

The Fire Watch Epilogue and *Life and Holiness*: Opposing Rhetorics in the Writings of Thomas Merton

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The rich and enigmatic prose of Thomas Merton does not lend itself readily to a traditional rhetorical analysis. Aspects of written communication that are isolated and studied evaporate when we look for them. The concern for audience, for instance, evaporates when we consider that Merton did not typically address a particular audience. Credibility, or the trust we put in an author, is frequently discarded by Merton when he declares his thoughts to be his own and not commonly shared by all monks. Logic, the staple of good rhetoric, is certainly present, but the spiritual realities Merton uncovers are so refined that the logic is merely scaffolding to look at art treasures more closely. The effect of setting, or the time and culture of a work, also evaporate, as so much of Merton's spiritual writings seem timeless.

Yet if there is one thing we know, it is that Merton's prose is powerful in its effect. It has the ability to shape one's inmost parts, to map spiritual terrain crossed unwittingly, and to open up vistas of the spiritual life. How then, rhetorically speaking, can a text achieve such effects barring standard rhetorical features?

The answer lies not in traditional rhetoric but in our ignorance of another *kind* of rhetoric of which Merton was a master. If traditional rhetoric focuses on the power of a text, its ability to influence, there is a lesser-known but equally important kind of rhetoric, a rhetoric that is a search for knowledge; it is this rhetoric that Merton used. Oddly enough, his desire to search for knowledge in language, through writing, has a powerful effect, even though this type of rhetoric does not aim at that. The effect comes, I think, through our resonance with Mer-

ton's struggles: the knowledge that he finds is equally true for us. Let us then examine the two sorts of rhetoric in Merton for the purpose of understanding this lesser-known rhetoric in order to use it ourselves and to unlock one of the most powerful passages in Merton's corpus, the Fire Watch passage in *The Sign of Jonas*.

A Lesser-Known Rhetoric

The use of language or writing in order to create knowledge is little known today among people outside the field of rhetoric and composition. Their understanding of rhetoric is the manipulative, deceitful use of language to persuade. The term itself is synonymous with lies. Yet rhetoric was a premiere art form for the ancients, one that encompassed both the aim of persuasion and the necessity of inventing one's arguments. They saw it as a civilizing force that addressed the whole person.

We do not know of this secondary type of rhetoric because rhetoric itself as an art form was lost to scholars in the 1600s, when French scholar Pierre de la Ramee split forever rhetoric and logic.¹ Rhetoric became equated with eloquence or style, and logic (what ancient rhetors knew as the invention of argument) was assigned to philosophers. Thus, to this day, school children and college students alike find themselves focusing on style and grammar in writing courses, not on invention of arguments.

That is, until fairly recently. Scholars of rhetoric in the 1960s rediscovered classical rhetoric, reintegrating the lost canon of invention to the writing classroom. The stylistically elegant but meaningless essays of students of the 1960s were an affront at the time of so much cultural change. A voice of protest and the need for powerful writing and

1. See Walter J. Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958). The following is from "Voice and Opening Closed Systems" in *Interfaces of Word* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press) 331: "Perhaps the most tight-fisted pre-Cartesian proponent of the closed system . . . was the French philosopher and educational reformer Pierre de la Ramee or Petrus Ramus. . . . Ramus' closed-field thinking is absolute and imperious, welling out of unconscious drives for completeness and security. . . . It is unencumbered by any profound philosophical speculation, and yet it is supposed to apply to every field of knowledge. Insofar as a strong stress on closed-system thinking marks the beginning of the modern era, Ramus, rather than Descartes, stands at the beginning."

compelling arguments necessitated a return to this powerful art form. It is only recently that historians of rhetoric have traced the meager threads of the use of language for discovery over the centuries.

One such historian is William A. Covino, who wrote *The Art of Wondering: A Revisionist Return to the History of Rhetoric*.² Rare, he writes, were those voices supporting the use of rhetoric for exploration and discovery. He names French essayist Michel de Montaigne, Italian scholar Giambattista Vico, and English philosopher David Hume as proponents of knowledge as exploration. They are notably of "renegade significance," having continued the "spirit of questing and ambiguity" in the face of the great amount of attention focused on certitude throughout the years between the 1600s and today. As Covino notes:

The views of Montaigne, Vico, and Hume maintain the equivalence of rhetoric and intellectual free play through the centuries when rhetoric became a mechanized ornament of thought and critical thinking became schematized. Muffled by the rationalist voice of mainstream technical rhetoric, these thinkers have been dissociated from the rhetorical tradition, although, as I will propose, they continue the Ancient emphasis on rhetoric as philosophy, and look toward the postmodern alliance of language, literacy, and open speculation.³

It is this open speculation and risk of questioning and ambiguity that Merton radiates in the Fire Watch passage.

When rhetoric as exploration or discovery was suppressed by the attention to style or eloquence, it was also dealt a severe blow in the nineteenth century, in particular when facts alone or a logical argument alone was sufficient (claimed rhetor Richard Whately) to persuade an audience.⁴ When today we try to reason with only the facts or only logic, we echo this understanding of rhetoric from the previous century. The problem with such a concept of rhetoric is that it only addresses the rational side of the audience, leaving appeals to emotion and values and appeals concerning the credibility of the speaker

2. William A. Covino, *The Art of Wondering: A Revisionist Return to the History of Rhetoric* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook, 1988) 45.

3. *Ibid.*, 46-47.

4. See James J. Golden, Goodwin F. Bergquist, and William E. Coleman, *The Rhetoric of Western Thought*, 4th ed. (Dubuque, Ia.: Kendall/Hunt, 1989) 204.

(to name the other important aspects of traditional rhetoric) completely untaught and not addressed, meaning that today we are frequently either bored or not moved by such speech, or worse, that those rhetors skilled at the ignored aspects of rhetoric have even *greater* power because we are completely unaware that we are being persuaded.

In the passages that follow, we will examine Merton using both types of rhetoric: the trap of logical rhetoric from the previous century and the rhetoric that has as its goal the search for new knowledge.

Convincing by Logic Alone: The Rhetoric of *Life and Holiness*

In *Life and Holiness* (1963) Merton reveals that he will not take his usual stance. He discards all his experience as a writer of the contemplative experience when he says, "Nothing is here said of such subjects as 'contemplation' or even 'mental prayer.'" ⁵ He says it is an "elementary treatment of a few basic ideas in Christian spirituality," most notably the action of grace in the life of the active Christian. ⁶ At once we know, in the introduction, that this is not typical of Merton's spiritual writings, for it concerns the active, not the contemplative life, and it is basic, not sophisticated.

These considerations lend themselves to a logic- or fact-driven text. We hear it in the first sentence of the book: "Every baptized Christian is obliged by his baptismal promises to renounce sin and to give himself completely without compromise, to Christ, in order that he may fulfill his vocation, save his soul, enter into the mystery of God, and there find himself perfectly 'in the light of Christ.'" ⁷ But let us choose for analyses longer passages that allow more room for interpretation. The two that follow concern faith:

The faith by which we are united to Christ and receive supernatural life by the Gift of his Spirit, is not mere emotional or affective self-commitment. It is not a matter of blind will. Christ is not only our life, he is also our way and our truth (John 14:6). Faith is an intellectual light by which we "know" the Father in the Incarnate Word (John 14:7-14). Yet faith is at the same time a

5. Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Image, 1963) 7.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, 12.

mysterious and obscure knowledge. It knows, as the medieval mystics said, by "unknowing." To believe is to know without seeing, to know without intrinsic evidence (2 Cor 5:7). Or rather, while faith truly "sees," it sees *per speculum, in aenigmatre* (1 Cor 13:12), in a manner that is dark, mysterious, beyond explanation. The "vision" or intellectual illumination of faith is produced not by the natural activity of our intelligence working on sensible evidence, but by a direct supernatural action of the Spirit of God. Hence, though it is for that very reason beyond the normal grasp of the unaided intelligence, it offers a greater certitude than natural scientific knowledge. But this greater certitude, though it remains a matter of personal conviction, is not susceptible of rational proof to anyone who does not himself accept the premisses of faith. "No man can come to me," said Jesus Christ, "unless he be drawn by the Father who sent me" (John 6:44; cf. 6:65).⁸

Here is a second passage:

Consequently it is necessary to dispose our hearts for faith in various ways, above all by inquiry, by reading, and by prayer. If we want to know what faith is, and what Christians believe, we must inquire of the Church. If we want to know what God has revealed to the believer, we must read the Scriptures, we must study those who have explained the Scriptures, and we must acquaint ourselves with the basic truths of philosophy and theology. But since faith is a gift, prayer is perhaps the most important of all the ways of seeking it from God.

After all, it is not always easy to find a Christian capable of explaining his faith, and even the clergy may not be able to translate technical knowledge into terms that everyone can grasp. The Bible, too, is not always easy to understand. Subjective interpretation of Scripture may lead to disastrous error. As for theology and philosophy: where will a man without religious education begin to find out about them? Prayer is then the first and most important step. All through the life of faith one must resort constantly to prayer, because faith is not simply a gift which we receive once and for all in our first act of belief. Every new development of faith, every new increment of supernatural light, even though we may be earnestly working to acquire it, remains a pure gift of God. Prayer is therefore the very heart of the life of faith.⁹

8. *Ibid.*, 80.

9. *Ibid.*, 81.

Logic and facts drive these passages. There is no appeal to emotions or values here; instead Merton issues directives, reasoning that if a person wishes faith, then he or she must pursue certain paths, even though ultimately, faith is a gift. The emphasis on logic or facts alone leads Merton to write of faith in such a way that he can refer to faith as mysterious, but never acknowledge the array of human responses to the mystery of faith and its pursuit. A logic- or fact-driven text presents to the audience that which the audience should do or think, without touching the values or emotions.

Merton uses Scripture quotes as non-negotiable facts or proofs of his points. Chaim Perelman and Lynn Olbrechts-Tytecha, authors of *The New Rhetoric* (1969), would criticize Merton's use of Scripture as a way of detaching the audience from the subject: one "way of lessening the strength of arguments is to emphasize their routine, easily foreseeable character."¹⁰ These quotes are not even integrated into the text; they exist as separate proofs that require the reader to stop and integrate them. Such reading is difficult and is the product of the belief that if the facts are present, the reader will be persuaded; nevertheless, the impact of such a text is not persuasion so much as a solely intellectual treatment of the topic.

Many twentieth-century writers fall into this rhetorical trap of believing that facts and reason alone make for persuasion. While such texts remain informative, they do not have a strong persuasive effect. Merton is at his best when he writes for himself, explores questions, and allows us to follow along. His forays into writing "persuasively" for a lay audience caused him to write in a markedly different, alien style that weakens instead of raises the power of his text.

The Fire Watch Passage as Rhetoric of Exploration

One of Merton's most famous and brilliant passages, the Fire Watch epilogue, remains mysterious, elusive, and profound. On the first or the twenty-first reading this text seems to defy any explanation; the symbolism and reflections in it can be honored as Merton's own, although they are strangely poignant. The text seems impenetrable because traditional rhetorical analysis finds nothing to analyze.

10. Chaim Perelman and Lynn Olbrechts-Tytecha, *The New Rhetoric* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1969) 468.

No audience, no credibility (Merton is at a loss himself here), all setting, and God speaking at the end of the text! Appreciation seems the only fitting response, and yet the effect on readers is still profound.

Can there be an explanation for a text that meanders so? The authors cited by Covino have definite explanations. Each of these scholars agrees on three key aspects of this kind of discourse: the confrontation of darkness and asking of genuine questions; wandering or aimless discourse; and associational thinking for synthesis and discovery. In short, the writer who wishes to pursue knowledge must walk out into the unknown and abandon commonly known ways of solving the issues at hand.

Raising Questions in the Dark

Vico believed that thought began in chaos and in the dark. He also believed that the rhetor must ask questions rather than organize data. He believed knowledge is what humans make rather than what they find; he also advised that students be trained in common sense along with the traditional analytical methods because their education would be useless if they could not deal with the probable and apply what they learned to current situations. Rhetoric for Vico meant "an activity in which the mind constructs knowledge of itself."¹¹ Montaigne agrees that knowledge is of the self: "I would rather be an authority on myself than on Cicero."¹² He too denounces formal logical rhetorical proofs in favor of the uncertainty of writing without absolutes.

Modern rhetorician James Kinneavy classifies this type of writing as exploratory discourse.¹³ He and a number of modern rhetoricians draw on psychologist Leon Festinger's term "cognitive dissonance" to explain the beginnings of the rhetoric of discovery.¹⁴ Wonder, dis-

11. Covino, *The Art of Wondering*, 58.

12. Michael de Montaigne, *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, ed. and trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967) 3:13, 822.

13. James Kinneavy, *A Theory of Discourse* (New York: Norton, 1970).

14. See also Peter Elbow, *Embracing Contraries: Exploration in Teaching and Learning* (New York: Oxford, 1986).

Janice Lauer and others, *Four Worlds of Writing*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

Richard Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike, *Rhetoric, Discovery, and Change* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970).

comfort, and instability prefigure writing of this type. The imagination, central to the explanations of Montaigne and Vico, searches for truth beyond standard or current dogma, frequently calling into question aspects of the dogma itself that do not resolve the dissonance.

The Fire Watch passage is rich in question raising. Once Merton tells us his ostensible task of being on the fire watch, he declares the deeper intent or dissonance:

It is when you hit the novitiate that the fire watch begins in earnest. Alone, silent, wandering on your appointed rounds through the corridors of a huge, sleeping monastery, you come around the corner and find yourself face to face with your monastic past and with the mystery of your vocation. The fire watch is an examination of conscience in which your task as watchman suddenly appears in its true light: a pretext devised by God to isolate you, and to search your soul with lamps and questions, in the heart of darkness.¹⁵

Mirroring what rhetoricians Vico, Montaigne, and Kinneavy hold about the necessity of wondering and questioning, this text advances beyond what they would describe because God too is asking questions of Merton. We later hear this in the following quote: "While I am asking questions which You do not answer, You ask me a question which is so simple that I cannot answer. I do not even understand the question."¹⁶ When Merton indicates that "This night, and every night, it is the same question,"¹⁷ the magnitude, or the weight, of these questions is felt. The dissonance Merton feels is profound and prolonged, and it is instigated not only by his own mind and heart but by God as well.

He wonders whether he should even ask these questions. He writes:

On all sides I am confronted by questions that I cannot answer, because the time for answering them has not yet come. Between the silence of God and the silence of my own soul, stands the silence of the souls entrusted to me. Immersed in these three silences, I realize that the questions I ask myself about them are

15. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1953) 352.

16. *Ibid.*, 353.

17. *Ibid.*

perhaps no more than a surmise. And perhaps the most urgent and practical renunciation is the renunciation of all questions.¹⁸

The density and difficulty of the questions Merton faces are apparent here—more poignant because of the context. Not only do these deep questions concern his own vocation but those of others as well. And like most of us facing painful or disturbing questions, Merton wonders whether it is better to ignore them all. Even so, it is the question of his own vocation that seems to concern God and Merton most at this time.

As the journey through the monastery takes place, the emptiness of the upper floors of the old guest wing takes him aback: "The very silence is a reproach. The emptiness itself is my most terrible question."¹⁹ At this point Merton has reached the heart of the dissonance. "With my feet on the floor I waxed when I was a postulant, I ask these useless questions. With my hand on the key by the door to the tribune, where I first heard the monks chanting the psalms, I do not wait for an answer, because I have begun to realize You never answer when I expect."²⁰ He does not release the dissonance, but he does surrender to God's mysterious time and ways of answering.

A key to our own journeys is to ask such questions in the dark as well. We too must risk the pain of confronting important questions, enduring the time it takes to answer them. To move toward the resolution of these questions, we must turn to the next set of qualities rhetoricians say mark the use of language or writing for discovery.

Aimless Discourse

Another feature of the rhetoric of discovery is that it is aimless. The text seems to ramble or wander instead of following a set or certain or expected route. Covino claims that the essays of Montaigne demonstrate of themselves Montaigne's belief that knowledge is exploration, not information. The order of the essays should follow from a great intellect, not from a set plan, according to Montaigne. Covino explains Vico's accord on this point:

18. *Ibid.*, 354.

19. *Ibid.*, 357.

20. *Ibid.*, 358.

Vico refuses to preestablish some "end" for learning and associates both learning and writing—his own discourse—with a journey that is regular and regulated but "aimless." The progress of study is compared to a recursive rather than a linear process, whose aims emerge during that process itself. Here we detect Vico's trust in ingenuity, in the natural tendency to arrive at points of clarity, of acute consciousness. Vico implicitly associates learning with discovery.²¹

Kinneavy too considers this kind of discourse a "wandering in some area."²² Because the text goes against current dogma, it cannot have a current organizational plan.

The reader follows Merton along his travels sensing that something will happen but without knowing quite what. Even though the route is prescribed, the effect of the text is a journey because the thinking is not following a set route. Juxtaposed are tremendously detailed descriptions of parts of the monastery and his own ruminations. Like on any aimless journey, we are more likely to discover treasure because we have time to look.

The key to using this aspect of composing is to let ourselves be aimless in the pursuit of dissonances. This can feel uncomfortable and like wasting time. Once we begin to do so, we can employ the next strategy—associational thinking.

Synthesis through Associational Thinking

Each of the above rhetoricians believe that associational thinking is what drives discovery once a writer is committed to asking important questions but to being aimless in searching for answers. Montaigne advised the pairing of opposites (or antithesis) as the most appropriate way of expressing conflicts. Covino explains that Vico paired associational thinking with civilization:

Civilization stops when we cease to think metaphorically and associatively, cease to ponder one thing in terms of others, cease to see each human life as a tangle of relationships to divinity and history and the common sense. In other words, civilization stops when we trade philosophical imagination for intellectual purity,

21. Covino, *The Art of Wondering*, 65.

22. Kinneavy, *A Theory of Discourse*, 102.

when we trade the unstable world of human affairs for the deep solitude of certainty.²³

He also believed that "ingenuity 'calls up' or 'discovers' a connection between terms; it is the power of associative thinking."²⁴ Kinneavy and a number of modern rhetoricians echo these concerns when they advise students to engage in varied levels of associational thinking in order to explore the questions they pose.

The entire text of the Fire Watch passage is associational. Everything Merton sees reminds him of something past, present, or future. Everything from his next dentist appointment to the history of the monastery is included. As one instance, the following quote shows how much depth is implicit in such associational thinking:

And here, now, by night, with this huge clock ticking on my right hip and the flashlight in my hand and sneakers on my feet, I feel as if everything had been unreal. It is as if the past had never existed. The things I thought were so important—because of the effort I put into them—have turned out to be of small value. And the things I never thought about, the things I was never able either to measure or to expect, were the things that mattered.

(There used to be a man who walked down the back road singing, on summer mornings, right in the middle of the novices' thanksgiving after Communion: singing his own private song, every day the same. It was the sort of song you would expect to hear out in the country, in the Knobs of Kentucky.)²⁵

The association of what really matters with the scene he describes is suggestive. One can imagine how silent and fervent the young monks were after Communion, only to have a joyful unknown man like themselves singing his own song every day during this time of "thanksgiving." In the same manner that God questions Merton about his vocation, this scene can imply that God lightly illustrated what really matters to the young monks regarding their Communion reflection.

Associational thinking in the epilogue does not discriminate: rich (and even silly) sensual detail accompanies philosophical ponderings and frustrations. Like every good poet, he links the mundane and the abstract and even inverts them. Everything from "the sneakers on my

23. *Ibid.*, 58.

24. *Ibid.*, 65.

25. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, 353.

feet" to "sweat running down our ribs" to a mention of the different color of each of the kitchen walls is given his notice. Not only was Merton fully alive and present to his reality, but one can sense that the writer/poet in him raced back to compose this text conscious of every detail so as to capture the drama of the discovery next to the mundane task during which it was found.

The most famous passage where Merton sees the "chorus of living beings" dramatically exemplifies associational thinking, synthesis, and new knowledge. The last pages of the *Fire Watch* epilogue hold the culmination of Merton's search for new knowledge.

In order to understand these last pages where so much new knowledge is given, we must first contrast it to Merton's initial status. Two objects are in question: the enigmatic questions God keeps asking Merton and the implicit questioning of Merton's monastic vocation. Most important, Merton has chosen the *via negativa* of monasticism marked by extreme asceticism, isolation, silence, and unknowing. This dark way is a kind of interior death (or search) for God in God's absence because therein God reveals a more mysterious presence.

In an attempt to highlight and focus on the knowledge Merton gained (instead of the richness and beauty of the text itself), at least five insights can be specified:

- The *via negativa* is filled with life.
- The mysterious God is compassionate and merciful.
- Communion with God is the way to know God.
- God's vision integrates the vile and cruel into mercy.
- The world and all people are united in God.

When contrasted to Merton's previous state of confusion or dissonance, the knowledge that erupts from his exploratory venture in both the physical experience and in his recounting the experience in writing is profound. The certitude and joyful attitude at the end of the text signal Merton's discoveries. The risk of engaging in exploratory discourse are the dead ends, the confusion that the earlier parts of the text present. The end of the text also presents images of freedom that contrast to earlier darkness: the white dove flies into the dawn. His July Fourth has become a liberation from darkness, confusion, and a false sense of isolation.

Merton's search for knowledge can be readily described by theories proposed by Montaigne, Vico, Kinneavy, and other modern rheto-

ricians. The risks of false starts and further confusion are part of the journey, but the end results so profound that they look of little consequence in comparison. We should be encouraged, then, to ask (and be asked) the hard questions, to wander aimlessly in text, and to engage in associational thinking. The impact of Merton's prose in the *Fire Watch* epilogue comes not from a direct address, as in traditional persuasive strategies, but from the resonance with our own too quiet journeys.²⁶

26. The author would like to thank Brother Augie Jackson, Charles Murach, and Paul Weingartner for their helpful comments.