

Jacob's War

By Thomas Merton

*In his 1991 Presidential Address at the Second General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, the late Robert E. Daggy referred to and briefly quoted from “a little-known essay titled ‘Jacob’s War.’”** The reference was to an unpublished five-page typescript in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, that had probably never been cited before or since. The heavily revised typescript is actually not an essay but apparently a prefatory note to a book that was never written. The title presumably refers to Jacob’s struggle with the angel in Genesis 32, which is not mentioned in the text itself but is evidently intended by Merton to symbolize his own wrestling with his identity as a writer who is also called to be a contemplative, an issue that of course preoccupied him periodically throughout his monastic life. The typescript is undated, and the text has no specific references that would help in assigning it to a particular time period. It is clear only that the author is a Trappist and a published (and reviewed) author, which would place its composition at least in the period after the appearance of *The Seven Storey Mountain* in 1948. The scriptural allusion in the title bears some resemblance to that found in *The Sign of Jonas* and so suggests the conjecture that it might belong to the period of “the missing years” of 1953-1956 for which there is no journal material; the reference to the unwritten body of the book as having to take the form of “a notebook” might indicate that “Jacob’s War” was intended to be a kind of sequel to *Jonas*, but such a conclusion remains highly speculative. A single page of handwritten notes, likewise headed “Jacob’s War,” also survives in the Merton Center archives. As it bears no textual relation to the typescript it is apparently all that remains, and perhaps all that was written, of the “notebook” that was to serve as the body of the work. Although part of an abortive project, “Jacob’s War” has its own interest as testimony to Merton’s ongoing efforts to come to terms with his vocation as monk and writer and so the text is now made available here, including textual notes documenting the changes, some rather extensive, that Merton made in the course of typing his text, as well as a transcription of the single handwritten page of further notes – with conjectural readings included in brackets. Thanks are due to the Trustees of the Thomas Merton Legacy Trust for permission to publish “Jacob’s War,” and to Merton Center Director Paul M. Pearson for providing a copy of the material and for assistance and encouragement in bringing it into print.

*Robert E. Daggy, “Choirs of Millions: Thomas Merton and God’s Creatures,” *The Merton Seasonal* 16.3 (1991) 11-17 (see 16); also published as “Choirs of Millions: A Reflection on Thomas Merton and God’s Creatures,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 28.1 (1993) 93-107 (see 104).

It is the illusion of a writer to live in his books. Because the writing of them satisfies him, he thinks they are himself. He places himself where there is spiritual comfort, because where a man's treasure is, there his heart is also. And he imagines that the voice that speaks in his books is his own voice. He thinks he recognizes himself, and he is glad.

That is why all book reviews tend to be disappointments: at least to a writer who is not satisfied with praise alone. For look: the reviewer is a writer too. And in writing about my book, he has not discovered me, he has discovered only himself. Attached to myself, I wanted to find my attachment in his review. Alas, he is not attached to me at all. If I find myself in his writing, it is only the "I" that I would be if I had the misfortune to be not I but he. Perhaps he has even identified something unpleasant about himself with my writing, perhaps he has made me a scapegoat for his own sins. And I who would be glad to be criticized if it were really I who was being criticized, am disturbed at the spectacle of this stranger exorcising himself disguised as me.

It is of course just as bad, perhaps worse, when the reviewer, in a moment of false enthusiasm, praises himself in pretending to praise me.

No book can survive time. It even dies in the lap of its own author before it is thoroughly grown up: and how shall it survive many centuries; even the greatest books will perish at the end of the world. In any case, Shakespeare is no longer Shakespeare, nor Homer Homer. Being public property they have become myths like Dali's Christopher Columbus in the raining taxi at the World's Fair which everyone has now forgotten.[§]

No writer wants to become such a myth. That is why every artist who is sincere, prefers to die rather than suffer the shame of being a celebrity for a long time. Yet perhaps there have been artists who, because of either great art or great charity, have totally escaped from themselves. They have ceased to fear fame. But this is heroic, because it means they have ceased to fear disfigurement.

The rest of us watch our books go out in the world and grow. They come home to us at last as strangers. It is a comfort that they are so, because we are no longer content to find ourselves in them. And so we turn to our writing again, to make ourselves anew.

This self-creation is despair and weariness to the flesh. In the end, it kills us. We exhaust ourselves in trying to be a myth, in building ourselves into the person we never succeed in being. Yet writing is the life of writers. It is not writing as such that exhausts us, but attachment to the result of our writing.

That is why I think the writer ought to dedicate his life to God, live in a cave, write all the year round and then tear up all he has written at the end of the year, the way the desert Fathers used to weave baskets as they prayed and then take them all apart. For it is not the weaving that matters, but the praying, and writing after all can be a form of prayer. Otherwise God would never have made writing a vocation.

For, as a matter of fact, the salvation of a writer is precisely in his writing. What a calamity to go through life thinking that all our gifts are sins! It is like the heresy that says

[§] The reference is to a Salvador Dali "installation," a leaky old car with grotesque dummies as driver and passenger, first exhibited at the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition in France and then in revised form at the 1939 World's Fair in New York City, with "Christopher Columbus" as the new passenger.

all pleasure is evil: as if God wanted us to frustrate everything that He has given us. As if He were not the God of the sane and of the living! But the summit of all God's gifts is the science to kick out from under us the ladder we have ascended and possess God above all gifts and graces. But false asceticism teaches you to kick the ladder away before you have ascended even one rung. It leaves you prostrate in the dust, without talent and without prayer and without God, and this, it says, is sanctity. No, sanctity does not lie this side of the means God has given us that we may come up to Him. Writing has something to do with the sanctity of a writer, but not until he has written something. For if you are to be sanctified by words, you must use them.

That is the problem of this book. It is not a scientific study of language, or a philosophy of writing, or a theology of silence. After all, it would be strange to put many words down on paper, all of them about silence.

Language is an angel with which I wrestle in deep silence. This book is the record of a mortal combat, and as I begin it, I cannot be sure who is going to win. Yet I am conscious that I would never advance to do battle if I did not think I could win, even though my adversary has been chosen for me and imposed upon me by God who has planned the struggle and Who watches it, inscrutable, because my life depends on it. And so, it would be just as well to admit that this has to be a notebook. I will not use the word "clinical" because for me anything that suggested science would clearly be a pose. I have to write it as if someone were supposed to read it, because that is one of the assumptions implied by the very fact of writing. However, these notes are a personal meditation and an examination of conscience. And they are an effort to breathe, because they are the record of what happens to a Trappist when he finds that words and silence have a deeper meaning than the pious books would lead one to suppose.

What can we do to moments with our words? Is our written perpetuation of the passing beauty of things a confession that we do not believe we will find them again in the eternity of God? I do not know. But I no longer understand something inveterate in poets: the anxiety to recapture the experience of a moment and possess it, set and solid, in a form of words. Why do I need to imprison the sunlight and the rain? Perhaps it is only because they do not belong to me in God. If all things are mine, I need not worry if they go free. Why do I need to catch the minutes and put them in my book? Why must this bird singing in the willow become eternal in a work of art? Keep your liberty, bird! For I have resolved to let beauty pass away without remark and to let the sun go down without comment and to let the clouds all fly away without protest. What is the use of my trying to praise them all? They are gone, anyway, before I can begin to catch them. And now I gladly forsake my appetite for beauty because, having once or twice praised God in my own words for His creation, I have discovered that, after all, His creation praises Him by itself better than all men's words in all languages and in all centuries. And though it is good that men should make their own poems to praise Him, I now know that it is better for me to sing to Him, when words are necessary at all, in the words of His own Psalms.

Thus I will let the rain fall, and will not bother the storm with my questions. I will let the sun come up over the wet fields and I will be as silent as the grass and much more happy: for why should I throw away the beauty of God's morning by trying to grasp it in

my human hand?

* * *

There is a time, in the ascetic development of a writer, when he must write as a duty. He must put words on paper as a matter of discipline, in order to open up the stream of thought and speech and thus to make himself into a writer. It is only when he has a certain amount of prose on paper that he can confront the problems of a writer and attempt to solve them. How else can it be? Until he has written something, he is not yet a writer.

But there comes another time when his asceticism will demand of him not that he write, but that he refrain from writing. For what is at one time a necessity becomes, at another, a temptation. Too much writing is a mortal sin, in the sense that it is the death of a writer. It kills his spirit by drawing it up to its own surface, where it dies of suffocation. Nevertheless, this evil can be corrected with a knife. If there be sickness in too great facility there is a certain health in destroying or emending what has {been} written, cutting it down to a sane limit and leaving it strong, living and clean.

recognizes] *preceded by interlined* thinks he
 is glad] *preceded by interlined* he
 For look:] *preceded by x'd out* To reviewers
 himself.] *preceded by x'd out* his
 Attached] *preceded by x'd out* I wanted to find something of myself in his review. All I have found something indeed
 identified] *preceded by interlined* even
 something] *preceded by x'd out* his
 scapegoat] *followed by interlined* for his own sins.
 And I] *preceded by x'd out* What
 disturbed] *preceded by x'd out* rec revolted
 It is of course] *preceded by x'd out* Then comes the day when I am praised by a reviewer *[sic]*
 in a moment] *preceded by x'd out* pretending
 No book] *preceded by x'd out* But after a
 lap] *preceded by x'd out* eyes of
 centuries:] *altered in pencil from centuries, followed by and cancelled in pencil*
 Columbus] *followed by x'd out* sitting
 taxi] *followed by x'd out* in in t
 long time.] *followed by x'd out* That is, if he
 totally] *preceded by x'd out* been taken
 fear] *preceded by x'd out* care what
 writing] *preceded by x'd out* papers
 despair] *interlined above x'd out* foolish
 Being.] *followed by x'd out* But still, the exhaustion is not in the writing but in the tasting
 us, but] *interlined above x'd out* us: it is
 result] *preceded by x'd out* end of our
 What a] *preceded by x'd out* It is not true to think
 everything] *followed by x'd out* that is goo
 God's gifts] *followed by* is the gift by *cancelled in pencil*
 science] *preceded by x'd out* gift of science
 possess] *preceded by x'd out* enter into the King
 graces.] *followed by x'd out* You cannot kick the ladder
 rung.] *followed by x'd out* It leve
 prostrate] *followed by x'd out* on the ground
 prayer] *followed by interlined* and without God
 come up] *preceded by x'd out* cross ov
 philosophy] *interlined above x'd out* theology

writing.] *altered from* writing.
 or a theology of silence.] *interlined above x'd out* It is a concrete problem working itself out It is the exterior
 Language is] *preceded by x'd out* If I say This book is the war of
 record] *preceded by x'd out* record of that eq
 mortal] *preceded by x'd out* combat
 admit that this] *followed by x'd out* is nothing but a notebook. It has to be book can no
 pose.] *followed by x'd out* But this is a notebook
 these notes] *preceded by x'd out* the boo
 a personal] *preceded by x'd out* personal and
 than the pious] *interlined*
 written] *interlined*
 passing] *preceded by x'd out* beauty of
 something] *preceded by x'd out* the anxiety that is *interlined above x'd out* what was once
 set] *preceded by x'd out* frozen in a set form of words
 because] *followed by x'd out* I do not
 If all] *preceded by x'd out* If they aren't mine,
 worry] *preceded by x'd out* trouble t
 catch] *preceded by x'd out* chain down the movements of this passing instant any more
 begin to] *interlined*
 in my own words for] *interlined above x'd out* for the beauty of
 have discovered] *preceded by x'd out* think
 wet] *interlined*
 fields] *followed by x'd out* witho
 I will] *followed by x'd out* pass
 write] *followed by x'd out* out of
 discipline,] *followed by x'd out* first
 thus] *interlined above x'd out* second in order
 writer.] *followed by x'd out* But
 another] *preceded by x'd out* a time in the
 a writer.] *a interlined above x'd out* the
 drawing] *preceded by x'd out* emptying it
 it up] *it interlined above x'd out* i
 corrected] *preceded by x'd out* excised
 be] *interlined above x'd out* is be sickness
 or emending] *preceded by x'd out* and

Jacob's War

The [error] of thinking that by ceasing to speak we can cease to exist as separate individuals and

that this is our end + our fulfillment.

No – we must *speak* to realize both our unity with God + other men + our *individuality*.

~~We do not~~

Would not have seen this stream unless I had read Valery.

– yet [stream] I see is nothing like his

entirely different experience.

What do these [trees] say to me??

Words of others awaken something in us

But also – protest against the false being words can make of us – if we bow to fictions.

Theme – the trouble is not with language but with the use we make of language.

Babel + Jerusalem should come in here.

Each of the Div. Persons – an opposition

Perhaps the devils fell into pure opposition by an impure desire of complete absorption.

The saints, like Job – are accused of blasphemy because they dare to be themselves + to refuse extinction.

Two extremes – submersion, by propaganda – in totalitarian mass – loss of self.

 false escape – by [mutism] + absorption in pantheistic absolute.

 Solution – Christian personalism – Charity – ‘Word’ of God

Using words + experiences – to encourage an unreal existence. Jumping [instantly] from

word to what it does *not* mean + what is yet a subjective reality for me