

Merton and Silence

Frederick Smock

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of Merton's death, I want to think about silence. Certainly, Merton took a vow of silence; and he was occasionally silenced by the Vatican. But I am not thinking of those forms of silence. Rather, I want to think about silence and the poet's art.

Much of a monk's life is spent in silence. Much of a poet's life is spent in silence, too – a poet spends a fraction of his time actually writing poems. Merton was both a monk and a poet, and thus well-acquainted with silence. Like meditation, and like prayer, poetry is surrounded by silence. Poetry begins and ends in silence. Silence is also inherent within the poem, like the silences between notes in music. As the great Chinese poet Yang Wan-li said, a thousand years ago, "A poem is made of words, yes, but take away the words and the poem remains."

Still, when we think of silence, we do not necessarily think of Merton. He was a voluble man, and a prolific writer. He continues to publish, posthumously. He always seems to be speaking to us. Bookshelves groan under the accumulating weight of his *oeuvre*. However, late in his life, Merton lamented the fact that he had written so many editorials, and not more poems and prayers – forms that partake of silence. "More and more I see the necessity of leaving my own ridiculous 'career' as a religious journalist," he wrote in his journal (2 December, 1959). "Stop

writing for publication – except poems and creative meditations."

"What do I really want to do?" Merton asked in his journal (21 June, 1959). "Long hours of quiet in the woods, reading a little, meditating a lot, walking up and down in the pine needles in bare feet." What a man commits to his journal is, at once, the most private *and* the most authentic version of his self. Books written for public consumption are not errant, just not as heartfelt. In his journal for the Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas (7 March, 1961), Merton wrote, "Determined to write less, to gradually vanish." He added, at the end of that entry, "The last thing I will give up writing will be this journal and notebooks and poems. No more books of piety."

Life is a journey toward silence, and not just the silence of death. Youth talks a lot, is noisy. Old age is reticent. There is so much to consider. Older men hold their tongues before experience. They know the wisdom of forbearance. To have seen many things is to reserve judgment. (I tell my students that their chief disadvantage is their youth, and, with time, this will be overcome.) In this modern era, when news and politics are dominated by endlessly talking heads, silence becomes a precious commodity. The mere absence of speech sounds like silence. But true silence is a presence, not an absence. A fullness. A richness that depends for its worth on the purity of intent, not the lack

of distractions.

In a late journal entry (4 December, 1968), Merton wrote of visiting the grand *stupas* of Buddha and Ananda at Gil Vihara, Sri Lanka. "The silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing..." Speaking of the figure of Ananda, Merton concluded, "It says everything. It needs nothing. Because it needs nothing it can afford to be silent, unnoticed, undiscovered." He also photographed these statues, focusing on their beatific serenity.

When we are silent, we can hear the wind in the trees, and the water in the brook, and is this not more eloquent than

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anything that we ourselves might have to say? Of living in his newly-built hermitage, Merton wrote in his journal (24 February, 1965), "I can imagine no other joy on earth than to have such a place and to be at peace in it, to live in silence, to think and write, to listen to the wind and to all the voices of the wood, to live in the shadow of the big cedar cross, to prepare for my death..."

Is it ironic for a writer to praise silence? No more so, perhaps, than to praise ignorance, which is what Wendell Berry does in his poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front." Berry writes, "Praise ignorance, for what man has not encountered, he has not destroyed." So, perhaps we should praise silence, for as much as a man has not said, he has been

true. Praise of silence runs throughout Merton's meditations. Of teaching the novices at Gethsemani, he wrote (4 July, 1952), "Between the silence of God and the silence of my own soul stands the silence of the souls entrusted to me."

Certainly, since his death, Merton has been silent – if not silenced. There is also the soft rustle, just out of hearing, of the poems and prayers he did not live to write.

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