

Awakening from Barth's Dream

Endings and Beginnings

Fifty years ago, on 10 December 1968, Thomas Merton was killed by electricity, on the margins of a war zone in South East Asia. The sudden end of a story, in one way at least. In another way, Merton continues to be present to readers as he has always been present, conjured from literature and audio recordings and visual art and endless recollections.

Twenty years earlier, in 1948 Merton entered the limelight by publishing into a Cold War world an early version of the beginnings of the story – the beginning of his life, and the beginning of his monastic life. That story has often been re-told from the beginning:

On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born.¹

And so it began, according to Merton. But how might things seem if we enter the story near the end rather than the beginning?

In 1966, Merton was in his hermitage, writing and publishing some of his most vivid and memorable work. The recent passing of his 50th birthday seems to have prompted Merton's reflecting not only on his past, but also on his legacy for future readers. Occasionally he had premonitions that he would not live into old age. He clearly had no intention of slowing down; in fact, the author and his publishers seemed to be working with some urgency. In August 1965 Merton had resigned as Novice Master and taken up full-time residence at the hermitage. In September, "The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air" was published in the *New Blackfriars* journal. In October "Truth and Crisis: Pages from a Monastic Notebook" was published in *Gandhi Marg*. In November, "Few Questions and Fewer Answers: Extracts from a Monastic Notebook" was published in *Harper's Magazine*. There were other publications in between, but what connects these particular pieces is that each was a foretaste of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, which would be published by Doubleday in November 1966. In August of that year, extracts from *Conjectures* appeared in *Life* magazine, a few days before *Raids on the Unspeakable* was published by New Directions.

Several people, including Merton's secretary, Br. Patrick Hart, tell us that *Conjectures* is as good a place as any to begin to get to know Merton. Near the end rather than at the beginning. A creative re-working of journal material going back to 1956, the draft title for a long while was *Barth's Dream*. A year before it was published, in November 1965, Merton noted in his journal that they had dropped the "Barth's Dream" title in favour of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. The first of its five sections, however, is still called "Barth's Dream".

The dream to which Merton was referring had been briefly mentioned by Karl Barth in a Christmas message of 1955, a response to an invita-

1 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), 3.

tion to write for a newspaper a “letter of thanks to Mozart”.² Barth recalled that, in the dream, he was supposed to examine Mozart (he knew not why), but his questions about dogmatics were met with silence. He was mystified about Mozart’s Catholicism, wanting to help him along, but receiving no answer. Barth loved Mozart, began each day listening to recordings of him before setting about his work on the *Church Dogmatics*.³ In the dream, Mozart had nothing to say – except what he has already said through music.

Merton was captivated by this story from Barth. So captivated, in fact, that he opened *Conjectures* with reflections on Barth’s recollection of the dream, blended with other comments by Barth about the child-like nature of Mozart, or the child who speaks to us through his music.⁴ Merton’s reflection ends with the observation that the inner child can save, where no amount of writing can save either Barth or Merton. “I was deeply moved by Barth’s account of this dream”, writes Merton.

*The dream concerns his salvation, and Barth perhaps is striving to admit that he will be saved more by the Mozart in himself than by his theology.*⁵

Barth recalls that it “has been said that it is a child (a ‘divine’ child to be sure), the ‘eternal youth’, who speaks to us in his music”.⁶ Merton suggests that Barth was seeking to awaken “the hidden sophianic Mozart in himself, the central wisdom that comes in tune with the divine and cosmic music and is saved by love, yes, even by eros” and not just the “mo-

re stern, more cerebral agape” which “is not in our own heart but only in God and revealed only to our head”.⁷ Eros is passion – and play.

My first impressions, when reading of a divine child speaking to Barth through Mozart’s music, were of playfulness breaking through, or breaking into, the serious business of composing or of writing. Perhaps we imagine Mozart being silly, free – irresponsible? Barth muses that such impressions arise because of the “sad brevity” of Mozart’s life, and “perhaps also the undeniable naiveté with which he conducted all practical affairs (according to his sharply critical sister, it became particularly evident on the occasion of his marriage and certainly in financial matters).”⁸

Then there were “the pranks and nonsense in which he indulged in his conversations and especially in his letters even during his final days”.⁹ Barth tells us that reliable accounts indicate that these behaviours happened most often when Mozart was hardest at work.¹⁰

In the opening pages of *Conjectures*, Merton makes no mention of playfulness or silliness at all. Rather, we are reminded that Mozart “was never allowed to be a child in the literal meaning of that word”¹¹ (What is the literal meaning of that word?) He was a child prodigy, a genius performing even as an infant. Yet, Merton picks up from Barth, Mozart was always a child “in the higher meaning of that word”.¹²

He does not say what that higher meaning is, but even to talk in this way about different levels of the meaning of “child” may lead back to the

2 Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, trans. by Clarence K. Pott (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 19.

3 Barth, *Mozart*, 16.

4 Barth, *Mozart*, 29.

5 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), 10.

6 Barth, *Mozart*, p. 29 is part of ‘Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’ from the *Zwingli-Kalendar* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt, 1956).

7 *Conjectures*, 10.

8 Barth, *Mozart*, 29.

9 Barth, *Mozart*, 29.

10 Barth, *Mozart*, 29.

11 Cited by Merton in *Conjectures*, 10–11.

12 *Conjectures*, 11.

world of abstraction and organising, and distance the intellectual from the thing encountered through Mozart. One way to lose touch with the child is to theorise her or him. Barth moves in a more fruitful direction, however, as he ponders the idea that a divine child speaks to us through Mozart's music. He reflects on how Mozart,

while truly mastering his craft and always striving toward greater refinement, nevertheless manages never to burden his listeners – especially not with his creative labors! Rather, he always allows them to participate afresh in his free, let us now say “childlike”, play. [...] he is able “just as an innocent child to move us to smiles and tears at one and the same moment without our daring to ask how and why”.¹³

This is Barth writing about how the child continues to address us through Mozart. We can miss the child's voice by theorising her or him too quickly. We can also miss the child's voice by yielding to the idea that “rediscovering the child's condition” has something to do with “the present adult me” having “some agreeable experiences of the kind I vaguely remember from my early years”,¹⁴ as Rowan Williams puts it in the foreword to Fiona Gardner's book on Thomas Merton and the child mind:

Many people use a wide variety of techniques to attain this goal. But it is not the same, because it is a self-conscious quest for another satisfying experience. The true mind of the child is found in an emptying out of the self that collects nice experiences. The child mind is simply the mind that inhabits where and who and what it is, that lives in the world without the shadows of craving and fear and self-objectifying.¹⁵

13 Barth, *Mozart*, 29–30.

14 Rowan Williams, Foreword in Fiona Gardner, *The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), ix–x (p. ix).

15 Williams, Foreword, ix

How, then, do we square this idea of the child mind with Merton saying that, by listening to Mozart, Barth was seeking to awaken a “wisdom that comes in tune with the divine and cosmic music that is saved by love, yes, even by *eros*”?¹⁶ Is it something about the immediacy of response to (in this instance) music, undistorted by craving, or collecting of sensual experiences, or intellectual control? If the child mind is in tune with a “divine” child, in other words, it may not even know it. We may manage to express it in music; but we may not even want to put it into words. We are in the moment, more fully alive.

Merton seems to imply that wordsmiths like himself and Barth cannot so easily respond to a divine *eros* when ensnared in their own intellects. In the little tale which opens *Conjectures*, Karl Barth seems to represent to Merton the cerebral and stern. His work, his response to the coming of God in Christ, is cerebral and stern. As an aside, it is worth noting that only a short while after the publication of *Conjectures*, Merton was corresponding with a young Rosemary Radford Ruether (to whom he had sent an earlier draft of part of the book), and stirred up a reaction about this same tension between the cerebral and the somatic or erotic. On 19 March 1967 Merton was responding to Ruether's critical comments about his hanging around in the countryside rather than amongst poor urban dwellers:

I wonder if you realize that you (at least from your letters) are a very academic, cerebral, abstract type. You talk about God's good creation, the goodness of the body, and all that, but I wonder if you have any realization at all of the fact that by working on the land a person is deeply and sensually involved with matter. [...] It is not romanticism at all, my

16 *Conjectures*, 10 (Merton's emphasis).

friend. [...] It is something you city people need and need very badly indeed.¹⁷

Ruether came right back at him. A couple of days later, in a long postscript, she gave a suitably withering retort:

Sorry you find me so abstract. If I weren't a woman would it have occurred to you to accuse me of being cerebral? Interesting resentment there [...] I wouldn't mention the resentment bit if it wasn't so absolutely predictable. I am just as fleshy as you, baby, and I am also just as much a "thinking animal" as you.¹⁸

One thing which comes across in the correspondence between Ruether and Merton is the way in which they both caricature the other's context. Merton may be doing similarly with Barth's dream, in which there is no reference to the intensely serious circumstances into which Barth began writing, or the enormity of the task he took on, of distilling and clarifying biblical witness to the God who is utterly beyond human conception, yet who gives himself to us in Jesus. Neither does Merton mention Barth's own criticism of religious systems and intellectualism. Instead, he focuses on a few comments which reveal something of Barth that *The Epistle to the Romans* and *Church Dogmatics* do not. On other occasions, Merton wrote quite differently of Barth, with a stronger sense of affinity between their respective understandings of how God comes to us.¹⁹

At the beginning of *Conjectures*, however, it seems that Merton wants to establish a contrast between a cerebral and a more full-bodied response to the coming of God. Was Barth actually seeking to awaken "the cen-

tral wisdom that comes in tune with the divine and cosmic music and is saved by love, yes, even by eros" or was that Merton projecting onto Barth?

A particular erotic awakening which occurred a few months before the publication of *Conjectures* has become a familiar part of the Merton story. He fell in love, and worked intensively to make sense of the love and the passions he experienced, and of their implications for his living and his theological thinking. We know of this because Merton wanted it known, and wrote about it. He wrote his way through it. The fact that there is more public knowledge about Merton's actual, personal responses to the erotic than there is about Barth's, is not just about the differences between the personal lives of the two men. It is more fundamentally about the contrast between what each of them was doing through writing, how each of them imagined themselves to be communicating with readers.

Barth's magisterial legacy – mapped out for scholars, for preachers and for ordinary (clever) readers – implies ultimate confidence in proclamation aimed at convincing in a manner which, presumably, will evoke behavioural responses which align with the truth proclaimed. Merton, on the other hand, gives us a multi-layered tapestry of his response to God, a more full-bodied performance of and struggle with biblical, prophetic, eschatological narrative. He draws us into the drama and the struggle of a personal engagement with biblical testimony, and does so in a way which, evidently, fosters a kind of interpersonal relationship between readers and the imagined author. As we interact with Merton and with one another, so we find ourselves inhabiting the land of the biblical counter-narrative in which Merton was immersed. Horizons fuse, or friction is generated, or tensions surface as a more vivid, more real world seeps into the thinner ideas of the world with which we generally get by. It is this kind of contemplative experience into which Merton

17 *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether*, ed. and intro. by Mary Tardiff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 43.

18 Tardiff, 49.

19 Merton's reading of Barth consisted in some sermons and similar material, and (in 1963) *Dogmatics in Outline*, based on lectures delivered in the ruins of Bonn University.

can draw us. In this kind of contemplative perspective, the structures and patterns of our world, the habits and untested assumptions of our minds and our tribes and our cultural contexts are seen in a new light, or felt with new sensitivities. It is in this way that contemplative prayer and meditation become a bedrock of protest, dissent and assent, realignment.

As we awaken more fully to a biblical world of psalms and prophets and Gospel, so we become more alert to, more prepared for, more trusting of an inbreaking God who comes to us in Christ, perhaps in familiar clothing we previously did not recognise as divine, perhaps as a wave of transformative silence in a world of noise and distraction. Perhaps as forcefully as a flood which breaks a creaking dam.

This is about how God comes to us; and about how the writings of Merton and Barth might be part of God's coming to us. How do the books of these prolific writers help us now to be receptive to the coming of God? Both authors are deeply critical of dehumanising systems and cultures. Both write of God as somehow "breaking in" to the world as we know it and think it. God breaks in as Word and as Wisdom, disrupting and dismantling and reorientating. Merton's writing on the matter is often implicit, including descriptions of his experiences of what he or we sometimes call epiphanies. More of the time he *shows* us, rather than instructs us (Merton resisted telling us how to pray, and is very clear that there is no programme for learning the kind of insight with which some seers are gifted).²⁰ He shows us what it might mean, in our praying, to learn to wait, or learn to see and to hear what was overlooked or unnoticed, the detail which gives the lie to some of the things we have learned to think about one another, about how the world runs, about ourselves.

20 See for example *Alaskan journal* on many ways of praying.

Moving from the opening to the central section of *Conjectures*, we discover awakening. "The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air" begins with the awakening valley, woods and monastery, and ends with a night watch. In the beginning, the eyes of the waking day birds are opened by the Father, to whom they address "an awakening question that is their dawn state", asking whether it is time to be. Hearing an affirmative answer, "they one by one wake up, and become birds".²¹

Awakening is granted and they are summoned. Last of all the birds to awaken are doves and crows. "The waking of crows is most like the waking of men: querulous, noisy, raw."²² Illustrating the point, the brief opening section ends with lament over human failure to attend to the unspeakable secret that "paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open. The sword is taken away, but we do not know it: we are off 'one to his farm and another to his merchandise'. Lights on. Clocks ticking. Thermostats working. Stoves cooking. Electric shavers filling radios with static."²³

This central section of *Conjectures* closes with a night watch. Merton is wandering the novitiate, whose empty rooms promise revelation. The author makes a conscious contrast with the recollections of his own past, the "Firewatch" written into *The Sign of Jonas*. Here in *Conjectures*, the author is thinking about the present generation of novices, his brother monks, the actual people sleeping in the dormitory above. Merton is reminded by their desks, their spaces, of "whatever is most personal, most truly their own". The detailed individuality matters. Their love and goodness "had transformed the room and filled it with a presence curiously real, comforting, perfect: one might say, with Christ".²⁴

21 *Conjectures*, 128.

22 *Conjectures*, 129.

23 *Conjectures*, 129.

24 *Conjectures*, 209.

Merton then goes so far as to say that it seemed “momentarily that He was as truly present here, in a certain way, as upstairs in the Chapel.”²⁵ This is an epiphany, and a reflection on incarnation:

*Now that God has become Incarnate, why do we go to such lengths, all the time, to “disincarnate” Him again, to unweave the garment of flesh and reduce Him once again to spirit?*²⁶

It is in the particular “humanity of our friends, our children, our brothers, the people we love and who love us” that we can see the “loveliness of the humanity which God has taken to Himself in love”.²⁷ This is no generalised delight in belonging to the human race, projected onto passersby, such as we find in the pages about a street corner in Louisville.²⁸ This is more concrete and specific than the message recorded on a plaque in Louisville, that :

Merton had a sudden insight at this corner Mar. 18, 1958, that led him to redefine his monastic identity with greater involvement in social justice issues.

If it did, Merton never said as much. His understanding of justice, and peace, and politics, and participation, and effectiveness, and prophetic living, was more subtly multifaceted and deeply rooted. The night watch which closes “The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air” is about details, and a profound gratitude for specific people with whom he has been privileged to discover loving relationship.

*It is very good to have loved these people and been loved by them with such simplicity and sincerity, within our ordinary limitation, without nonsense, without flattery, without sentimentality, and without getting too involved in one another’s business.*²⁹

This is prayer and politics in the late Merton. On the basis of these actual loving relationships, he finds reason to “recover hope for the other dimension of man’s life: the political”³⁰ as he retires from his work as Novice Master and moves out of the environs of the monastery. So as I began with the beginning of *Conjectures*, let me end with the ending:

*Priests and ministers suddenly believe it urgent to assure everyone that “the world” is telling us the truth – not always making clear what world they mean. And often those who insist that “the world” is deceiving us mean only the world which refuses them and their message, not their own world, their own tight system of fragments of the past held together by money and armies. | I think only the poets are still sure in their prophetic sense that the world lies, and George Oppen has said it well: | They await | War, and the news | Is war | As always | That the juices may flow in them | And the juices lie.*³¹

About this world, made up of “news, glands, juices, opinions, combat, self-affirmation, despair”, there is no need to be doctrinaire, writes Merton. “It is there for anyone to see, and [poets] see it. They see how the people act in it.”³²

25 *Conjectures*, 209.

26 *Conjectures*, 209.

27 *Conjectures*, 209.

28 *Conjectures*, 153-155.

29 *Conjectures*, 210.

30 *Conjectures*, 210.

31 *Conjectures*, 341.

32 *Conjectures*, 341.

What people want is stimulation, flowing juices (which, presumably, makes contemplative stillness and attention nigh on impossible). The more real world which poets like George Oppen describe, is (says Merton):

*manifest in words, but is not a world of words. What matters is not the words but the life. If we listen particularly to the world's speech about itself we will be lied to and deceived, but not if we listen to life itself in its humility, frailty, silence, tenacity.*³³

As *Conjectures* begins with reference to the child in Mozart, a divine child, so it ends with the Jewish child of George Oppen's poem. Amidst any despair that infants will grow to live a lie like their parents' generation (or even worse), hope rests in the fact that there is a world which "remakes itself at God's command without consulting us".³⁴ The poet, in the end, "sees only the world remaking itself" [like a valley of birds asking permission to be, perhaps] so George Oppen's adult Max can take the infant to look out of a city window onto "false, glittering buildings" and be undisturbed:

*The glitter is false? Well, the light is true. The glitter has ceased to matter. It is even beautiful.*³⁵

And *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* ends, perhaps frustrating any desire for explanation or the tying up of meanings. But Merton's words just don't work like that.

33 *Conjectures*, 342.

34 *Conjectures*, 342.

35 *Conjectures*, 342.