

The Child in the Rain

Meditations on innocence, courage
and witness in Merton's *Raids*

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Years ago in the guest house of Gethsemani Abbey, Matthew Kelty recounted a story told him by a young couple. I haven't found a published version, so hope my recollection is faithful enough. The couple's infant daughter had been acting up since the birth of her baby brother. The parents assumed she resented sharing parental attention. Several times the girl had asked to be alone with her new brother and, fearing the worst, the parents had resisted the request. The girl persisted until the parents came up with a plan which would

relieve them and satisfy her. They placed a monitor beside the baby's bed and listened in on the other, ready to leap into action as their daughter (blissfully unaware of the intrusion) went in for some personal time with her brother. Neither violence nor spite were heard, and if envy was evident, it was tinged with melancholy as the little girl said to her baby brother, 'Tell me about God; I'm forgetting...'

Kelty's story tells of original blessing, natal intimacy with God, a fading intimacy which echoes the archetypal loss of innocence which

even a young child's experience blots out. The story carries its own theology—of original blessing, an umbilical Eden, paradise lost with every birth as each child is dragged through experience away from some kind of oceanic communion. It's a theology we might well question in light of our collective personal experiences and of news from the actual world, as well as the reported discoveries of psychotherapy, biology or anthropology. Nevertheless, however we each construct our theology in the wake of Augustine *et al*, something in Kelty's story may continue to resonate. Perhaps something about a child's pre-linguistic knowing, about utter dependence and vulnerability, or about what they have not yet done, or seen, or suffered. A deep-rooted protective instinct may kick in, or a yearning to start over, to be that newborn, re-born. But 'can a person enter a second time into his mother's womb?' We know the answer to that one, yet still persist in misunderstanding Jesus' reply to Nicodemus. Perhaps because we cannot disregard the longing which gives rise to the question in the first place—a longing for regeneration, restoration, paradise regained.

There are strong traces in Merton of a romantic view of the original innocence of childhood, and of how that state of grace becomes corrupted by society.¹ In Kelty's story, the infant is asked to communicate God precisely at that time when he

has no speech. To Merton also, there was something incommunicable about original innocence. Furthermore, if culture and society are 'corrupting,' and each are constituted in language, then any supposed pre-linguistic innocence or awareness simply *cannot* be communicated. But how can we ever conceive of the idea that God is better known by those without language? To be 'born again', on the other hand, might be experienced as like emerging from a particular world of language which has become for us a 'womb of collective illusion.'

We must begin, indeed, in the social womb. There is time for warmth in the collective myth. But there is also a time to be born. He who is spiritually 'born' as a mature identity is liberated from the enclosing womb of myth and prejudice. He learns to think for himself, guided no longer by the dictates of need and by the systems and processes designed to create artificial needs and then 'satisfy' them.²

Time and again Merton reconstructed or evoked the mythic child and, through a range of poetic forms and techniques (though chiefly in silence and in the forest) he sought the child's elemental utterance, tearing holes in the web of corrupting or debased language

represented by propaganda, advertising, trivia and double-speak. Ross Labrie reads Merton's frequent reference to the child as 'an exemplary symbol of the expansiveness of the primordial imagination. In turn the child's mind... became in his eyes a template for the self.'³ To abandon this template, this *point vierge*, this true self perhaps,⁴ 'meant losing the originality of the self and yielding to the subsequent absorption of the self into the collective mirror—paradise lost.'⁵ The child we encounter with Merton is sometimes a lost child, a child of experience. This child also appears in other forms, other guises, carrying other meanings. Sometimes she is the mythic Sophia, sometimes the Christ. The child may be playing before God, or may indeed *be* God. She plays, she dances, just as we also may play or dance if only we can *remember* the kind of elemental child-consciousness which Kelty's story suggests:

Dance in the sun, you tepid idiot. Wake up and dance in the clarity of perfect contradiction. You fool, it is life that makes you dance: have you forgotten? Come out of the smoke, the world is tossing in its sleep, the sun is up, the land is bursting in the silence of dawn.⁶

The child may be like the artist, or like the prophet. The child may be

Merton—before or after being orphaned. Some women become that child's mother, in projection or in dreams. There is a foster mother, a black Madonna.⁷ A photograph of a bombed Birmingham black girl carrying a limp white-faced, empty-headed doll can signify at one and the same time both the redemptive child and the corrupted child. Then right there at the opening of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* is 'Barth's Dream' about Mozart. Merton reads Barth's dream as the theologian's attempt to find out from Mozart why he was such a poor Catholic, and Mozart has no answer but his music. Merton reports Barth's conclusion that 'it is a child, even a "divine child" who speaks in Mozart's music to us.'⁸

Between references in Merton's private journals to the typing up of *Conjectures*, we discover a suggestive connection between the playful Mozart child and the child as bystander and witness. Merton copied out a piece from François Mauriac, who apparently in old age discovered Mozart, describing him as a 'witness'—indeed, as the musician who most exemplifies the characteristic of a witness 'because we find in his childhood that original purity... with Christ.'⁹ Mauriac goes on to describe Mozart's last works as 'like a reproach to God, like the complaint of a child.' For children also complain—and need to be allowed to complain, trusting they will be heard, without retribution. Mozart, child prodigy, appar-

ently childish in so many ways, 'was never allowed to be a child in the literal meaning of that word,' writes Merton.¹⁰ But surely Mozart had no choice but to be a child in the *literal* meaning of that word. So what is Merton implying? That he was not permitted to play? Or to make mistakes without consequences? Or to complain?

The voice of the child able to speak candidly, sometimes complaining, sometimes playful, recurs particularly through Merton's private journal and letters. There in particular modes of writing the free child speaks. The closing scenes of *My Argument with the Gestapo* add weight to this suggestion, as the author's fictional self describes with parental concern the departure of his writings:

I am filled with anguish at parting with the work I have so dangerously wrought! My book, precious as an only child, goes off on a terrible journey, in the hands of a maniac who believes he understands world affairs, political rights and wrongs, and what is going to happen in the war!¹¹

The projected author is left facing a pile of new, blank paper: 'I think suddenly of Blake, filling paper with words,' he muses, 'so that the words flew about the room for the angels to read, and after that, what if the paper was lost or de-

stroyed?'¹² He decides that this is 'the only reason for wanting to write, Blake's reason.' Blake himself described other reasons for wanting to write:

When God commanded this hand to
write
In the studious hours of deep mid
night
He told me the writing I wrote
should prove
The Bane of all that on earth I lov'd.
...
Thy Father drew his sword in the
North
With his thousands strong he
marched forth:
Thy Brother has arm'd himself in
Steel
To avenge the wrongs thy Children
feel:

But vain the Sword & vain the Bow
They never can work War's
overthrow.
*The Hermit's Prayer & the Widow's
tear*
*Alone can free the World from
fear.*¹³

The hermit's prayer and the widow's tear symbolize here not only forms of innocence, but also a kind of efficacy or power to liberate, like the emblematic stance of a courageous, poetic prophet. Merton the hermit writer came to terms with being regularly pregnant with writings he needed to nurture and release into the world, where they might fulfil their work of witness

and prophecy. Turning our attention to *Raids on the Unspeakable*, we rediscover the child who is witness and prophet. There, the 'Letter to an Innocent Bystander' concludes with a version of the tale of a monarch deceived into parading naked before crowds who collude with the charade about an invisible suit. Merton then comments on the role of the child in the tale:

...since the times have become what they have become, I dare to blurt this out. Have you and I forgotten that our vocation, as innocent bystanders—and the very condition of our terrible innocence—is to do what the child did, and keep on saying that the king is naked, at the cost of being condemned criminals?¹⁴

Here is a child able to play and to complain. Yet does it not strike us as odd that the child is also the one who *doesn't pretend*? Do we not tend to assume that children (rather than adults) are the ones who like to pretend? They 'make believe,' they play, and their play involves fantasy, imagination run riot. It doesn't matter. There are no consequences if childhood is allowed to be childhood. If the king had been clothed, and the child had pretended that the king were naked, it wouldn't have mattered. It would be funny, and unsurprising. We expect that kind of thing from

children. What alarms us is the candid, uncensored speech which a child can blurt out in earshot of too many people: 'Daddy! That man's really fat!' Which may be a little embarrassing to a parent, or to the fat man. But to the Fat Man of *Raids*, the Fat Man who is the dark side of consumer culture and totalitarianism, the child's naive declaration is more than embarrassing. To a naked king hiding behind walls of propaganda and collusion, the child's unmasked honesty is powerful—and dangerous. To a consumer-generated, profit-driven enterprise designed for manipulation and control, there is something deeply threatening in the unbroken, ungroomed child. So the child must be controlled, co-opted from as early as possible. Children must be conditioned to fawn and manipulate and lever money from adult wallets. They must become the reason we are persuaded to create nuclear family enclosures and invest in protecting futures against manufactured fears.

Media reports regularly reveal fears about what we together are doing to our children, through ignorance, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault. The stories, together with the debate they generate, also reveal something about how we envisage childhood. Perhaps many parents fear damaging their children, if only by unwittingly exposing young bodies and minds to poisons, or neglecting them by being over-committed or

overly distracted elsewhere. Are children really so fragile, easily broken? Are we being unduly anxious about the cultural and chemical environment in which we nurture our children? We've all been children, many of us had it rough, and we make it into adulthood more or less intact. Which begs the question whether there is something undisclosed beneath our preoccupation with safeguarding policies or with 'stranger danger.' What lies at the heart of that disproportionate sense of vulnerability and fear we project onto children? If we can separate out the reasonable concerns from the self-fulfilling ones, then we might act effectively. And these are times when only action counts.

The *National Trust* recently released a report about one aspect of the unintentional harm with which we generally collude.¹⁵ The report echoes what was described in Richard Louv's American bestseller as 'nature deficit disorder.'¹⁶ We are keeping children indoors too much. Not that they mind. Louv's book begins with a short, poignant epigraph quoting a fourth-grader in San Diego: 'I like to play indoors 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are.' To inhabit the plugged-in domestic world is not the same as playing, in any way Merton would recognize. Throughout *Raids* and other writings he implicitly or directly affirms that a natural, outdoor environment can restore the child to itself—the child in each of

us.¹⁷ Though wary of a naïve nature-romanticism, Merton's later life especially was a celebration of the humanizing experience of ordinary exposure to the elements and seasons. He lived in the woods on purpose.

Louv and others report a relatively new form of parental fear, that we have inadvertently and electronically alienated our children from a nurturing natural environment. Has Suzanne Collins made a similar point through her dystopic fiction, *The Hunger Games*?¹⁸ There, the forest has become an arena of death under the gaze of television cameras which channel death-as-entertainment to those who need to play where the electrical outlets are. The controllers of the Capitol, with their parasitic cortege, demand regular sacrifice of the youthfulness of labourers in order to sustain their own fabricated, illusory and privileged existence. The author came up with the idea as she was flipping television channels between a 'reality TV' show and reportage of child soldiers. Both things are real in their freakish ways, and how they blur. What do we make of reports that the electronic gadgets which fascinate and hypnotise us require elements such as coltan, which is cited as a major cause of conflict in East Africa? To most of us, it means practically nothing. We live in the Capitol (or Capitalism) and watch hunger games.

In *Lost Icons*, Rowan Williams de-

scribes the harm done when the child is perceived as consumer and targeted as '(usually vicarious) purchaser of any number of graded and variegated packages.' They may not be conscripted into child armies, but are certainly conscripted and groomed into 'style wars' and 'a marketing culture that... openly feeds and colludes with obsession.' Distorted ideas of freedom are relentlessly promoted through 'a whole vocabulary of choice and gratification, in the unspoken complexities of rivalry and desire that are not addressed head-on; the businesses of learning what it is to be desired, to be enviable....' If we as society refuse to recognize a latent period of freedom from making choices with consequences, then (writes Williams) 'we are culturally guilty of the equivalent of conscripting the teenage guerrilla; not to mention the child prostitute.'¹⁹

The child who 'dared to point out that the king was naked'²⁰ is free, and courageous. He represents the 'innocent bystander' who is anything but passive, who declares the king naked even at the cost of being condemned as criminal. The illustration is poignant; but as a description of the social role, obligation or potential of the intellectual, the artist or the disciple in critical times, what does it mean? Within the framework of the traditional tale, the king's nakedness and the deception of the tailors are verifiable 'objective' facts, self-evident to

everyone once pointed out by the child. So where now is our naked emperor? What is the equivalent? Things are rarely so clear, and we have to deal with ambiguity and compromise. Longings for clarity and innocence can be unhelpful if they get bogged down in the myth of pure action or inaction, of wanting to be like an unspoiled, new-born infant. 'Can a man enter a second time his mother's womb?' Re-birth is not first birth. The recovery of paradise is not a return to paradise. Innocence after experience is not the same as innocence before experience. We cannot live in reverse.

Because we live in a womb of collective illusion, our freedom remains abortive. Our capacities for joy, peace, and truth are never liberated. They can never be used. We are prisoners of a process, a dialectic of false promises and real deceptions ending in futility.²¹

Having discovered a degree of liberation from the collective myth by choosing a monastic identity, Merton grew to discover that the new (monastic) myth also needed to be transcended. He learned and passed on to us a message that we need continually to break through the social myths which undermine compassion and communion. 'We must begin, indeed, in the social womb.... But there is also a time to be born.' Children grow, and adapt.

Without being overly naïve we might hope that they continue to adapt ways of seeing and speaking truth without fear of rejection or disadvantage. No need to think about pleasing the adults around them. No need to think about making themselves desirable to peers or sponsors. No need to be overly concerned about 'fitting in' or competing to 'stand out,' to be noticed. No need to play to the gallery or the Fat Man, but able to shout about the naked king without expecting to be punished, ridiculed, accused of lying or called to account for embarrassing someone. We do children no favours by giving them the impression that they are centre of the universe, for then they may fear the universe collapsing if they make a wrong move. Of course it then feels safer to remain in the virtual world of the console, where life is instantly restored when things go wrong. In that particular womb of collective illusion it's harder, however, to get het up about an emperor with no clothes. It's just either sordid or silly. Who cares? In fact, collusion is a requirement of entry to that electric world. No matter:

As for the technological Platos who think they now run the world we live in, they imagine they can tempt us with banalities and abstractions. But we can elude them merely by stepping into the Heraklitean river which is

never crossed twice....No one can enter the river wearing the garments of public and collective ideas. He must feel the water on his skin. He must know that immediacy is for naked minds only, and for the innocent.'²²

Merton invites us into the river, into the dance, into the woods and the rain. So often he mentions the rain. *Raids on the Unspeakable* begins in the rain. Rain which has not yet been controlled and commodified. It just pours. Its noise obliterates language, and whilst this may not be quite the same as the waters of the womb, it may bring us close to archaic memories of a time before language. It remains free, gratuitous (writes Merton), reminding us of the gratuity of God. It is a reminder that nature cannot be owned, whatever the Fat Man says. It is innocence. It is witness. And it is unspeakable in the best possible way. The idea of rain may depress a domesticated spirit, but as we step out of our shelters or electric cocoons there's a chance that, beneath the clouds, we remember our deep communion with all creation and we might dare appear a fool by addressing the rain now and then: 'Tell me about God. Because I think I'm forgetting....'

Notes

1. For more on this, see Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*, (Columbia,

Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p.139. I am indebted to Labrie for his substantial writing on the theme of the child in Merton, and his more recent work on Merton's *Raids on the Unspeakable*.

2. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp.16ff.

3. Labrie, *Inclusive*, p.135.

4. Although Merton does not directly equate the mythic child with the 'True Self'—of which he writes at length, for example in *New Seeds of Contemplation* and in *The Inner Experience*—he is in each instance attempting to name and describe a foundational element of human identity prior to or independent of socialization or other development. Merton refers to the 'point vierge' in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), p.128 and elsewhere.

5. Labrie, *Inclusive*, p.150.

6. Merton, *Raids*, p.107.

7. See Merton's journal entry for February 4, 1965 in Robert Daggy (ed.), *Dancing in the Water of Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton Volume Five 1963-1965*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), p.202.

8. Merton, *Conjectures*, p.10.

9. Journal entry for October 16, 1965 in *Dancing in the Waters of Life*, p.304. Merton cites the original French.

10. Merton, *Conjectures*, pp.10f.

11. Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, (New York: New Directions, 1975), p.259.

12. Merton, *Gestapo*, p.259.

13. William Blake, 'The Grey Monk', stanza 4 from 'Poems from the Pickering Manuscript' in ed. W. H. Stevenson, *William Blake: Selected Poetry*, (London: Penguin, 1988), p.146.

14. Merton, *Raids*, pp. 61-62.

15. See BBC News Science and Environment section, 30 March 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-17495032> (accessed 7 April 2012).

16. Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*, (New York: Workman Publishing, 2010) (revised and updated).

17. See Labrie, *Inclusive*, pp.140-141.

18. Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*, (London: Scholastic, 2009).

19. Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), pp.22-26.

20. Merton, *Raids*, p.62.

21. Merton, *Raids*, pp.16f.

22. *Raids*, p.161. See also pp.106-107.

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