

Thomas Merton: Strategies of a Master Teacher of Poetry

by Gloria Kitto Lewis

Thomas Merton thought of himself as not only a Cistercian monk and poet, but very importantly as a student and teacher. As he wrote in his journal in May 1962. "I usually ignore this element of my vocation, but obviously I am a writer, a student and teacher as well as a contemplative of sorts, and my solitude, etc., is that of a writer and teacher, not of a pure hermit."¹ Merton writes very little directly about his ideas about education and his experiences as teacher of theology and literature. Yet, recently, a few scholars working with Parker Palmer and others in a relatively new field called spirituality of education have begun exploring Merton's education theories and pedagogical applications. As Merton was a teacher and student of poetry, one rich source for initial study is the tapes of fourteen classes in 1965–66 at the Abbey in Gethsemani for the novices on the poetry of three mystic poets, Blake, Hopkins, and Rilke. Some of these tapes are housed in the collection at the Thomas Merton Center, while others have been published by Credence Cassettes. Merton's teaching of Rainer Maria Rilke was particularly focused and lively because, as his journal notes reveal, he was giving special attention to Rilke in his private studies at the time he was presenting Rilke's work to his students. Merton's classes on Rilke give valuable insights into Merton as master teacher of poetry.

The purpose of his poetry classes on Rilke and the other poets was threefold. The first was to help the novices through the aesthetic experience to continue to discover on their own who they were in the most profound sense. As Merton noted in his major essay on education, "The purpose of education is to help the student to discover himself: to recognize himself and to identify who it is that chooses."² And he later added that education "means discovering in the ground of one's being a 'self' which is ultimate and indestructible, which not only survives the destruction of all other more superficial selves but finds its identity affirmed and clarified by their destruction."³ The second purpose was to introduce and practice a strategy for participating in poetry because, through contemplation of art, students could touchstone with the hidden wholeness of all creation and in so doing could come into communion with God. Merton felt that "the genuine



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aesthetic experience is something which transcends not only the sensible order (in which it has its beginning) but also that of reason itself. It is a supernatural intuition of the latent perfection of things."⁴ He found that it is "an analogue to the mystical experience which it resembles and imitates from afar."⁵ Through contemplation of a poem, the student can "grasp the inner reality, the vital substance of its object, by a kind of affective identification of itself with it."⁶ The third purpose was to round out their liberal arts studies because study of poetry could bring them valuable knowledge as well as wisdom and joy. Believing in the value of a liberal education for contemplatives, Merton was quick to remind his students during the second session on Rilke on February 6, 1966, for example, that they needed to know Rilke if they were going to be educated in the humanities.⁷

Given the structure, student body, subject matter, these classes were difficult to teach. These sessions on poetry were held only intermittently. Some classes, called conferences, were held on Sunday afternoons and others were part of regularly scheduled courses of study in theology. All were only thirty minutes long. Therefore, Merton often was obliged to review material presented in an earlier session in addition to presenting new poems. At best, a half an hour is very little time even to do justice to a couple of poems as complex as many of Rilke's. Added to the time constraints were the problems the students presented. The students, though undoubtedly cooperative, attentive, polite, and able, had a notable range of backgrounds. Some had college educations while others had only finished high school. Most seemed to have very little knowledge about drama and poetry. For example, in a class dealing with songs in *The Tempest* and *As You Like It*, Merton discovered that not one person had read any of Shakespeare's plays.⁸ In another class, Merton was clearly relieved when a couple of students did know two of Hopkins' more popular poems about the Blessed Mother, "The May Magnificat" and "The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe." With a measure of jubilation, he said, "We are in good shape."⁹ None of the students had read Rilke's poetry and, indeed, had to be coaxed into studying his poetry, as Rilke was not a Roman Catholic. In a class on Rilke, Merton stated emphatically:

We have got to have the right attitude toward this because you are used to sitting and have the law laid out to you saying this is the way it ought to be. Here everything is wide open... There are things about Rilke that can not be decided and some things will shock you. I am keeping on him not only because I am working on him and am interested in him, but also because I think monks now should get into the habit of being shocked and not dropping the person who shocked him immediately.¹⁰

Yet as the tapes reveal, Merton met the challenges by having a clear vision of his student audience and methodology. Aiming to teach active poetry participation classes as opposed to merely passive poetry appreciation classes, his goal was to help students to experience poems on their own in ways that would enable these contemplatives to come into communion with self and God. Ironically, never did Merton think he was actually teaching. Rather he was guiding and, very importantly, learning along with his students. He emphatically said that fortunately at Gethsemani, as opposed to Columbia University, he was "no longer teaching anybody anything."¹¹ In teaching these poems, he spoke in an informal, unthreatening manner, explaining complicated concepts like Rilke's *inseeing* in simple terms. Often he was playful. Turning to a new poem, he would say, "Let's hit it," or now let's see "what the scoop is." When introducing Blake's "Ah, Sunflower," he emphasized the, *ah*, and added

“Ah, that is in the kind of stuff I write all the time.”¹² To ensure success, he arranged poems in an increasing order of difficulty. Study of Rilke, for example, moved from two poems from his middle period, “The Merry-Go-Round” and “The Panther,” to major works in his later period, *The Book of Hours* and the *Duino Elegies*.

Using a student-centered approach, Merton used some effective techniques when introducing a poem. To initially enliven discussions, he related anecdotes that made the poets come alive. On introducing Rilke, he began with a description of the poet: “If you are going to read him, don’t look at his picture first. He is an aristocrat, a Czech aristocrat born in Bohemia. He has a droopy mustache and great pockets under his eyes, and he is a typical middle European aristocrat. The only people who look more educated were the Hungarian aristocrats, of which there aren’t any anymore. He looks like Alphonso the Thirteenth.”¹³ Then Merton proceeded to imitate this aristocrat talking and concluded, “If you look at his picture first, you have had it. You aren’t going to read his poetry. That is going to be enough.”¹⁴ Invariably, he tried to help the class relate to the experience of the poet. After reading the fifth poem from Section One of Rilke’s *The Book of Hours*, which presents God as one in the next room separated only by a wall, Merton pointed out with great sensitivity that that is the way the monks sometimes think and feel. In his initial comments on Rilke’s “The Unicorn,” in which the saint looks up during his prayer and sees a unicorn, Merton was quick to observe, “Of course this happens all the time” around the monastery.¹⁵

Believing that poetic sounds helped to convey the poem’s content, he read the poem under discussion aloud, often in the original language. Merton had found this technique useful in his private study. Referring in a journal note to Rilke’s poems, he wrote: “I notice that I have really never pronounced German words. I have always neglected to bite into them & to use all the consonants. Now I must do this reading R. carefully aloud, eating the words, making them real.”¹⁶ In presenting Rilke, he often read the poems in German. His reading of “The Panther” was moving. The lines “*tausend staben gabe*,” meaning “thousands of bars,” surrounding the panther in the zoo, were some he read over and over, noting that those German words underscored the panther’s experience of being imprisoned in seemingly endless bars.¹⁷

After introducing the poem, Merton demonstrated over and over again a strategy for participating in a poem. This method can be characterized as perceptual rather than conceptual, as it involves using all the senses in experiencing the poem. It resembles the strategy advocated by the philosopher F. David Martin.¹⁸ Like Martin, Merton advocated confronting the fact of the work of art rather than merely facts about the work. He used this approach well in the teaching of Rilke’s “The Panther.” Students, participants in the poem, walked through three steps. First, they perceived the poem with their senses. Merton read the poem aloud first in the original German, then in his favorite translation by C. F. MacIntyre.¹⁹ He also asked the students to “see” the imprisoned panther. Then the class perceived with their imaginations, to get inside the experience of the artist, perceiving what the artist thought and felt. Merton noted that some think of imagination as fantasy. Playfully, he observed, “That is what you use when making your evening meditation. That is where you get mental movies.” However, imagination is not fantasy; rather it deals with a deeper reality. As he said, “It is creative and re-creative and a function of the intellect.”²⁰ Through the imagination students connect with the poem and recreate for themselves the experience of the poet. Thus, the artist makes each student into an artist.²¹ In this second step, they connected, as it were, with Rilke and with him experienced the

panther moving in endless circles inside his cage. Finally the students perceived “in the deepest part of the self, the heart.”²² Here they began to comprehend intuitively, spiritually, the meaning of the experience, coming finally to some wisdom about the deep truths of the human experience. In this third step, students came to understand in a profound sense what it is to be imprisoned and how living beings survive and prevail. In the poem, the panther looked directly into the poetic eyes for a moment, making a contact that demonstrated that the animal was not completely stupefied, destroyed by his captors.

The tapes of classes on Rilke and other mystic poets give indication that Merton’s special pedagogical strengths were his abilities to share his unbounded love of poetry, a kind of love that was infectious, and to give students guidance in perceiving poetry in their solitude. His were fast-moving and happy classes where hearty, healthy laughter resounded. In all probability, students in these person-centered classes gained greater spiritual strength and wisdom as they continued in glorious freedom on their paths toward self-discovery. That was Merton’s wish as teacher, his prayer as fellow journeyer, and the tapes give strong evidence that his prayer was answered.

Notes

1. Quoted in Thomas Del Prete, *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1990) 165.
2. Thomas Merton, “Learning to Live,” *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Harcourt, 1979) 4.
3. “Learning to Live” 5.
4. “Learning to Live” 4.
5. Thomas Merton, “Art and Spirituality,” *The Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (Garden City: Image, 1974) 407.
6. “Art and Spirituality” 407.
7. Thomas Merton, audiotape, rec. 10 June 1966, Bellarmine College, Thomas Merton Center, 233 A.
8. Thomas Merton, audiotape, rec. 3 Jan. 1965, Bellarmine College, Thomas Merton Center, 197 A.
9. Thomas Merton, audiotape, rec. 20 May 1965, Bellarmine College, Thomas Merton Center, 213 B.
10. Thomas Merton, *Love and Search for God*, audiotape, Credence Cassettes, AA2078, 1988.
11. “Learning to Live” 6.
12. Thomas Merton, *Poetry of Paradise*, audiotape, Credence Cassettes, AA2368, 1989.
13. Thomas Merton, *Poetry and Imagination*, audiotape, Credence Cassettes, AA2076, 1988.
14. *Poetry and Imagination*.
15. *Poetry and Imagination*.
16. Thomas Merton, unpublished journal notes, August–November 1965, Bellarmine College, Thomas Merton Center.
17. *Poetry and Imagination*.
18. F. David Martin and Lee A. Jacobus, *The Humanities Through the Arts*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw, 1991).
19. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems*, trans. C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley: U of California P, 1940).
20. *Poetry and Imagination*.
21. *Poetry and Imagination*.
22. *Poetry and Imagination*.