

## Harvesting New Fruits: Merton's "Message to Poets"

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In the late spring of 1963 the Argentinean poet Miguel Grinberg, who today honors us with his presence, invited Thomas Merton to a meeting of poets that was to be held in Mexico City the following February. In June of the same year Merton wrote to Grinberg explaining that he could not come. That correspondence resulted in a later published article on nine questions Grinberg put to Merton, as well as a correspondence that continued through 1966, and a "Message to Poets," which Merton sent to the conference to be read *in absentia*.<sup>1</sup>

It is that latter document that I wish to use as the locus of my remarks to this distinguished meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society. This talk is billed as a "springboard" lecture by which, I think, the purpose is to get people to reflect on various points and observations that the speaker proposes.

I will think of this address as a springboard in one other sense, which is to say, to advance from the text of Merton's message to engage some broader issues that I think to be at the heart of Merton's larger, more significant pertinence for us now thirty years after his original writing.

This strategy is not, I think, unfair to Merton's text. After all, he wrote his message for an underfunded, rather spontaneous conference

1. The correspondence is published in Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, ed. Christine Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993) 195-204. "Message to Poets" is in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981) 371-4. It was also published in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: State Mutual Book & Periodical Series, 1994).

organized without the usual support from foundations, government granting agencies, or financial “angels.” Indeed, the editor of Merton’s literary essays notes in the prefatory remarks to the message that one Peruvian poet sold her piano in order to finance her trip to the conference. The occasion of the conference in Mexico was, for Merton, a kind of springboard that permitted him to say some things that were in his heart and on his mind.

That kind of informal, hidden, and, dare I say, eremitical kind of affair in Mexico would have much appeal to Merton. Whatever other charisma Merton may have been given by the Spirit, organization, tight planning, and financial acumen were not among them. That the meeting was in Mexico would have also appealed to him since his eyes and his heart had been focused south of the border for nearly a decade prior to the Mexico meeting.<sup>2</sup> It is for that reason that I am emboldened to offer some mildly disorganized and somewhat loosely planned theses about what was in this poetic manifesto. I offer, then, not an exegesis of the text but some reflections inspired by it.

Poets, of course, are makers, as the very etymology of the word poet suggests (from the Greek verb “to make”). I understand the word poet here in the most generous sense of everyone who responds to the world by making it his or her own through the construct of response, which is by listening and saying. Not to be a poet, in this sense, is not to be human.

What does the poet make? I suggest, as our concurrent sessions tell us, that we can say that the poet makes at least four things.

### Poets Are Makers of a New Language

If there is one thing that explains why Merton was—and is—so phenomenally powerful to the generation that first read him and to those who still read him, it is because he was able to express the most primordial realities of religious faith and transcendental meaning in a new and compellingly fresh fashion. Ironically enough, his capacity to help himself (and us) to see religious faith anew grew from the very old practice of monastic *lectio*, which I will call here *sapiential reading*.

By sapiential I mean nothing more elaborate than the practice of careful reading with an openness to the wisdom that may come from

2. Even earlier if one takes seriously his love for Cuba registered in *The Secular Journal*.

words pregnant with meaning. In the context of the Bible the person of faith, of course, expects God to speak through the text at many levels, but it is more than the Bible to which I refer here. I mean something like that sense of communication that can come in depth when one person meets another through the text: heart and mind speaking to heart and mind.

It may seem paradoxical coming from a professional theologian, but what helped Merton write so compellingly was his own modest reading in what passed for standard theology in his day. He read the “standard” textbooks in scholastic theology as part of his training for the priesthood, but he had no passion for that kind of theology. From his earliest monastic training he drew from the old tradition of monastic theology, which encouraged this deep faith in the revelatory power of words, especially the Scriptures.

Close students of Merton will agree with him that the one time he attempted a scholastic analysis of spirituality (in *The Ascent to Truth*) he and his critics both agreed that the attempt was a failure. He candidly admitted as much in the preface to the French translation of the book where he realized that, from the perspective of seven passed years, he should have written a different kind of work concerned less with scholasticism, “which is not the true intellectual climate of the monk.”<sup>3</sup>

Conversely, Merton, from his earliest monastic days, attempted to draw on resources to push beyond text to naked meaning. In an early letter to the Carthusian Dom Porion, he said, rather disingenuously, that the only thing that he was writing (this was 1952) were “maxims.” Merton would write out a compressed Latin saying and give it to his monastic students with the request that they “think about the words, enter into them, and give me something of their own in return.”<sup>4</sup> These lapidary texts still ring true.<sup>5</sup> With them Merton intended to add some short meditations and produce, as he says, a truly monastic

3. The complete preface is in Thomas Merton, “Honorable Reader”: *Reflections On My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 27–28. I have unburdened myself on the way(s) we might call Merton a theologian in “Thomas Merton as Theologian: An Appreciation,” *Kentucky Review* 7:2 (1987) 90–97.

4. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990) 34.

5. One beautiful example: *fons vitae silentium in corde noctis* (“silence, in the heart of the night, is a fountain of life”).

book. Through a process of transformation, this exercise became a manuscript called "Thirty-Seven Meditations," which in turn, after refinement, would be published as one of Merton's most nourishing books: *Thoughts in Solitude*.

The motivation and strategy behind this particular exercise is to be discovered in the classic text *Ladder of Monks* by the medieval Carthusian Guigo II: that exercise in sapiential reading by which a reader moved from reading to meditation to the response of prayer and, finally, to contemplation. For Guigo the language of Scripture was a source of nourishment but the word(s) had to be assimilated by the reader (Guigo uses the images of eating and nourishment) as that reader encountered the text and the text, in turn, encountered the reader.<sup>6</sup>

My deepest conviction about Merton is that his whole life was an attempt to create a vocabulary worthy of expressing those things which most deeply affected him, whether it was a prophetic stand against the world or speaking about the fundamental experience of God in prayer.

That desire to search for the deepest meaning of language haunted him as a young person in his admiration for the verbal excavations of James Joyce,<sup>7</sup> to his early monastic life when he mastered both the technique and necessity of *lectio*, to his later years when he attempted to construct verbal landscapes in works like *Cables to the Ace*. He set out the challenge of language most starkly in a few lines that bear repeating:

If you write for God you will reach many men and bring them joy.

If you write for men—you may make some money and you may give someone a little joy and you may make a noise in the world for a little while.

6. Guigo addresses God by using the image of "breaking the bread" of Scripture: "the more I see You, the more I long to see You, no more from without in the rind of the letter, but within, in the letter's hidden meaning" (*The Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations* [Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1981] 73). Merton alluded to Guigo in his letter to Dom Porion.

7. The 1939–41 journals (recently edited by Patrick Hart) written before he went into the monastery are filled with *catenae* of words that were either new to him or caught his eye in his reading of everything from billboard notices to literary texts in various languages.

If you write only for yourself you can read what you yourself have written and after ten minutes you will be so disgusted you will wish you were dead.<sup>8</sup>

The first message from the messenger is a question: How do we find the words today that, in the welter of words, provide joy to a world which drowns in a vocabulary of death? How do we push language to affirm the God who is the foundation of all and everyone and not alienate those who thirst for a "good word" and receive plummy platitudes or poisonous clichés? This does not necessarily involve a new vocabulary, although it can also mean that. It most emphatically means giving new currency and a new edge to words as simple as "bread" or "love" or "I'm home." It also means that we must be alert to language that poisons or deadens our sense of what is real.

Here is one hint: you do *not* repeat the language of Thomas Merton; you take the challenge he presents and go out to discover language afresh. As the Zen master, cited by Bonnie Thurston at our last ITMS meeting, would have it: look at the direction and not at the finger that points the way.

### Makers of Personal Conviction

In his message Merton speaks of "interior personal convictions 'in the Spirit.'"<sup>9</sup> At the root of conviction (like the cognate word "convince") is the twofold movement of shedding what is false in order to embrace what is true. When a felon is convicted in court it means that the truth of who he or she is and the consequences of that discovery are discovered.

In that sense conviction is very much like what the gospel calls *metanoia*—that change by which we leave off one way of life in order to embrace another. *Metanoia* (conversion) is widely used in the New Testament both in the mouth of Jesus and in the vocabulary of the primitive church.<sup>10</sup>

I do not intend to develop a theology of *metanoia* here, but I do want to make one point crucial for this paper: in the New Testament

8. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 111.

9. Merton, "Message to Poets," 372.

10. One can find an exhaustive analysis in Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985) *sub voce*.

*metanoia* is demanded in response to a call articulated in language; one hears a word and one responds or does not respond. This is true for Jesus, who announces the kingdom of God and asks for conversion, just as it is for the early apostles, who proclaim the Good News and demand a response. Kierkegaard said that what distinguished the genius from the apostle is that the apostle announces the truth and that the warrant for the announcement is that it *is* the truth.

Merton was a monk and the monk is the one who is commanded to hear the word. Benedict begins his rule: "Listen, my child!"<sup>11</sup> Listen to what? Instruction (*praecepta*). How? By inclining the ear of the heart. Furthermore, this "hearing" is not a once and for all proposition. Indeed, as Benedict makes clear, it is a hearing in a school (*schola*).<sup>12</sup> In that sense, at least, one could call the monastic life an education in listening.

It would not be too far off the mark to describe the procession of Merton's published journals—from *The Sign of Jonas* to the posthumous *Asian Journal*—as landmarks of hearing that mark the continuation of the way first begun as he undertook his new life described in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

We should not overly schematize his life's journey, but it does seem clear that Merton's life was a series of convictions—those turnings from error into truth which led him, he believed, by faith to the truth who said "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." Such convictions come to us in illuminating moments that are never free from pain.

Spiritual listening is a pluriform exercise. It could be the ecstatic moment of listening to the awe-ful mystery of God in the bell tower of Gethsemani in 1952 or listening to the presence of the people at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, just as it could be listening to cries of the murdered children in Alabama or the silences of the hermitage or the wisdom found in the sound of turning prayer wheels or the flutterings of prayer flags of an exiled Tibetan community in Northern India.

11. Prologue to the *Rule of Benedict*. The earlier *Rule of the Master* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1977) expresses the same sentiment but in a far more prolix fashion: "You who are reading, first of all, and you who are listening to me speak, dismiss now other thoughts and realize that I am speaking to you and through my words God is instructing you."

12. Benedict calls a monastery "a school of the Lord's Service" at the end of the prologue of his *Rule*. The *Rule of the Master* uses *schola* as a synonym for the monastery.

Everyone has a particular ear, but the voice that gives us conviction is one even if that voice speaks in many different words. To be a person of conviction "in the Spirit" demands a rootedness in life; indeed, Merton says that the solidarity of poets (i.e., of makers) is rooted in life and not "artificial systems." If one listens to the world and then speaks back to it there is a primordial trust—a conviction—that one is on unshakeable ground; indeed, one is on the way to the conviction of truth.

Merton was so convinced of that fact that he could as a young monk lament that he and so many others lacked the burning integrity of such unmonastic figures as D. H. Lawrence just as he could, in his later years, note the convictions of a Pasternak or a Camus or a Dalai Lama or a D. T. Suzuki. He could discern their path because he also was a traveler who was listening and hastening to the source of what he heard.

Here is a second hint: One cannot make another's convictions one's own, but everyone is challenged to become a listener for the truth in order to make the change (conversion) from error to truth. That truth (which many call God) is beyond human comprehension, but is the ultimate source of conviction if only we can decipher the language we hear. And that language, Merton would slyly add, is to be found in silence. Think of these words from Merton's "Hagia Sophia":

There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity  
A silence which is the fount of action and joy.  
It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the un-  
seen roots of all created being  
Welcoming me tenderly  
saluting me with indescribable tenderness.

### Makers of Extraordinary Possibilities

The phrase "extraordinary possibilities" seems so grandiose that it may be worthwhile to unpack it a bit. Extraordinary is not the opposite of ordinary; it is the enhancement or the thickening of the ordinary. The poet, after all, sees ordinary things but in a manner that makes them new and fresh. Cézanne saw more than apples in his luminescent still lifes, just as Emily Dickinson saw death in carriages when her Amherst contemporaries saw only vehicles.

Merton had that kind of "eye." One need not exegete his poetry or gloss his prose to see that. One need only thumb through his published photographs. His pictures of people tended to be snapshots of

no great merit, but when he was left alone at his hermitage with the leisure to look—ah, well, then we see the ordinary take on a Hopkinsque depth of the “dearest, freshness, deep down things.” If one wishes to understand Merton the contemplative, one could well begin to look attentively at those tree stumps, roots, paint buckets, chairs, mottled leaves, and bare autumn limbs that caught his eye. Both the ordinary facticity of nature and the detritus of human culture take on a new thickness that speaks of that *Grund* which the mystic says is at the root of all.

Closely connected to the capacity to see the ordinary as beyond (as “extra”) is the conviction of possibility. Possibility carries with it the promise of the not-yet-explored, of the alternative density of what impinges on us in our ordinary journey. To see possibility is to be able to hope in the face of the implacable presence of the seemingly impermeable hereness and the ordinariness of the present moment.

Anyone who hopes, especially if one has drunk deep of the doctrine of monastic hope, sees both the danger of the future and the redemption of the future. The monk is a watcher (as Merton beautifully describes it in the “Fire Watch” sermon).<sup>13</sup> From the vantage point of the watchtower he may see—Merton saw!—the SAC bombers with their atomic eggs, hear the cries of burned children in Birmingham, the napalm in Vietnam. Those sights signaled possibilities of apocalyptic scenarios. Merton, however, also saw people who struggled against violence. He saw the rustle of SOPHIA in the writings of Pasternak and in the protests of Camus. He saw evil and the good behind it in Flannery O’Connor. He found Zen wisdom in the Desert Fathers and Mothers. He found Cistercian purity and simplicity in the Shakers. He saw possibilities and alternatives in the poets, hippies, and others who lived at the margin.

Whoever hopes, which is to say, whoever can live with the possibility of extraordinary possibilities, is, in a deep sense, a person of prayer. The eminent Oxford theologian John Macquarrie has made the point brilliantly:

Prayer is *passionate* thinking. . . . Such a thinking is not content to learn what is, but considers what ought to be. . . . Such a thinking is intermingled with painful longing and desire as it catches

13. One could explore in some depth Merton’s concept of the “watcher”—a term so deeply embedded in prophetic literature.

the vision of what might be and longs for its realization. . . . This passionate thinking, that is, open to feeling the world as well as knowing it, is at least the threshold of prayer. To think of the world with longing for its perfection is a step towards praying for the coming of the kingdom; to think of the world with rejoicing for all that is good is inarticulately to hallow His name. . . . Wherever there is passionate thinking as described above there is something that has an affinity with prayer.<sup>14</sup>

Merton would not use quite the same terms as Macquarrie. As one who struggled against overconceptualized theories of “mental” prayer all of his life, “thinking” would not be the first verb that would come to his mind.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, what Macquarrie attempts to articulate is very close both to the sophianic model that undergirds the “General Dance” at the end of *New Seeds of Contemplation* and the more austere sense of contemplation reflected in the essays posthumously published in *Contemplation in a World of Action*.

### Poets Create Beyond All Objects

To prepare to reflect on this final part of the paper I sat down and reread Merton’s “Message to Poets.” I saw something there that I had not seen before and it struck me with the force of intuition. This message is not about poetry and it is not about poets; it is about the *community* of poets. Some gathered in Mexico and another single poet in Nelson County, Kentucky, but all bound together beyond place, appearance, race, nationality, and their poetry both read and unread. Thus, Merton speaks of the solidarity of poets who are “all monks,” “standing together,” “united,” “Children of the Unknown,” “Dervishes in the water of life,” etc. It is human community and not the poem as “artifact” that binds.

Merton lived in an enclosed contemplative community for twenty-seven years. One could create a fever chart of his attitude toward that community consisting of spikes and valleys: the monastic community was a *paradisus claustralis*, a “foretaste of heaven,” or even,

14. John Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality*, 2nd ed. (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse, 1992) 26.

15. He would have liked, however, Macquarrie’s further reflections on “compassionate” thinking where Macquarrie borrows heavily from the Buddhist tradition. Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality*, 27ff.

"the center of America." But, when the old fogs of what Cassian calls *accedie* struck him, the monastery was parodied as an all-American, go-getting cheese factory housing neurotics and pseudo-contemplatives. Indeed, as one who has lived with his journals over the past few years, I think it fair to say that the spikes and valleys could be charted on an almost weekly basis. It much depended on what he was reading, how loud the tractors were rumbling, and whether he and the abbot were talking about this or that.

Apart from the ordinary travails of living as a solitary by disposition in a community to which he had been bound by vows, Merton was thinking about something far more ambitious: how to live in the hidden fastness of rural Kentucky while simultaneously living compassionately with those persons who were fellow searchers and pilgrims on the contemplative way. In point of fact, Merton discovered a way of community that suited his own needs, which was the way of the heart.

Let me illustrate what I mean by reference to a short introduction that Merton wrote in 1960 for the first volume of his *Obras Completas*,<sup>16</sup> which had been published in Buenos Aires. When Merton wrote this introduction he already had a long and intimate acquaintance with a number of Latin American intellectuals and a passionate interest in the southern hemisphere, fueled largely from his deep friendship with Ernesto Cardenal, who had been his novice in the 1950s. Merton wrote that he had attempted to join in his life a deep appreciation for Latin American culture by his prayerful encounter with its poets and artists, novices and mystics. He then concluded:

I cannot be a partial American and I cannot be, which is even sadder, a partial Catholic. For me Catholicism is not confined to one culture, one nation, one age, one race. . . . My Catholicism is all the world and all ages. It dates from the beginning of the world. The first man was the image of Christ and contained Christ, even as he was created, as saviour in his heart.<sup>17</sup>

That is a profound statement in its own right and a powerful description of Merton's vocation as monk/writer/poet. First of all, it moves a description of Catholicism away from being a mere denomi-

16. There were no follow up volumes, although other works than those in this first volume were translated into Spanish.

17. This introduction may be found in Merton, "Honorable Reader," 41.

national tag toward a larger, more theological conception of what Catholicity at its deepest really means: the capacity to hold in tension the particular and the universal; the openness necessary to see the largest picture while remaining faithful to whom one is and where one stands in this life. To be a true Catholic means to be able to reconcile the particular with the universal; to keep in balance the *coincidentia oppositorum*.<sup>18</sup> Adam, Merton says in the above quote, was one person, but Adam's life held the promise of all life: we are all of Adam's race.

This was not merely an aside in Merton's understanding of his Catholicism. He expressed himself of this same sentiment to many others in his personal correspondence. To Czeslaw Milosz: "I cannot be a Catholic unless it is made quite clear that I am a Jew and a Moslem, unless I am execrated as a Buddhist, and denounced for having undermined all that this comfortable and social catholicism stands for."<sup>19</sup> To Lawrence Ferlinghetti he wrote that the "you gotta go to confession" routine was not what he meant by drawing on Catholic roots, but "fidelity to conscience, or to the inner voice, or to the Holy Spirit: but it involves a lot of struggle and no supineness and you probably won't get much encouragement from anybody."<sup>20</sup>

This was not a recipe for syncretism or for indifference but for the deepening of one's attentiveness to the Holy Spirit starting from where one was intellectually and existentially.

Merton wanted to do something like that in his intellectual and contemplative life. Indeed, his experiment in actually living that way not only provides a key for understanding his many interests, but is also a template for seeing how he attempted to integrate the seemingly contrary poles of his desires (e.g., solitude/community; activism/contemplation; writing/asceticism; etc.).

Think of the instances in Merton's life that demonstrate his desire for a Catholic union to be achieved within his own person:

- His desire to unite Eastern and Western Christian thought by his own reverential readings in the Orthodox tradition.
- His desire to reach out to the novelist Boris Pasternak because of his conviction that he detected Sophianic themes in *Doctor Zhivago*.

18. For this concept of Catholicity see the brilliant theological meditation of Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983).

19. Letter of 18 Jan. 1962 in Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, 79.

20. Letter of 2 Aug. 1961 in *ibid.*, 269.

- His desire that Ecuador's Jaime Andrade sculpt a Madonna and Child of the Andes so that his novices could see a fuller picture of Christ in the Americas.
- His love for Suzuki, who deepened his understanding of Cistercian simplicity and discipline through the eyes of Zen (and how that eye, trained in Zen, could look so lovingly at Shakertown and understand its aesthetics perfectly).
- His deep conviction, expressed in his prefaces to Japanese translations of his work, that he desired his life to be simultaneously a *no* to violence, degradation, and inhumanity while being a simultaneous *yes* to all that was good and human and beautiful and decent.
- His intention to go to the Tibetans in Northern India not as a guru, but as a pilgrim and a learner.
- His belief that a life-long look back to the deepest strains of the monastic life could help him to understand the ascetic writer of Algeria, Albert Camus, as well as the Native Americans of his own continent.
- His vocation to be a contemplative who could live in direct compassion with the world he loved and the people who loved him.

And how did he do this? First of all by practical (and sometimes impractical) strategies: writing to people; organizing a "little journal" timed to self-destruct after four issues, small retreats, and gatherings; sending off mimeographed letters to friends; sharing books, articles, and ideas; obeying inner impulses to strike up a correspondence.

Secondly, and paradoxically, by deeper strategies: living in silence, walking in the woods, saying his psalms, sitting quietly—all of the things monks ought to do.

And finally, by obeying the old monastic dictum of listening to the most profound silence there is—the great silence at the heart of things; by being a watcher of the times and of the presence of Sophia in a redeemed world; by being hospitable to ideas, people, movements.

Are all those old monastic themes not present in his message to poets?

Where are those poets today? Only God knows. Who from the conference remembers Merton's words? It is difficult to say. It is not important. The "Message to Poets" is a temporal artifact, an occasional thing, a souvenir of a past now long gone from us.

Here is what is important: Decades after he wrote his message we are here as part of a web of people who are academics and activists, poets and artists, people who want to listen and watch and learn. At least partially, we find inspiration in the life and work of a person who believed it worthwhile to write to poets in Mexico, flower children in the Bay Area, Nobel Laureates, and prelates precisely to expand new communities of fellow seekers. His language was flexible enough to speak to these audiences either singly or as groups, just as his books today are read by a range of people whose arc would move from the devout to the quizzical.

And this because authentic spirituality for Merton was never a matter of "chatting" about God or of punishing oneself or of fleeing from the thickness of life. Contemplation for Merton was the "deep resonance in the inner center of our spirit in which our very life loses its separate voice and re-sounds with the majesty and mercy of the Hidden and Loving One."<sup>21</sup>

That, in brief, is what I have learned from reading and living with the "Message to Poets." I can summarize what I have been driving at by re-calling two stories from traditions that Merton loved:

"Abbot Bessarion, dying said: The monk should be all eye like the Cherubim and Seraphim."<sup>22</sup>

"A pilgrim asked the Buddha: 'Are you a god or a magician?' The Buddha said: 'I am neither god nor magician.' 'What are you?' The Buddha said: 'I am awake.'"

21. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 3.

22. In Merton's translation in *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960) 49.