimes both trouble of heart and disquiet of mind.
(*Imitation of Christ*, p. 58)

And now Merton:

Contemplation is not trance or ecstasy, nor the hearing of sudden unutterable words, nor the imagination of lights. It is not the emotional fire and sweetness that come with religious exaltation. It is not enthusiasm, the sense of being "seized" by an elemental force and swept into liberation by mystical frenzy. These things may seem to be in some way like a contemplative awakening in so far as they suspend the ordinary awareness and control exercised by our empirical self. But they are not the work of the "deep self," only of the emotions, of the somatic unconscious. They are a flooding up of the dionysian forces of the "id." Such manifestations can of course accompany a deep and religious experience, but they are not what I am talking about here as contemplation.
(*New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 10-11)

Note the rhetorical complexity in Merton's reversal, definition, and subsequent amplification. Rhetoricians Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca would label such an argument one from incompatibility. One form of the argument of contradiction, the argument from incompatibility, rests on circumstances. That is, Merton shows us that physical and emotional circumstances may be our understanding of contemplation, but they do not make for true contemplation. In the presentation of these opposing views, he enables readers to dismiss their previous views quickly and move on to a deeper, richer understanding of solitary prayer. Notice that Thomas a Kempis offers no clarifications but directly tells the reader how to pray in solitude: "lift up your mind . . . open your heart . . . abide with Him." His use of imperatives would not be well received today and it is almost unimaginable to think of Merton writing *New Seeds of Contemplation* in this manner. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca offer some explanation: "Contrary to appearances, the imperative does not have persuasive force: all its power comes from the hold of the person commanding over the one carrying out his orders; the relation is one of relative forces, without any implication of adherence. When actual force is lacking or when one does not consider using it, the imperative assumes the tone of a prayer" (*The New Rhetoric*, p. 158). Thus the imperative requires us to be in relation to the author, carrying out his or her orders. In contrast, Merton's approach places no requirements on the reader. Instead, we are asked to consider and choose between concepts.

Let us examine how two spiritual classics deal with paradox, for it is a common occurrence in religious writing. The paradox of understanding humility as the acceptance of one's gifts can be seen in both passages. The following is from St. Francis de Sales:

There is no need to fear that knowledge of his gifts will make us proud if only we remember this truth, that none of the good in us comes from ourselves. Do mules stop being dull, disgusting beasts simply

because they are laden with a prince's precious, perfumed goods? What good do we possess that we have not received? And if we have received it, why do we glory in it? On the contrary, a lively consideration of graces received makes us humble because knowledge of them begets gratitude for them. (Devout Life, p. 135)

Here is Merton:

In great saints you find that perfect humility and perfect integrity coincide. The two turn out to be practically the same thing. The saint is unlike everybody else precisely because he is humble.

As far as the accidentals of this life are concerned, humility can be quite content with whatever satisfies the general run of men. But that does not mean that the essence of humility consists in being just like everybody else. On the contrary, humility consists in being precisely the person you actually are before God, and since no two people are alike, if you have the humility to be yourself you will not be like anyone else in the whole universe. But this individuality will not necessarily assert itself on the surface of everyday life. It will not be a matter of mere appearances, or opinions, or tastes, or ways of doing things. It is something deep in the soul. (New Seeds, p. 99)

Typical of most pre-twentieth century spiritual classics, Francis de Sales' book argues from analogy and experience. While accepted then perhaps, these arguments are not valued highly today. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca tell us that empiricists regard analogies as of "weak and uncertain character." Furthermore, and more interesting for our purposes, analogies presume an acceptance that the natural world is linked to or is a mirror of the spiritual world. Unless we accept that implicit premise, analogies will be useless to us. And so today, despite their beauty and eloquence, analogies in religious texts may not be convincing for many readers. The argument from experience can also cause twentieth century readers to distrust a text. The author must be credible before we accept his or her message. In spiritual writing, the argument from experience will only garner readers who know the author or who trust the author's background. It would be almost impossible to secure worldwide attention to a spiritual classic today that was based solely on argument from experience except when the writer has widespread credibility. Name one? The Dalai Lama.

Let's look at how powerful Merton is when he opts out of these traditional venues and chooses the argument from contradiction. This approach is an intellectual, rational one. Our rhetoricians would explain the workings of this argument as follows: Merton has essentially presented a system that contains a proposition and its negation — since most of us cannot tolerate such contradiction, we render the system "inconsistent and thereby unstable." We abandon our former belief that Merton shows us to be unsound. In this case, Merton confronts us with the common notion of humility as the debasing of ourselves and counterposes it with the idea of humility as identity and integrity — the real ownership of one's individuality. What Merton suggests is so much more sound, whole, and beautiful than our current notions that it wins our approval and acceptance.

If the twentieth century needed anything in spiritual writing, it needed to be addressed on its own terms. Those terms included diversity of every sort, a crisis of faith, a respect for reason, an acknowledgement of the discounting of religious truth, and a hunger for something permanent in an extremely unstable time. Another text that fits these same needs was *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The fourteenth century in England was about as tumultuous as our age. Similar to our reaction to the strict Catholic dogma of the 1800s, the fourteenth century staggered away from the intense writings of St. Thomas Aquinas and, from turmoil, some of the finest mystical writings in English were produced. The unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* presents the deepest principles of prayer in the simplest, even homeliest, fashion. Let us hear his advice concerning the knowledge of God:

But now you put to me a question and say: "How might I think of him in himself, and what is he? And to this I can only answer thus: "I have no idea." For with your question you have brought me into that same darkness, into that same cloud of unknowing where I would you were yourself. For a man may, by grace, have the fullness of knowledge of all other creatures and their works, yes, and of the works of God's own self, and he is well able to reflect on them. But no man can think of God himself. Therefore, it is my wish to leave everything that I can think of and choose for my love the thing that I cannot think. Because he can certainly be loved but not thought. He can be taken and held by love but not by thought. . . . [W]ith a devout, pleasing love strive to pierce that darkness above you. You are to smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love. Do not leave this work for anything that may happen.

(*Cloud of Unknowing*, pp. 130-131)

Despite its rich theological base in the *via negativa* tradition, despite its wealth of personal experience, despite its real love for the reader, this is not a book of fine rhetoric. It is the absence of rhetoric that makes spiritual classics of earlier centuries so simple and sublime. We see what a master of thought and language Merton is when he achieves the sublime while presenting complex rebuttal formats. Let us, for the final time, consider a parallel passage in Merton:

To find love I must enter into the sanctuary where it is hidden, which is the mystery of God. And to enter into His sanctity, I must become holy as He is holy, perfect as He is perfect.

How can I even dare to entertain such a thought? Is it not madness? It is certainly madness if I think I know what the holiness and perfection of God really are in themselves and if I think that there is some way in which I can apply myself to imitating them. I must begin, then, by realizing that the holiness of God is something that is to me, and to all men, utterly mysterious, inscrutable, beyond the highest notion of any kind of perfection, beyond any relevant human statement whatsoever.

If I am to be "holy" I must therefore be something that I do not understand, something mysterious and hidden, something apparently self-contradictory for God, in Christ, "emptied Himself."

(*New Seeds*, p. 61)

Both authors use the argument from essence in these parallel passages. They both state that God's essence may not be known by rational thinking, but that it may be known if we alter our way of knowing to love and mystery. The final irony we see in Merton's rhetoric is that he admits twentieth century readers into the most mysterious of subjects in a highly rational way. His argument from contradiction serves to dismiss quickly the premise that we could ever understand the holiness and perfection of God. We accept this and are ushered into mystery.

His work becomes clear when we contrast it with *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Note how direct and Zen-like our very experienced writer is when he or she states simply that "no man can think of God" or that God "can certainly be loved but not thought." The exercise of love follows in the same simple form. I am always struck by the simplicity of this text and attribute it to the homey English tongue of the fourteenth century (as overexposed as I am to twentieth century religious rhetoric, I tend to favor it). In his time, Merton's cultural setting, education, and life experience suit him to the use of complex rhetorical patterns. An argument from life experience alone (being a convert, having twisted notions) would account in large part for his rhetoric.

Let us now conclude this discussion of Merton's use of the argument from contradiction by summarizing the implications that would most benefit those of us involved in some way in religious rhetoric. They are fourfold: choice, intellectual clarity, consistency, and irony. Choice is at the heart of this rhetorical pattern — one of Merton's favorite themes. The argument itself places a value on freedom, individuality, confrontation, and learning. The second implication of intellectual clarity means that Merton was not afraid to raise the level of discourse on various topics, indicating that they were not simple matters. He did not veer from discussing them in terms of their common misconceptions and did so without condescending or preaching. Third, the argument from contradiction is in itself consistent with the lines of reasoning accepted by twentieth century readers, meaning that it is rational. Twentieth century readers, for a variety

of reasons, eschew the emotional appeal, are repelled by imperatives, and don't readily see experience as credible. Finally, this fairly belligerent pattern can be seen as ironic when Merton uses it — perfectly ironic because it turns Christian in his hands: Merton leads us to the loss or death of our self-centered, twisted ideas and to accept, on our own, God-centered, life-giving conceptions. To summarize, Merton's greatness as a rhetorician consisted in allowing readers of wide religious backgrounds to review, clarify, and choose their own religious beliefs according to reasoning that they accepted — all in a marvelously Christian format.