

Seeds of De(con)struction: Insights from Merton for a Postmodern World

By **Daniel P. Horan, OFM**

Introduction

The title of this article is not without its audacity. To claim that a twentieth-century monk, who died in 1968, has something to offer a world that bears an uncanny dissimilarity to the one which he inhabited nearly a half-century earlier is indeed bold, if not ostensibly foolish. Yet, I remain convinced that there are ways in which Thomas Merton's work offers insightful direction for spirituality in a postmodern world. The nascent, almost intuitive thesis that I offer does not find its foundation in the fruit of a method or the content of a proposition explicitly espoused by Merton during his lifetime. Instead, what I posit is the authentic rendering of Merton's later work as seeds of what might be appropriated in the future, long after Merton's contemporaneous labors ceased. The thing about seeds is that they, in their pre-germinating existence – dry and unverdant and listless at that stage, in no way resemble the plant they will grow up to be, if nurtured and cultivated correctly, illuminated by the light and nourished by the water. They are inchoate to the greatest degree and their existence is barely noted except by those, such as farmers or hobbyist gardeners, who are attentive to their presence. The trained eye sees what the seeds could produce, while the uninformed overlook and dismiss what appears to be immaterial.

My invitation is for us to imagine ourselves as the gardeners of the seeds proffered by the late Merton, cultivating the spiritual plants to maturity and harvesting the fruits that have grown. The point here is really a matter of relevance, for the increasing challenge faced by all who study the work of Merton today is to identify the ways in which his thought can be correlated with the experience of women and men of a new era, in a time and place that does not readily resemble that of Merton. Merton's continued relevance is a theme that has increasingly come to the fore, reaching something of a zenith in recent years in part due to then Bishop, now Cardinal, Donald Wuerl's remarks about why Thomas Merton was removed from the new *American Catholic Catechism*. The text, aimed especially at young adults, was to include a prominent American Catholic at the beginning of each chapter, who would serve as a model of Christian living. Wuerl, the chairman of the committee responsible for this project, explained that, among other reasons, "the generation we were speaking to had no idea who he was."¹ Implicit in Wuerl's explanation, not to mention the misunderstanding of Merton's own life and work, is the reality that the current Cardinal Archbishop of

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Washington sees Merton as an irrelevant figure in contemporary Christian life. Others too might ask what Merton has to offer us in a technologically hegemonic, globalized and pluralistic world.

In this reflection I seek to offer some initial trajectories that blossom from seeds of wisdom found in Merton's later work. These are ideas that are in need of cultivation and further exploration, but are nevertheless fecund contributions to the contemporary spiritual and theological landscape. In an age marked by increasing religious pluralism, disaffected populations resulting from political polarity and the hyper-expansive reach of globalization,² a new way to view the world, God and prayer is needed that will take seriously the challenge to be relevant and speak to a new generation of spiritual seekers. The thought of Thomas Merton is one such source for our time, especially when engaged with the philosophy of deconstruction.

In recent years the importance of "the text" has surfaced as the focus of philosophical reconsideration of previously held convictions that have influenced literary critique and theological inquiry. Deconstruction, made famous in the work of the late Jacques Derrida, is one such philosophical current in contemporary academic discourse.³ It is fair to say that the written word – "the text" – shaped Merton's literary and spiritual outlook.⁴ This outlook was formed in part by Merton's method of intellectual appropriation of a variety of sources, while engaging the Christian tradition with the challenges of his day in new and prophetic ways.

The Challenge of Postmodernity

In order to respond effectively to the challenges that arise from the so-called "postmodern world," we must first briefly identify what it means to talk about the "postmodern." In his cleverly titled book, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault to Church*, James K. A. Smith begins his project with an illustrative comment about the current state of affairs. He writes, "Postmodernism tends to be something of a chameleon, portrayed as either monster or savior – either the new form of the enemy or the next best thing to come along."⁵ For the most part, this summarizes the response that the term postmodernity evokes from most scholars. Other authors have likewise suggested that people tend either to defend or to resist what is meant by the term, while its precise meaning is oftentimes unclear.⁶ It can be difficult to fend off an apparent enemy that has no graspable definition, while it is equally unfathomable to embrace that which is unknown. This ambiguity, I would suggest, is the present overarching challenge of postmodernity as such. It means many things to many people and yet is a term that is used in an all-too-often unclear or equivocal way.

For our purposes, I suggest that the term "postmodern" be used to identify two significant, interrelated although not identical, threads of contemporary critique. The central focus is "language," both in terms of what we can know about things linguistically and the foundation (or lack of foundation) in the development of narratives. From Jacques Derrida we have the postmodern motto "there is nothing outside the text" (Derrida, *Grammatology* 158), which might be described – in the least bad way – as all that we know linguistically is culturally and socially constructed.⁷ With regard to the narrative, we can look to Jean-François Lyotard for whom "the postmodern" refers to the dissolution of metanarratives ("*les grand récits*"; lit: "big stories").⁸ These two intersecting foci provide a plethora of challenges and questions for the Christian tradition.

I suggest that Merton's later work, while not explicitly engaging these postmodern themes that would emerge with force after the Trappist monk's death, offers us at least a heuristic resource for responding to these claims. The seeds of deconstruction in the thought of Thomas Merton take the form of an anticipatory sensitivity to the linguistic issues raised in the postmodern era. Lyotard himself suggests that the emergence of the "postmodern" began as early as the late 1950s, observing that such a disposition toward the narrative as characterized above begins to be seen with the technological transformations of society, science and learning in the twentieth century (Lyotard 3-6). Merton's engagement with the literary and spiritual conversations of his day places him, chronologically, at the forefront of this shift.

Method and Textuality: Merton's Deconstructive Tendency

Following the now famous introduction of the term *bricolage* to the academy by Claude Lévi-Strauss,⁹ Fred Herron has written that Thomas Merton's methodological *modus operandi* can rightly be described as representing something of a monastic *bricoleur*. His writing, *the text*, is not the product of a singular source nor the effort of a monolithic method. Instead, his writing is admittedly a social and cultural construct, if shaped in part by the context of monastic religious life. Drawing on texts from an array of eras, cultures and languages, Merton's work reflected a certain comfort with "materials [that] ranged from the literature of the world to the writings of the Fathers of the Church" (Herron 117). Herron explains: "While there was never anything artless about Merton's writing, there was a studied and dedicated openness to going to the places where his prayer, his reading, his correspondence, or the challenges of the day took him. One would be hard pressed to imagine him as the author of a systematic theology. The 'voice of the present moment' was too compelling for that. Merton's procedures were his own; his tools were those that were the ones at hand" (Herron 117).

This appreciation for Merton's textual disposition as a *bricoleur* opens for us an avenue toward appropriating what I would describe as a postmodern method of spiritual textuality. Jacques Derrida's assertion that "there is nothing outside the text" suggests that meaning is always constructed and subject to interpretation, recognizing that the signs and signifiers of language do not actually bear a direct correlation with reality. Instead, origin and presence are illusive. How Merton constructs a spiritual textuality – primarily as a *bricoleur* – reflects an intuitive sensitivity to the necessary role contexts play in interpretation. On one hand the variety of sources of multifarious provenance seems to dissolve the context within which each original text was constructed. Yet, on the other hand, the construction of a *bricolage* creates the condition for the possibility of its radical appropriation and future determinability of meaning. For, as Smith reminds us, "context, then, determines the meaning of a text, the construal of a thing, or the 'reading' of an event" (Smith 52).

Take for example Merton's essay, "Events and Pseudo-Events"¹⁰ (a title and subject that offers an ironic sympathy with Derrida's deconstructive description of "the Event"). In this essay Merton, in a style reminiscent of Roland Barthes, considers news stories and relates his interpretation of their meaning in popular culture. Merton writes: "We believe that the 'news' has a strange metaphysical status outside us: it 'happens' by itself. Actually, it is something we fabricate. Those who are poor artisans make only pseudo-events. These are the tired politicians and businessmen, the educators, writers, intellectuals and tireddest of all, the Churchmen. Others are better at it: they

know how to make real bad news!” (FV 152). The pseudo-event is Merton’s moniker for a systemic false interpretation. He recognizes that the reality of meaning is, at some level, constructed and interpreted, and because of this there exist true and false modes of interpretation.

Reality and meaning is textual – it is written. Merton’s critique of the “pseudo-events” of society places the authorial responsibility in the pens and pencils of the “tired politicians and businessmen, the educators, writers, intellectuals” and churchmen of the day. But, the event, as properly understood, is written and expressed (lit., “pressed out”) by God. This approach is indeed a form of interpretation, one that refocuses the gaze of the reader from the banality of quotidian pseudo-events to the reality of spiritual textuality. Derrida insists that the whole world is a text, which, therefore, opens up the possibility for examining what guides or informs its interpretation (Smith 54). Merton’s response, is the *vita evangelica* – life of the Gospel:

The Church is indeed concerned with news: the Good News. The Church is concerned with real events: saving events, the encounter of man and Christ in the reconciliation of man with man. In a sense, there is no other kind of event that matters and there is no other news that matters. To abandon this news, and become implicated in the manufacturing of pseudo-events in order to create an “image” that will then attract converts . . . This is an affront to the world and to Christ. Can it be entirely avoided? I do not know, but one thing must be said about it now: *it has ceased to have any meaning whatever to modern man.* (FV 162)

The Gospel becomes the hermeneutic lens for Merton’s understanding of interpreting the event of reality. It is not a fabrication or an imposition of some accidental quality or meaning, but the act, to borrow a phrase from Jamie Smith, of “seeing the world through the Word” (Smith 54).

Merton’s later literary method, that of *bricoleur*, provides a means for expressing and communicating the event with relevance for a given age, while his recognition of the textuality of experience provides a hermeneutic key in the form of Gospel interpretation. Herron explains: “Thomas Merton took up the challenge of *bricolage*, implicit in the gospel, through his willingness to enter into a searing search for the real in his writings and his life. That search reflects a deep sense of faith in the image of God central to humanity and in Christ” (Herron 122). In this way Merton offers us a seed of deconstruction in his own realization of the necessity for Gospel interpretation and the methodological value of *bricolage* for continued spiritual relevance.

Reconstructing the Narrative

There is little doubt that Jean-François Lyotard’s claim that the postmodern means “incredulity toward metanarratives” bears veracity beyond speculation. The emergence of critical fields of study such as post-structuralism, postcolonial theory and the like, supports Lyotard’s recognition that the metanarrative has been dealt a lethal blow. Yet Lyotard maintains that knowledge cannot be reduced to the scientific or ostensibly objective realm of contemporary (and limited) pedagogical formulae. There also exists a real category called narrative knowledge (Lyotard 18-23). Lyotard suggests that in the post-Enlightenment era narrative knowledge had been subordinated and eclipsed by scientific inquiry, rendering such approaches delegitimized (see Lyotard 37 and *passim*). The corrective assertion, the challenge ushered in part by the postmodern condition, is the need to recall that: “If education must not only provide for the reproduction of skills, but also

for their progress, then it follows that the transmission of knowledge should not be limited to the transmission of information” (Lyotard 52). Theology and spirituality studies, largely considered outside the purview of scientific knowledge in the context of modernity, are resituated in the postmodern condition and given renewed focus.

Merton’s work can be said to offer contemporary spiritual seekers a constructive engagement with narrative knowledge as a form of spiritual and intellectual formation. Merton himself was interested in exploring the possibility of other forms of textuality and communication that appears to align comfortably within the horizon of Lyotard’s postmodern concerns. Take Merton’s essay, “Peace and Protest,” for example (*FV* 40-46). In response to the Vietnam War protests and nationalistic counter-protests, Merton challenges both sides to consider what is in fact underlying their respective approaches. On the one hand, the protesters are asked to evaluate their efforts to consider how their actions validly present a new form of communication, a new – to use Lyotard’s grammar – *narrative knowledge*. On the other hand, the patriotic counter-protesters are asked if “perhaps our scientific and technological mentality makes us war-minded. We believe,” Merton says, “that any end can be achieved from the moment one possesses the right instruments, the right machines, the right technique” (*FV* 45). The quest for peace amid violence is a journey of the spirit that cannot, Merton seems to imply, be found in the laboratory or in the textbook of conventional knowledge. A new knowledge, a return to the narrative as performative and expressive, is needed. Merton is not attempting to deconstruct standard institutions of pedagogy, but instead acknowledges the deconstruction always already present in the modern and myopic claim of scientific knowledge to the exclusion of all else.

Narrative knowledge serves as a thread of continuity throughout much of Merton’s writing on peace. In his essay “The Christian in World Crisis,”¹¹ found in the collection *Seeds of Destruction*, Merton uses Pope John XXIII’s Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris* as the guiding text for a reflection on what Stanley Hauerwas might later describe as the formation of a “community of character.”¹² The centerpiece of that essay focuses on the question of *who we are* in light of the Gospel. Merton believes that any attempt at a response to that question must arise from the identity of the Christian disciple, whose actions are always shaped and informed by the Gospel – a form of narrative, not scientific, knowledge. Scripture is an interesting source of narrative knowledge because it is oftentimes popularly conceived as a singular thing, yet postmodern thinkers have invited contemporary seekers to reconsider its identity and meaning as a composite. John Caputo has said, “On Derrida’s terms, both the Tanach and the New Testament are not books but libraries of books, swarming with competing theologies, spiritualities, dissident voices, different historical audiences, etc., the proof of which is the formidable body of literature that has grown up over the centuries trying to interpret what is going on in these texts.”¹³

Women and men of faith living within the context of postmodernity must take seriously the reality of pluriformity in the Christian narrative. This is always in need of interpretation, yet remains the anchor for postmodern Christian identity. While the mythic assertion of a ubiquitous and monolithic Christian metanarrative is no longer tenable, the reconstruction of the Christian *narrative* for authentic spirituality is imperative. What Lyotard and Derrida have done in terms of the narrative is to dismantle the fable that there is some singular and objective source of truth. In its place, writers like Merton rise to the occasion and insist that Christianity is more than a set

of propositional ideas, but is a “faith that is inextricably linked to the events and story of God’s redemptive action in the world” (Smith 75). Christianity cannot become a set of propositional points to which one assents like a citizenship test or loyalty oath. Such a reduction of one’s self results in an implicit approval of the singular metanarrative previously recognized as already deconstructed. As with Merton’s critique of social, industrial and military conformity in his essay “Rain and the Rhinoceros,”¹⁴ authentic Christianity stands opposed to mythic hegemony because it is not reducible to scientific knowledge. Christian faith is lived, experienced, read, shared and told. This insight comes across again in Merton’s *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, throughout which we see, as William Shannon notes well, that Merton “wanted to seek those areas of religious experience that united rather than divided people. . . . His interest was in religious experience rather than doctrinal formulations.”¹⁵

Merton offers us a seed of Christian praxis rooted in the appropriation of narrative knowledge. What Merton time and again returns to in his reflection on Christian identity and action in his later work is the freedom and hope that is found in the face of mythic metanarratives, in the rejection of social conformity and the space that is created for contemplation and prayer.

Conclusion

At the end of his scholarly study on Merton’s thought entitled *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision*, Lawrence Cunningham recalls a striking description of Merton by the former Vatican Apostolic Delegate to the United States, Archbishop Jean Jadot. The Archbishop had said that Merton was “‘a kind of prophet’ [who] did not discover new things but found old things and turned them into a language that speaks to our age.”¹⁶ This insight indeed reflects what is at the heart of Merton’s continued relevance for our time. Drawing on the expansive Christian tradition, Merton responded to “signs of the time”¹⁷ in such a way as to offer constructive engagement with the needs of the world in light of the faith of the community of believers. His prophetic voice was, and continues to be, one that seeks to “make all things new,” transforming our spiritual, cultural and political landscapes into “the place of peace, the place of silence, the place of wrestling with the angel.”¹⁸

The way he does this is not through some fabrication of a previously unknown gimmick or original creation, but through the elucidation of that which has always been true. Among the many seeds of postmodern insight Merton left for us to plant and tend is the truth that Christianity is not defeated or weakened by the shifting sands of postmodern philosophy and contemporary social theories. On the contrary, the truth of Christianity remains relevant and accessible – and, perhaps, becomes even more clear – in our own time. In place of the sectarian withdrawal or simplistic construal of orthodoxy that has become increasingly popular in recent decades, Merton’s insight draws us back to the Christian narrative as a reality experienced in performance and way of being-in-the-world always in need of interpretation. As the light of deconstruction makes clear the defeat of any singular source of truth, Merton’s work models for us a method of spiritual *bricolage*. And while we live in a world of violence, unrest and misunderstanding, Merton’s writing reminds us that authentic Christian spirituality guides our wholly (holy?) human pilgrimage toward freedom and hope.¹⁹

1. Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008) 242.
2. For more, see Craig Ott and Harold Netland, eds., *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).
3. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997); subsequent references will be cited as “Derrida, *Grammatology*” parenthetically in the text. See also Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978); Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), among others.
4. Two very insightful articles that have begun to explore this theme are: Fred Herron, “A Bricoleur in the Monastery: Merton’s Tactics in a Nothing Place,” *The Merton Annual* 19 (2006) 114-27 (subsequent references will be cited as “Herron” parenthetically in the text); and Robert Webster, “Thomas Merton and the Textuality of the Self: An Experiment in Postmodern Spirituality,” *The Journal of Religion* 78 (1998) 387-404.
5. James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006) 15; subsequent references will be cited as “Smith” parenthetically in the text.
6. See Myron Penner, “Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Some Preliminary Considerations,” in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, ed. Myron Penner (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006) 13-17.
7. Kevin Vanhoozer, “Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge (of God),” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 12-13.
8. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) xxiv; subsequent references will be cited as “Lyotard” parenthetically in the text.
9. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) 17.
10. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 145-64; subsequent references will be cited as “FV” parenthetically in the text.
11. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 93-183.
12. See Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).
13. John Caputo, “Hoping in Hope, Hoping against Hope,” in *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, ed. James Olthius (London: Routledge, 2002) 129.
14. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 9-23.
15. William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton: An Introduction* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005) 158-59.
16. See Lawrence Cunningham, *Thomas Merton & The Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) 208.
17. Vatican Council II, *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, #4 (*The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, SJ [New York: America Press, 1966] 201).
18. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 345.
19. Freedom and hope are both important categories examined by Jacques Derrida and other deconstructionists. Like forgiveness, justice and love, freedom and hope are events of the (im)possible that might, within a Christian framework, be understood as analogues (or alternative names) for God and God’s action in the world.