

Attention to Language

Introduction

Thomas Merton was a master of language. When we are talking about Thomas Merton this weekend, it will be good to remind ourselves of how carefully he approached language. Before I say anything about language, I wish to quote Thomas Merton himself. In an aphorism he once wrote:

If a writer is so cautious that he never writes anything that cannot be criticized, he will never write anything that can be read. If you want to help other people you have got to make up your mind to write things that some men will condemn.¹

Merton wrote such that he was heavily criticized by conservative Christians. But that is exactly why he was able to help so many people. He had the courage to express the truth in a society that would rather follow illusion and ideology.

Yet another word from his aphorisms:

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. If you write only for yourself you can read what you yourself have writ-

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¹ Thomas Merton *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Copyright by the Abbey of Gethsemani Inc., published by New Directions Book, New York/USA 2007, 105. Hereafter in the text NSC.

ten and after ten minutes you will be so disgusted you will wish that you were dead. (NSC 111)

Thomas Merton did not write for himself, and also not to win acclaim from people. He wrote in order to let the truth shine. And for him that was writing for God.

1. Saying - talking - speaking

In German we have three words for “speech”. When I “say” (*sage*) something, then I illustrate something. And everyone can take that in complete freedom according to what she sees and knows. “Saying” also includes “recounting” (*erzählen*). In recounting (*Erzählung*) an image emerges that we look at and allow to work on us. Looking – so says Martin Heidegger – leads to freedom. Saying and recounting are therefore rather comfortable. They make us freer.

With “talking” (*reden*) we hear in German the words for “consider” (*berechnen*) and “justify” (*begründen*). “Talking” (*reden*) means: giving reasons. The word thereby is related in German to “advise” (*raten*) in the sense of making intellectually sensible. The wordplays in German for “talking” reveal also the shadow side and aggressiveness in talking. “He talked a hole into my stomach.” Someone wants to “have a talk with me” in order to correct me or convince me. Or somebody wants to “talk me out of or into” something. When we only talk, it is “just talk” or chit-chat.

A “conversation” (*Gespräch*) happens only when we speak. The German word for “speak” (*sprechen*) comes from the word for “burst” (*bersten*). Something bursts out of me. It always means a personal speaking, a speaking that comes from the heart. Friedrich Hölderlin describes the mystery of speaking thus::

*Much has man (Mensch) experienced
Named many of the heavenly ones
Since we have been a conversation
And able to hear one another*

In order for a conversation to take place, one needs an experience. I don't speak about just anything, I speak out of the experience I have had with myself and with other people. For Hölderlin, speaking always opens up the heaven above us. We do not only speak with each other, we become a conversation. A conversation comes into being, a conversation that binds us to each other at our depths. However, good listening belongs to this kind of speaking. I don't just listen to the other, I hear from him, I hear the person himself. To a conversation belongs asking and answering. The German word "question" (*Frage*) has the same root as "furrow" (*Furche*). I don't interrogate the other, I don't press him with my questioning; rather I plough a furrow into his field. Thus the field of the other can yield fruit. And that requires an answer. Both the German "Antwort" and the English word "answer" come from "anti" meaning "in the face of" the one with whom I speak. I do not give an abstract answer, but rather I speak a word in which I look the other in the face. I can thereby speak only words that are honest, so that I can look the other openly and honestly in the eye.

Thomas Merton is allergic to people who give answers too quickly. In an aphorism he once wrote:

What about the men who run about the countryside painting signs that say "Jesus saves" and "Prepare to meet God!" Have you ever seen one of them? I have not, but I often try to imagine them and I wonder what goes on in their minds. Strangely, their signs do not make me think of Jesus, but of them. Or perhaps it is their Jesus who gets in the way and makes all thought of Jesus impossible. They wish to force their Jesus

upon us, and He is perhaps only I projection of themselves. (NSC 106–107)

2. The healing power of Language

With what he said, Thomas Merton wanted to lead people to an experience of God and to a healthy attitude about themselves. His writing stands in the tradition of the Greek philosophers. Plutarch talks about the philosopher Antiphon, who developed a relief from sufferings via his poetry and art. He had a sign outside his therapeutic practice that said he could heal sickness through words. This ability to heal through words was developed by the Evangelist Luke in his Gospel. Luke was believed in antiquity to have been a physician. He so wrote, that people suffering from internal and external illnesses experienced healing and comforting power in his words. He had learned this healing power of speech from Plato, known as the father of catharsis: purification and healing of the soul through talking.

These days we often experience a wounding language. It is an aggressive, condemning language that disrespects the human person, a language that consciously spreads "fake news", which openly lies just to win people. This language makes a person sick. And it creates an aggressive atmosphere in society. The Fathers of the Church say: With language we build a house. Through brutal language, our society will become ever more a house in which nobody feels at home, a cold house in which we freeze.

With his words Jesus built a house in which people wanted to live. The disciples said of him: "Were not our hearts burning in our breasts, as he spoke with us on the way?" (Lk 24:32) Jesus spoke a warming language, a language which came from the heart. And Jesus said of his own speaking: "You are already clean through the word which I spoke to you." (Joh 15:3) Jesus speaks in a way that people feel purified and become

free from the tarnish which darkens their spirit and makes them sick. Through Jesus words people come into contact with the original and pristine image that God himself made of them. That heals them from all self images that make them sick.

Thomas Merton made an effort to use healing, pure, and clear language. He did not simply write, but rather he was very careful about his writing. Perhaps writing was a healing process for himself. In writing he could express what was in him, and clarify what was sometimes still diffuse in his head and swimming around. Since he could clarify it for himself, he could help countless readers to clarify their own thoughts and come into contact with themselves and with their true self.

3. Language as Refuge

Language makes one at-home. The Jewish poet Hilde Domin calls language "the last refuge". And she wanted to defend this at-home-ness with her words. One could also say that about the books that Thomas Merton wrote. With his words he wanted to give spiritual seekers a refuge from the meaningless noise to which they are exposed in society – a safe and good place where they can feel at home.

Jean Paul once wrote: "In the poet humanity comes to reflection and to speech. Therefore he easily awakens them again in others." The healing power of language consists in awakening people from their illusions, which make them sick. Hilde Domin recognized this healing power of language directly in poems. She believes that poems belong "to the best that we have. To that which rescues humans in their humanity". Poems protect the human being and rescue him from the grasp of utility. Then the human can be who he is. Poets – so believes Hilde Domin – sharpen language and protect it from being misused.

Thomas Merton himself wrote poems. And in the aphorisms he reflected upon what makes a Christian poet:

The poet enters into himself in order to create. The contemplative enters into God in order to be created. A CATHOLIC poet should be an apostle by being first of all a poet, not try to be a poet by being first of all an apostle. For if he presents himself to people as a poet, he is going to be judged as a poet and if he is not a good one his apostolate will be ridiculed. (NSC 111)

Thomas Merton did not just want to write pious books, he wanted so to write them, that they touch people with their language. He wanted to speak a language which would stand up to the judgment of people – a good and healing language, but a language that laid bare the truth. And the truth is not comfortable for every person. Heidegger called language "the house of being" and also the "protector of being". Thomas Merton with his language allowed true being, the original being to become visible. He did not write about God, but rather his language allowed God to be experienced.

Conclusion

Like every author, Thomas Merton created a reality with his writing. The word makes things new. "Everything came into being through the Word" John's prologue tells us (Joh 1:3). Merton's language does something inside people. Whoever writes accepts a responsibility for his reader. And he influences the language of society with his language. In his writing Merton realized and accepted his responsibility for the people of his time. In so far as we today bring his writings closer to people, we accept responsibility for our society. So I wish for all participants in this symposium that through reflection on the language of Thomas Merton, we ourselves will become sensitive to a language that is healing for our

society today. Insofar as we, like Merton, make the effort to speak an honest, clear, pure, and encouraging word, we make a contribution which does not further corrupt society with even more brutal language. Rather we learn again to build a house with our language, in which a seeking, fearful, worrying humanity finds refuge and feels at home.



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