

Light in a Darkening Landscape
 Presidential Address—ITMS Fifteenth General Meeting
 St. Bonaventure University, Olean, NY
 June 15, 2017

By **Michael W. Higgins**

We live now in a time when the word has been corroded, meaning has been sundered, chaos is our common argot. When discourse is coarsened, then so are we; when words are evacuated of substance, when they become empty vessels, then we are compromised. Does “mercy” mean anything at all? Is it alone what we ascribe to it? Is it an airy thing like fake news or alternate facts? Or is it anchored in truth-telling, symbol-shaping language? Does it humanize us by demonizing the other? If so, it is not mercy. And we know that.

Thomas Merton will not let us forget what happens when words are held hostage by those who intend more than mischief for us, when words have become drones of discontent, missiles of madness, surreal sound bites disconnected from reality, lethal weapons in the hands of advertisers, spin doctors, political apologists, apparatchiks of industry, state, and yes, religion. For instance, John Morrish in his television column in *The Tablet* of London has this to say about a PR woman who is the stuff of nightmare and yet exquisitely “meaningful” in her linguistic orbit: “wildly enthusiastic, usually wrong, always incomprehensible. While giving advice to a client dealing with a crisis in Cornwall she barks: ‘It’s a major brand dropout. If you don’t triage this thing now, you are going to be up to your ass in alligators.’”¹ Can you imagine Cornwall’s Doc Martin worrying about alligators? And he’s a worrier.

Language is not only ruthlessly rendered inchoate by wordsmiths in love with neologisms, parasense and persiflage; these high priests of opacity have become our new comedians. But there is not a lot to laugh about when, as journalist Stephen Marche reflects in “This American Carnage” on the new reality:

Writing itself, the attempt to make sense, is now a political act. Science, the attempt to describe the world, is now a political act. Whether we want it or not, anyone who observes, and reports is now an agent. Fact-checking and peer review are no longer abstruse functions of professional castes; they are sacred obligations. To check a fact is to preserve a white dove in the heart of the temple.²

Facts are foundational; truth is not a commodity; words must represent not misshape reality.

Merton was a model “dove in the heart of the temple.” He treasured the word, he didn’t massage it; he chose the right word because he knew that by so doing he revered it. The word is sacred. The poet exercises a minor mercy in electing the necessary word. Merton had little stomach for the master

Michael W. Higgins, Distinguished Professor of Catholic Thought at Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT, served as fifteenth president of the International Thomas Merton Society (2015-2017). He is the author of numerous books, including *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (1998), *Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary* (2014) and *Unquiet Monk: Thomas Merton’s Questing Faith* (2015). His most recent book is *Jean Vanier: Logician of the Heart* (2016).



Michael W. Higgins

manipulators of language. Think of his anti-poems *Original Child Bomb*³ and “Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces” (CP 345-49). These parodies of justification are Swiftian in their impact. We reel at the monstrous end to which language has been corralled to serve. We have a taste of madness.

Merton scorned the agents of promotion, the advertisers who sell us the pap of falsehood, in such works as his anti-poetic epic *Cables to the Ace*.⁴ But perhaps his most sustained and apposite work, given our current *zeitgeist*, is his less playful and more lyrical 1957 radio play *The Tower of Babel*.⁵ The Leader addresses the assembled in a manner suggestive of any number of twentieth-century demagogues (his name, after all, is Legion – Caudillo, Poglanic, Fuhrer, Duce):

Already I see that the skies are as full of words as they are of stars. Each word becomes an instrument of war. Words of the clocks and devils. Words of the wheels and machines. Steel words stronger than flesh or spirit. Secret words that divide the essences of things. Last of all, the one word which strikes at the heart of creation, and dissolves it into its original nothingness. Give me possession of this one word, and I will forget every other. (CP 252)

David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*, echoes Merton’s spiritual and intellectual dismay half a century after the appearance of *The Tower of Babel* when he observes:

On Inauguration Day, at the Capitol, Trump no longer affected any awe of the task before him or respect for his predecessors. He furiously rebuked the elected officials sitting behind him and the international order that they served. Using the language of populist demagogues, from Huey Long to George Wallace to Silvio Berlusconi, the new President implied that he, the Leader, was in perfect communion with the People, and that together they would repair the landscape of “American carnage” and return it to its prelapsarian state of grace.⁶

Those gathered to hear the Leader in Merton’s play willingly give him his one word: “Fear! Fear!” (CP 252). It is the same word that is spoken, according to American poet Archibald MacLeish, in his pre-World-War-II verse play *The Fall of the City*,

In the day of confusion of reason when
all is delusion:

In the day of the tyrants of tongues when
the truth is for hire:

In the day of deceit when ends meet.⁷

It is in times such as these that people turn to their gods.

Carl Gustav Jung argued that when the word’s link with transcendence is severed the State will use the word as a mechanism of control. The Swiss psychiatrist says in *The Undiscovered Self* that this happens when “belief in the word becomes credulity, and the word itself an infernal slogan capable of any deception. With credulity come propaganda and advertising to dupe the citizen with political jobbery and compromises, and the lie reaches proportions never known before in the history of the world.”⁸

Merton’s *The Tower of Babel* is about the betrayal of language and the consequences of that betrayal. By the word we are sorely afflicted. Words have become in our time the paid hirelings, the mercenaries of ambition, lust, greed and all other manifestations of Power’s will – they are the sacraments of the dead, the spawn of the Tower:

The words of this land

Are interminable signals of their own emptiness,
Signs without meaning. (CP 265)

Words have become slaves of distortion and servants of deceit. But it was not always so: “Ah, yes, I have heard in the past that words could be true” (CP 266).

The monk-poet knows that Babble-On will not easily be undone and that primary responsibility is to renew the word, to cleanse it, to redeem it. The writer must counter the persuasive logic of the Professor who argues that words

belong by right to the political process:
Doing, making, destroying. Or rather
Being done, being made, being destroyed. (CP 256)

Merton knew that in the midst of Babylon lies Jerusalem, in the heart of chaos lies form, in the center of confusion, vision, and at the core of the maelstrom lies redemption. Merton, like his old friend, the poet-contemplative Robert Lax, knew the curative power of language, delighted, as we can read in their correspondence, especially captured in *A Catch of Anti-Letters*,⁹ the playfulness of language, the parodic, witty and surreal dimensions of words at frolic, the one safeguard against the leaden tone of political babble, an antidote to the crushing portentousness and simulated gravitas of the Leader. It is the Word that will undo the tyranny of the word. But that Word – laced in mercy – is the supreme paradox. Enfleshed truth frees language from its demonic servitude. Merton reminds us of the ecstatic power of language, he reminds us that words are remarkable things, and his witness as poet-sentinel in a tremulous time gives us hope that a language restored to integrity is the only antidote to *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni’s melancholy observation that “when something no longer provokes remark, it becomes unremarkable, and the road from there to acceptable is a short one.”¹⁰ We easily acclimate to the “new normal.”

Merton spent his vocation as an artist and contemplative unsettling us with language, probing the frontiers of meaning, de-shackling us from the complacency and conformity that diminish us. Merton abominated the false unity that comes from the imposition of univocal authority, a unity born of fear of the future, of the Other; he sought throughout his life as a monk and intellectual a multivalent authority, a unity born of communion, a unity sealed in freedom. That is not a small mercy, but a great one, and we his readers and disciples are the beneficiaries of his wisdom, his light as it were, in our darkening landscape.

1. John Morrish, “WestEnders,” *The Tablet* 268.9041 (22 March 2014) 23.
2. Stephen Marche, “This American Carnage,” *The Walrus* (25 January 2017); accessed at: <https://thewalrus.ca/this-american-carnage>.
3. Thomas Merton, *Original Child Bomb: Points for Meditation to Be Scratched on the Walls of a Cave* (New York: New Directions, 1961); Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 291-302; subsequent references will be cited as “CP” parenthetically in the text.
4. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968); CP 393-454.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Tower of Babel: A Morality* (New York: New Directions, 1957); CP 247-73.
6. David Remnick, “A Hundred Days of Trump,” *The New Yorker* (1 May 2017) 19.
7. Archibald MacLeish, *The Fall of the City* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937) 23.
8. Carl Gustav Jung, *The Undiscovered Self* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990) 42-43.
9. Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *A Catch of Anti-Letters* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed, Andrews and McMeel, 1978). See also Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax*, ed. Arthur W. Biddle (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001).
10. Frank Bruni, “Donald Trump’s One Awful Accomplishment,” *The New York Times* (30 April 2017) SR3.