

Thomas Merton and the Vocation of the Cultural Critic: Prophetic and Poetic Imagination

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Introduction

The question of vocation is one of the most haunting and vexing challenges of life. The literary giant Dante states boldly: "Not many come in answer to this call,"¹ that adventuresome descent into hell and the search for the beloved Beatrice. The seventeenth-century Anglican poet/divine George Herbert summarizes his vocation:

I live to show his power, who once did bring
My joys to weep, and now my griefs to sing.²

Frederick Buechner presents the vocational question in these terms: "A man's life is full of all sorts of voices calling him in all sorts of directions. Some of them are voices from inside and some of them are voices from outside. The more alive and alert we are, the more clamorous our lives are. Which do we listen to? What kind of voice do we listen for?"³

Before having Thomas Merton comment directly on his own unique vocation, I cite one last person, much admired by Merton, who knew that in his own life many voices clamored for attention. I refer to the poet Rainer Maria Rilke:

1. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Lawrence Grant White (New York: Pantheon, 1948) 58.

2. George Herbert, "Joseph's Coat," in *George Herbert: The Country Parson, the Temple*, edited with an introduction by John N. Wall, Jr. (New York: Paulist, 1981) 284.

3. Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark* (New York: Seabury, 1981) 27.

My life is not this steeply sloping hour,
in which you see me hurrying.
Much stands behind me; I stand before it like a tree;
I am only one of my many mouths,
and at that, the one that will be still the soonest.

I am the rest between two notes;
which are somehow always in discord
because Death's note wants to climb over—
but in the dark interval, reconciled,
they stay there trembling.

And the song goes on, beautiful.⁴

The song of Thomas Merton goes on, beautiful. Though he has been dead twenty-five years, Merton continues to touch the minds and hearts of individuals and nations. Major biographies have attempted to track his mysterious life, four volumes of his letters have now been published, his books and tapes continue to sell, workshops, seminars, classes, and conferences are available on an annual basis. People are interested in knowing who this man was, what voices he heard, how he responded to life and love in the twentieth century. We are all desirous of mentors and models. Thomas Merton has been a teacher and guide for many of us.

Was Thomas Merton's vocation one of being a cultural critic? Beyond doubt he played that role, since he boldly challenged the values of our national and international ethos. Merton knew the values of the gospel, and he understood, theoretically and experientially, the values of the world. He felt within his bones the discrepancies of his own heart and of the culture, the distance between the ideal and real, the goal of integrity and the facticity of brokenness. As a critic he was not afraid to speak out and shout words of confrontation, especially against the foolishness of war and the insanity of mass armament.

To be called to the vocation of cultural critic was one of many callings and certainly not the deepest for Merton. In the end, Merton saw his vocation to be a writer. Six years before his death he reflects:

If the monastic life is a life of hardship and sacrifice, I would say that for me most of the hardship has come in connection with writing. It is possible to doubt whether I have become a monk (a doubt

4. Rainer Maria Rilke, "My life is not this steeply sloping hour," *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Robert Bly (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 31.

I have to live with), but it is not possible to doubt that I am a writer, that I was born one and will most probably die as one. Disconcerting, disedifying as it is, this seems to be my lot and my vocation. It is what God has given me in order that I might give it back to Him.⁵

And what does one write about? Great authors record their experience of life, inner and outer. Merton wrote about his hunger for God, about his own strange journey in and out of light and darkness, about the political forces that shaped the century, about the cultural movements that influenced individual and national destinies, about the inner landscapes of his often tormented and confused soul. What he felt and thought had to find its incarnation in words to take on full reality. Writing for Merton was a vocation verging on an addiction. But then, can the two be separated?

Rilke's poem talks about one of many mouths. Merton expressed his self-identity in other terms than that of a writer. Here are just a few examples that must be mentioned before venturing into the poetic and prophetic imagination that empowered Merton to do his work as a cultural critic:

For it had become evident to me that I was a great rebel. I fancied that I had suddenly risen above all the errors and stupidities and mistakes of modern society—there are enough of them to rise above, I admit—and that I had taken my place in the ranks of those who held up their heads and squared their shoulders and marched on into the future. In the modern world, people are always holding up their heads and marching into the future, although they haven't the slightest idea what they think the "future" is or could possibly mean. The only future we seem to walk into, in actual fact, is full of bigger and more terrible wars, wars well calculated to knock our upraised heads off those squared shoulders.⁶

. . . I am not only not a Saint but just a weak, proud, self-centered little guy, interested in writing, who wants to belong to God. Intercede for me, a stuffed shirt in a place of stuffed shirts and a big dumb phony Tramp as I am.⁷

5. Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell, revised edition (New York: Doubleday/Image, 1974) 16. First published in 1962.

6. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1948) 93.

7. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton*

My outlook is not purely American and I feel sometimes disturbed by the lack of balance in the power civilization of this country. It is technologically very strong, spiritually superficial and weak. There is much good in the people, who are very simple and kind, but there is much potential evil in the irresponsibility of the society that leaves all to the interplay of human appetites, assuming that everything will adjust itself automatically for the good of all. This unfortunately is fatal and may lead to the explosion that will destroy half the world, of which there is serious danger. I entered the monastery twenty years ago, and am novice master here. I believe my vocation is essentially that of a pilgrim and an exile in life, that I have no proper place in this world but that for that reason I am in some sense to be the friend and brother of people everywhere, especially those who are exiles and pilgrims like myself. . . . My life is in many ways simple, but it is also a mystery which I do not attempt to really understand, as though I were led by the hand in a night where I see nothing, but can fully depend on the Love and Protection of Him Who guides me.⁸

Merton's complex personality is evident in this self-portrait. Also in evidence is his marvelous capacity to name reality, the bright and the dark side of life. There is an honesty, and therefore humility, that is very appealing in someone who refuses to romanticize or idealize the mystery of life, which is permeated with comedy and tragedy, faith and doubt, love and much hatred.

Thomas Merton was essentially a writer but one who did not heed the line in Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*: "I keep my nose out of God's business." Merton put his nose under the divine canvas and was concerned with God's business, that is, people, creation, salvation. As a writer he had to be a cultural critic as well as a poet and contemplative. Through the instrumentality of the written word, Merton was bonded in a rich solidarity with the twentieth century and all it stood for. The famous scene in Louisville is embedded in many of our imaginations:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the reali-

on *Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, selected and edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 9, 137, 147.

8. *Ibid.*, 51–52.

zation that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. . . . This sense of liberation from the illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. . . . Thank God, thank God that I am like other men, that I am only a man among others.⁹

The Gift of Imagination

Biography must deal with imagination. To know the story of another is to come to an appreciation of the deep psychic images and symbols that govern and guide one's attitudes and behavior. Imagination is many things: the capacity to dream, the power to discern possibilities and fresh alternatives, the faculty of flexibility that makes us forever restless, "a nest of wires" (Mary Oliver) impossible to unravel. Amos Wilder warns us: "When imagination fails doctrines become ossified, witness and proclamation wooden, doxologies and litanies empty, consolations hollow, and ethics legalistic."¹⁰

The culture of any given era, and by culture I understand the influences of art and politics, economics and song, education and theater, on the consciousness and lifestyle of a given people, is grounded on certain large operative metaphors, indeed on a dominant imagination. The critic comes along with a different set of images and symbols that challenge and sometimes contradict the reigning culture. This person is sometimes called a prophet, sometimes a critic, quite often a rebel. The critic has a different set of eyes (metaphysics), a different way of knowing (epistemology), and therefore a different lifestyle (ethics, morality). It is difficult to overestimate the significance of symbols and images. Avery Dulles gives us a clue to the influences of symbols and thus the importance of the imagination:

Symbols transform the horizons of man's life, integrate his perception of reality, alter his scales of values, reorient his loyalties,

9. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday/Image, 1968) 156-57.

10. Amos Niven Wilder, *Theopoetic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 2.

attachments and aspirations in a manner far exceeding the powers of abstract conceptual thought.¹¹

What about Merton's poetic imagination? Poetry has to do with experience and words. The poet is skilled in making words do extraordinary things in creating new and significant experiences for the reader. When the poetic imagination is activated, our experiences of life are deepened and broadened, our contact with reality is sharpened and enriched, our sense of life takes on greater fullness and intensity. Merton was a poet. He felt life deeply, he wrote about it in extraordinary ways using images and verse to communicate what he felt and saw.

The poet Merton demonstrates his skill in capturing the human struggle through the poetic medium:

This afternoon, let me
Be a sad person. Am I not
Permitted (like other men)
To be sick of myself?

Am I not allowed to be hollow,
Or fall in the hole
Or break my bones (within me)
In the trap set by my own
Lie to myself? O my friend,
I too must sin and sin.

I too must hurt other people and
(Since I am no exception)
I must be hated by them.

Do not forbid me, therefore,
To taste the same bitter poison,
And drink the gall that love
(Love most of all) so easily becomes.

Do not forbid me (once again) to be
Angry, bitter, disillusioned,
Wishing I could die.

While life and death
Are killing one another in my flesh,
Leave me in peace. I can enjoy,
Even as other men, this agony.

11. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image Books, 1974) 24.

Only (whoever you may be)
 Pray for my soul. Speak my name
 To Him, for in my bitterness
 I hardly speak to Him: and He
 While He is busy killing me
 Refuses to listen.¹²

Merton insists on "being like the rest of men." Being allowed this privilege/burden arose out of his deep sense of solidarity with people (and with all creation) and an awareness of the human condition. As he used images and symbols to understand and critique himself, he also relied on imaginative language to do his work as a cultural critic.

In a letter to Pope John XXIII dated November 10, 1958, Merton uses the imagery of the cloister, contemplation, solitude, to describe his sense of vocation and mission to the larger world. The monastic life must not be limited to prayer and penance. Merton felt an obligation, if not a compulsion, to be connected with the major movements going on in the world, and to be connected in sympathetic ways. His poetic sensitivity demanded that contact be made and sustained despite the cloister walls. He writes:

It seems to me that, as a contemplative, I do not need to lock myself into solitude and lose all contact with the rest of the world; rather this poor world has a right to a place in my solitude. It is not enough for me to think of the apostolic value of prayer and penance; I also have to think in terms of a contemplative grasp of the political, intellectual, artistic and social movements in this world—by which I mean a sympathy for the honest aspirations of so many intellectuals everywhere in the world and the terrible problems they have to face. I have had the experience of seeing that this kind of understanding and friendly sympathy, on the part of a monk who really understands them, has produced striking effects among artists, writers, publishers, poets, etc., who have become my friends without my having to leave the cloister.¹³

Merton's rich and fertile imagination was grounded in three disciplined and extraordinary capacities: the capacity to notice, the

12. Thomas Merton, *The Strange Islands* (New York: New Directions, 1957) 25–26.

13. Merton, *Hidden Ground*, 482.

capacity to speak, the capacity to care.¹⁴ Noticing, the ability to pay attention to reality, is an art that was well developed in the life of Thomas Merton. Nor was this skill merely one of a keen sensitivity. Rather, Merton's noticing cut to the quick of reality and led him, often painfully, into the truth of things. As a cultural critic he simply "saw" what others were blind to: he saw the stupidity of war, he saw the insanity of the arms race, he saw the evils of racism. Dialectically, he also was attuned to beauty and goodness, praising God and people in appropriate ways.

Merton's skills in naming were extensive. What helped him was his broad education: schooling in France and England, studies in New York, his teaching experience, and perhaps most of all, the breadth of his reading. What came in was given out. His letters, books, poetry, and lectures were all means for Merton of putting in ordered fashion the vast store of knowledge he had accumulated. Part of his speech was sharp and biting, speech directed to acts and institutions of inhumanity. Merton condemned evil, in society and in the Church. He spoke, as we have seen, sharp words about himself: tramp, rebel, big dumb phony, stuffed shirt. Different noticing demands different words. Not all people who notice are able to speak with eloquence. But Merton was one who did.

Poetic imagination demands the capacity to notice, the capacity to use language well. But not all poets are gifted with the capacity to care. Merton knew that the key to a Christian existence lay in the heart, a heart grounded and centered on faith: "Men without deep faith live as it were with no center, and no heart, and consequently one can only expect violence, injustice, confusion and chaos."¹⁵

There were four things that deepened Merton's faith and fostered his capacity to care: prayer, penance, poverty, and solitude. His structured Trappist life helped to make these means both accessible and, through mutual witness, believable. In prayer, God's word pointed the way to radical concerns for others; in penance, freedom from the false self assisted in breaking down the walls of self-protectiveness; in poverty, space was made for the other, the room of hospitality remained uncluttered; in solitude, an authentic listening allowed the cry

14. See Walter Brueggeman's *Finally Comes the Poet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

15. Merton, *Hidden Ground*, 67.

of the poor and lonely to be heard. Yet even here Merton knew of dark dangers:

The crises of the age are so enormous and the mystery of evil so unfathomable: the action of well-meaning men is so absurd and tends so much to contribute to the very evil it tries to overcome: all these things should show us that the real way is prayer, and penance, and closeness to God in poverty and solitude. Yet there is no question that sometimes this too is also preached as an evasion of responsibility.¹⁶

Our images of God, of self, and of life are determinative. Robert Jay Lifton begins his book *The Broken Connection* in this fashion:

We live on images. As human beings we know our bodies and our minds only through what can be imagined. To grasp our humanity we need to structure these images into metaphors and models. Writers, artists, and visionaries have always known this—as have philosophers and scientists in other ways. Depth psychologists, however, take on the special and perhaps impossible task of bringing order to this dazzling array of images and the equally impressive range of feelings with them.¹⁷

Merton understood intuitively Boulding's principle: "Behavior depends on image." Two images were embedded in Merton's imagination as they are in our own: August 6, 1945, the mushroom cloud of an atomic bomb; August 7, 1959, the haunting photograph of the earthrise from outer space. Merton's poetic imagination was used to speaking about war and peace, war that mutilates human bodies and human spirits, peace that reflects the kingdom of God. War and peace is the subtitle that underlies Merton's poetic critique of our times.

Prophetic Imagination

The formation of one's imagination can take different tacks. So much depends upon environment, genes, where one is born, and the historical circumstances of one's times. Poetic imagination is not necessarily prophetic. In fact, many poets isolate themselves from political

16. *Ibid.*, 20.

17. Robert J. Lifton, *The Broken Connection* (New York: Basic Books, 1979) 3.

and economic realities in an attempt to protect their solitude so as to avoid dissipating limited energies. But Merton's personality could not bear such restrictions. He was a monk universal, concerned about everything. His poetic imagination necessarily had to be prophetic.

The contemporary Scripture scholar Walter Bruggemann states in his work *The Prophetic Imagination* that a prophet is one who criticizes and energizes:

It is the task of prophetic ministry to bring the claims of the tradition and the situation of enculturation into an effective interface. That is, the prophet is called to be a child of the tradition, one who has taken it seriously in the shaping of his or her own field of perception and system of language, who is so at home in that memory that the points of contact and incongruity with the situation of the church in culture can be discerned and articulated with proper urgency.¹⁸

Merton fits well this description: his studies grounded him in the tradition, his curiosity and sense of solidarity attuned him to cultural realities, his faith pushed him with urgency into speaking the truth achieved through prayer and study. His imagination was deeply prophetic.

Today the prophet sees much of the world as dysfunctional. Merton's analysis sees our sickness as one of disordered love:

Our times manifest in us a basic distortion, a deep-rooted moral disharmony against which laws, sermons, philosophies, authority, inspiration, creativity, and apparently even love itself would seem to have no power. On the contrary, if man turns in desperate hope to all these things, they seem to leave him more empty, more frustrated, and more anguished than before. Our sickness is the sickness of disordered love, of the self-love that realizes itself simultaneously to be self-hate and instantly becomes a source of universal, indiscriminate destructiveness. This is the other side of the coin that was current in the nineteenth century: the belief in indefinite progress, in the supreme goodness of man and of all his appetites. What passes for optimism, even Christian optimism, is the indefectible hope that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century attitudes can continue valid, can be *kept* valid, just by the determi-

18. Walter Brueggeman, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 12.

nation to smile, even though the whole world may fall to pieces. Our smiles are symptoms of the sickness.¹⁹

Besides this disordered love, Merton's prophetic stance takes on the emancipation and autonomy of the technological mind. This attitude claims unlimited possibilities, holds that science can do everything—that science is "infallible and impeccable," that it is responsible to no power and has its own "ethic of expediency and efficiency." Merton writes: "If technology remained in the service of what is higher than itself—reason, man, God—it might indeed fulfill some of the functions that are now mythically attributed to it. But becoming autonomous, existing only for itself, it imposes upon man its own irrational demands, and threatens to destroy him. Let us hope it is not too late for man to regain control."²⁰

Half prophets are neither nice to be around nor are they terribly helpful. Their criticism may be accurate, but unless alternatives are offered we should not expect an improvement of the common good. Merton, during one of his stays in the hospital, where he had access to newspapers and the events of the world, suggests that we have the following needs: "First, we need to recover the belief that order is possible, and that it rests with us to preserve it. Then we need the desire to do it." He goes on to say that we have to believe in the good potentialities of people, however wasted or misused in the past. The key is that the order must come from the inside. "Finally, all this requires the hope that independent and personal initiative will not be entirely useless: we need to recover the belief that it is worthwhile and possible to break through the state of massive inertia and delusion created by the repetition of statements and slogans without meaning and without any effect in concrete action. In a word, the arbitrary, fictitious, and absurd mentality of our society—reflected in its advertising and entertainment particularly—must be recognized as an affront to man's personal dignity."²¹

A social analysis done in 1993, twenty-five years after Merton's death, presents us with a number of crises: alienation and loneliness; the gap between the have's and have-not's; the inability of the community to care; the "forgetting of Being"; the disintegration of our

19. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 67–68.

20. *Ibid.*, 75–77.

21. *Ibid.*, 255.

stories (images, symbols, metaphors); the civil strife we call violence; the blatant consumerism that dehumanizes people and society. The writings of Thomas Merton the prophet assist us in once again focusing on values that point us toward a "civilization of love." Without this critique and others like it, we may not avoid the vicious vortex of twentieth-century muddleness.

Conclusion

As I think of Thomas Merton in his role as a cultural critic, three books come to mind: *Blessed Simplicity*, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and *Care of the Soul*.

Raimundo Panikkar, in *Blessed Simplicity*, subtitled *The Monk as Universal Archetype*, maintains that "[t]here are four sociological groups of capital importance in society: (1) church or religious groups; (2) academia, or teaching and research institutions; (3) government and military; (4) industry and commerce."²² He goes on to say that the monk, in the strict sense, is not priest, intellectual, public officer, producer; the monk does not fit into any of these four sociological groups. A fifth state exists in which a person has abandoned the world and has renounced the ordinary human enterprises. Panikkar then mentions a sixth group, namely, the guerrillas who are dissidents and revolutionaries.

These categories may be too clean for some, but they do provide a way of identifying lifestyles and value systems. Regarding the function of the monk in society, he is, Panikkar writes,

the person who has abandoned the world, the monk, the *sannyasin*, the renouncer, the one who has forsaken all the rules of the game of human intercourse, who has leapt over the wall and yet remains as a symbol to the majority of mortals of the provisionality of all human enterprise. In his own eyes the monk is one segregated, set apart, but in people's consciousness he is holy and thus by no means a marginal or peripheral being. The monk resides in the very center of society, and when they are faced by what appears to be technically insoluble problems the people approach their saints, their monks, hermits, and ascetics.²³

22. Raimundo Panikkar, *Blessed Simplicity: The Monk as Universal Archetype* (New York: Seabury, 1982) 86–87.

23. *Ibid.*

I wonder whether the Western world holds the monk in such esteem. I do not wonder nor do I doubt that one monk, Thomas Merton, has articulated many insights that will help us deal with our near-insoluble problems.

The second book: Stephen R. Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. A friend of mine suggested that this book and others like it are the spiritual manuals of our day, replacing official texts. Covey and his cohorts speak about values and mission statements, principles of communication and relationship, the art of dialogue and achieving one's goals. From Covey's first principle of "Be Proactive" to the seventh guideline of "Sharpen the Saw," we hear the basic dynamic of growth toward full human potential.

Merton's critique of such works would probably center on the self-reliance emphasis and the short-changing of grace. But Merton would appreciate the desire that is arising in various management fields to deal with the whole person, to live by a set of principles, to take seriously and responsibly the human journey.

On the best seller list of the *New York Times Book Review* magazine is Thomas Moore's *Care of the Soul*. The thesis of this text is that we have lost our soulfulness, we are no longer connected to what is deepest and most human and divine within us. *Care of the Soul* simply affirms much of what Merton stood for. Merton's voice cried out in the wasteland, cried out that we must care for the inner life. His stress on tending the inner life so that our outer lives might be authentic and human remains a great service to our time.

Two of Merton's seven mountains were poetry and prophecy. He climbed those roughed slopes and reported back to us his find. For that report, I am grateful.