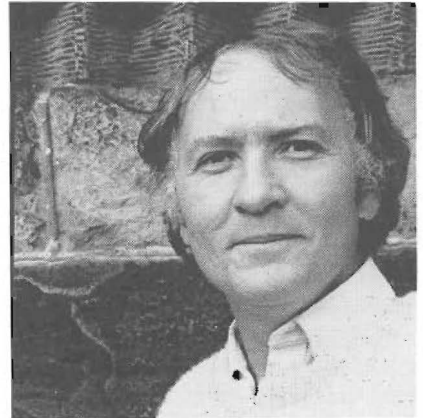

THOMAS MERTON & WENDELL BERRY: A Brief Study in Tone

by **J. S. Porter**

Jesus, according to St. Mark (1:22) and St. Luke (4:32), used “words with power” and spoke with authority. Speaking with authority does not mean speaking charmingly or cunningly. It means that the speaker’s words are lived: the words come out of struggle and speak to the struggling self within us. As Northrop Frye informs us: “The sentences of the Sermon on the Mount have nothing in them of the speech-maker’s art: they seem to be coming from inside ourselves, as though the soul itself were remembering what it had been told so long ago” (*The Well-Tempered Critic*, p. 455).

Mother Teresa speaks with authority. So does the Dalai Lama. These people live their words. Certain poets speak with authority about certain things: Robert Bly about grief and fathers; Gary Snyder about ecology and Zen;



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Adrienne Rich about pain and women. Certain essayists, among them Ivan Illich, make us listen by their intelligence, rigor and industry. And two Kentuckians, a poet-monk and a poet-farmer, speak with authority and compel us to listen. These writers who speak with authority are prophets of sorts, people who tell us what is coming before it comes, and more importantly, tell us what is happening now. But what kind of prophet? And in what manner do they speak?

Thomas Merton and Wendell Berry — the latter a farmer, naturalist and conservationist as well as poet, novelist and essayist — have a great deal in common. The “farmer from Nelson County” (one of Merton’s humorous self-definitions) shares, for example, with the farmer of Henry County passionate concerns for the environment. In that loveliest of tracts, *First and Last Memories* in which memory is distilled into art, Brother Patrick Hart recounts his first experience of Merton, as the then Master of Juniors, leading monks in the planting of loblolly pines. Merton “gave instructions about how they should be planted, heeling them in after one of the novices opened the earth with a spade” (p. 2). Brother Patrick notes that there was little concern for the environment in Kentucky in the early 1950s “except for individuals like Wendell Berry and Thomas Merton” (p. 4).

Wendell Berry writes eloquently about farming, soil, poetry, native peoples, race, the university, language. His poems celebrate the preciousness of everyday encounters with animals or trees or tools. He is particularly gifted in writing tributes to regional writers like Wallace Stegner and William Carlos Williams and poets such as Hayden Carruth. He has the capacity to reproduce regional voices accurately. He excels in paying homage to the natural cycles and seasonal changes around his farm in Port Royal on a hillside overlooking the Kentucky River. His essays — works of gratitude to nature, remembrance of friends and fidelity to place — exhort us to “think small,” (the title of one of his finest essays), to attend to the close-at-hand, to care for the soil and vegetation of our country, our region, our backyard. The task of world reforestation and global replenishment of depleted top soil, for example, is a daunting task, but we can start by planting seedlings, as Merton did, in the small space given to us.

As we would expect, Berry is well acquainted with Merton’s writings. He cites Merton as a prophet of wholeness in his essay on nature poetry, “A Secular Pilgrimage.” The “new consciousness which isolated man in his own knowing mind and separates him from the world around him (which he does not know as it is in itself but only as it is in his mind) makes wisdom impossible because it severs the communion between subject and object, man and nature, upon which wisdom depends” (*A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural*, p. 16). In one of his longest and most deeply spiritual essays, “Discipline and Hope,” Berry closes with a Merton anecdote: “Asked one day why the Shakers, who expected the end of the world at any moment, were nevertheless consummate farmers and craftsmen, Thomas Merton replied: ‘When you expect the world to end at any moment, you know there is no need to hurry. You take your time, you do your work well’” (*Harmony*, p. 168). Though they often say the same things, Merton and Berry say them in different tones.

Tone is a troublesome little word to pin down. It is the signature of the voice, the footprint of the tongue. Poets sculpt their individuality by their tones. One of Merton’s favorite poets, Rainer Maria Rilke for example, speaks as an angel to a man. One is never sure where the voice is coming from except to know that it falls from a great height and one strains to hear it. *The Duino Elegies* fall with all the magnificence of a Bach fugue. Cesar Vallejo, on the other hand, another poet admired, translated and written about by Merton, speaks to us as if we were a member of his family. Many of his poems invoke family members and the reader is temporarily adopted in order to experience the family’s joy and anguish.

Tone has to do with how one sounds, whether angry or pompous or flippant. But it also has to do with where one stands when one speaks — whether one is above or below or beside the other. Merton tends to speak friend to friend as if he were standing beside us, on ground neither more nor less elevated than the ground on which we stand. The power of his writing comes, in part, from his standing with us as he speaks, not as an authority or an expert but as a friend who is living through what we are living through as though his life were always contemporaneous with ours. When Merton condemns his fickleness, for example, we share in the reprimand.

As soon as you taste one way of prayer, you want to try another. You are always making resolutions and breaking them by counter resolutions. You ask your confessor and do not remember the answers. Before you finish one book you begin another, and with every book you read you change the whole plan of your interior life. Soon you will have no interior life at all. Your whole existence will be a patchwork of confused desires and daydreams and velleities in which you do nothing except defeat the work of grace.
(*New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 260-261)

He ends the self-flagellation with a quick pep talk: “So keep still, and let Him do some work.” This passage carries the tone of much of Merton’s communication: it is confessional; it is deeply personal; it is intended for himself. But, since it is published, it comes to us as an overheard monologue to which we are privy. The monologue projects beyond itself, reaches for the other, and hence calls us into dialogue. The “you” of the passage is both Merton and ourselves. When the soul opens fully, all souls open a little. He has been so open about his fault that we feel as if it belongs to us as well. His is the diction of comradeship, the discourse of brotherliness. Indeed, to impose a family metaphor, Merton tends to speak as a brother to a sister or a brother to a brother, not as a father to a child or an older and wiser uncle to a nephew or niece. Merton is, in his words, “the incarnation of everybody” (*Collected Poems*, p. 395), not as strength but as fragility, not as certainty but as doubt, not as centrality but as marginality. And he is aware of this dialectic of identification in which he identifies so closely with us that we are impelled in return to identify with him. In the “Preface to the Japanese Edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*” he boldly announces: “I seek to speak to you, in some way, as your own self” (*Honorable Reader*, p. 67). His tone in the preface assumes equality, that his wounds will speak to our wounds, but the tone also conveys authority by an odd mixture of audacity and humility.

Merton’s fellow Kentuckian, on the other hand, by design or inadvertence, sometimes speaks from a hill. We look up to hear him, and he looks down to pronounce. His tone is often teacher-ly as in his short article on computers in *What Are People For?*. (His tone in poetry is quite different — quieter, gentler, more personal, more provisional, less certain.) Berry tells us that computers are a waste of resources, that he prefers the pencil, that his wife types his script, that he doubts anyone can demonstrate that a computer has been used to produce work better than Dante’s, that he does not own a television either, that there are certain rules to be learned when determining whether new technology ought to replace old technology. He speaks with authority. He speaks prophetically perhaps, but he also speaks from higher ground than that which we occupy. Here is an example:

A number of people, by now, have told me that I could greatly improve things by buying a computer. My answer is that I am not going to do it. I have several reasons and they are good ones. The first is . . . I would hate to think that my work as a writer could not be done without a direct dependence on strip-mined coal. How could I write conscientiously against the rape of nature if I were, in the act of writing, implicated in the rape? For the same reason, it matters to me that my writing is done in the daytime, without electric light.
(*What Are People For?*, p. 170)

The tone is off-putting, even self-righteous, so much so that *Harper’s* in which the essay appeared printed five negative responses in a subsequent issue. Of the twenty letters received, all

but three were critical. Readers objected to the implication of impurity or lack of virtue if they persisted in using computers over typewriters or pen-and-paper. They objected largely to the tone, not the content, of the article, a point missed by Berry in his published reply. Merton would, I suspect, have responded to IBMs and Word Perfect, but if he did not, his rejection would have been based on personal reasons, *not* on “moral grounds.”

To be fair to Berry, his tone can be professorial but also sportive and rich in image. Even when his tone misses the mark, his ideas are so powerful, tightly argued and lived that the message, like a fist, thrusts its way into our life. He writes only when he has something to say. He has Thoreau’s gift for nature metaphors as in this wonderful sentence from his essay “Waste”: “I have seen the Ohio, whose name (Oyo in Iroquois) means ‘beautiful river,’ so choked with . . . manufactured filth that an ant could crawl dryfooted from Kentucky to Indiana” (*What Are People For?*, p. 126). His wisdom, though sometimes lacking in humor, has a homespun quality to it. He writes of particular things, things at his doorstep, in his yard, the things that make him happy (like wind) or angry (like storms). If from time to time, his tone thunders like Jeremiah, whom he quotes on occasion, the tone is no less legitimate than his tone of celebration, homage or espousal. He has earned his words. His hands have held and felt and worked the soil, the desecration of which he has protested. He has lived by the code of Ecclesiastes: “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might” (9: 10).

The tone of the early Merton, pre-*Sign of Jonas* say, can be even stiffer and more dogmatic than anything in Berry. But the tone Merton strikes in one of his last talks, an informal address in Calcutte (1968), characteristically radiates the humor, the self-deprecation, the understatement and the festivity of the middle to late Merton. He begins by poking fun at his clerical collar, noting that his usual costume is blue jeans and open shirt. He reassures the audience that he is supposed to be a monk although he may not look like one. He then identifies himself as a marginal person in league with poets and hippies. Again, as in *New Seeds*, the second person plural is used, an I-you relationship is established and an I-you dialogue is maintained.

So I ask you to do me just the favor of considering me not as a figure representing any institution but as a statusless person, an insignificant person who comes to you asking your charity and patience while I say one or two things that have nothing to do with my (prepared) paper.

(The Asian Journal, pp. 306)

From one who has not earned the right to be so informal the words may seem insincere, but Merton has paid for his words. His tone is off-hand but also intimate, a brother joking with a sister.

Berry, on the other hand, badgers at times. He can seem strangely distant rather than personal. On occasion he speaks as a minister to a congregation or as a master to an apprentice or even as a father to a child. He frequently seems wiser and more hardworking and more committed and even “better” than we are. Such a tone does not incite the reader to social action, however just the cause. In contrast, Merton seems actually aware of his shortcomings as a messenger and hence understates and personalizes his message. The messages of Merton and Berry, couched in Berry’s phrasing, may ultimately be the same: “To keep oneself fully alive in the Creation, to keep the Creation fully alive in oneself, to see the Creation anew, to welcome one’s part in it anew” (*What Are People For?*, p. 9). But the manner in which the message is communicated differs. The tone may not affect the content of the words, but it does affect the likelihood of our listening to, and acting on, those words.