

# The Importance of Not Being Serious

Thomas Merton's Comic Imagination,  
with Continuing Reference to Søren  
Kierkegaard and Karl Barth

Malgorzata Poks

Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God.

(Karl Barth, quoted. in *The Harper Book Of Quotations*  
(1993) ed. Robert I. Fitzhenry, p. 223)

Blessed are they that play, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

(Emily Dickinson, letter to L. F. Norcross, 1881)

Something marvelous happened to me. I was transported to the seventh heaven. There sat all the gods assembled. As a special dispensation, I was granted the favor of making a wish. 'Do you wish for youth,' said Mercury, 'or for beauty, or power, or a long life; or do you wish for the most beautiful

woman, or any other of the many fine things we have in our treasure chest? Choose, but only one thing!' For a moment I was bewildered; then I addressed the gods, saying: 'My esteemed contemporaries, I choose one thing—that I may always have the laughter on my side.' Not one god said a word; instead, all of them began to laugh. From that I concluded that my wish was granted and decided that the gods knew how to express themselves with good taste: for it would indeed have been inappropriate to reply solemnly: it is granted to you.

A; Diapsalmata (Hong Translation, slightly abbreviated)<sup>1</sup>

### Definition

A raid can be defined as 'a hostile or predatory incursion...an attack or invasion for the purpose of making arrests, seizing property, or plundering.'<sup>2</sup> Consequently, Merton's little book, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, which he 'in some ways' loved 'more than the rest'<sup>3</sup> can be seen as a series of indignant or ironic inroads into the territory presided over by dictatorial Martins-Fatmen who rule with the obliging help of Eichmann-like 'public servants,' silently efficient and obedient unto death, and with the explosive assistance of Fat Men and Little Boys. Surprisingly, Merton's single-handed guerrilla attacks prove capable of undermining the pompous power of the Fatman's systems and, by laughing at them, unmask the world's totalitarian utopias as unreality, emptiness, void, nothingness—in a word, as the Unspeakable.

### Humour

Merton was well known to his friends and relatives for his exceptional sense of humour. The *Humorous Verse* section of *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, his numerous anti-poems and a few translations from the Chilean anti-poet Nicanor Parra, as well as the frequent employment of irony in his journals, reviews, and social essays, testify to the importance of the poet-monk's comic imagination as a healthy reaction to taking oneself too seriously and the accepting world's 'solemnizing' and absolutising the Truth—in the singular—in the fundamentalist fashion. Merton's poem 'Elegy for James Thurber' from the 1963 collection *Emblems of a Season of Fury* mourns the death of humour, personified in the popular comic writer who could still laugh at 'our final [nuclear] madness' and by laughing, disarm it. Now that humour has been abol-

ished, complains Merton, madness can only be 'solemnized' and so engulf all the discursive space available.<sup>4</sup> The results of this solemnizing are depicted in, for instance, Merton's poem on the birth of the nuclear sublime, *Original Child Bomb* (1962).

On the whole, the poet would have agreed with the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who wrote that laughter 'purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality.'<sup>5</sup> Written in the 1940s, in the cauldron of the Second World War, and first published in 1965 for censorship reasons, Bakhtin's study on the late medieval culture of folk humour, entitled *Rabelais and his World*, soon became a pivotal text for poststructuralist criticism and helped revise the original bias of Aristotelian poetics against comedy.

It has to be stressed at this point that Merton was a big fan of the carnivalesque culture of the late Middle Ages: he delighted in the grotesquely satirical vision of François Rabelais' novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and its English eighteenth-century descendant, Lawrence Stern's *Tristram Shandy*; admired the fifteenth-century poet, thief, and vagabond François Villon, whose original name, des Loges, served as inspiration for Merton's

imaginary world of *Lograire*; and continued to be inspired by French symbolists and bohemians, like Rimbaud, as well as their successors, like the surrealist poet René Char. In the late 1960 Merton became fascinated with stand-up comedians. The ribald, scatological humour of a Lenny Bruce deserved, in Merton's opinion, more respect for its honest, straightforward use of language, than the polite debaucheries of fashionable new-speaks, the coded and loaded languages of advertising experts, or the couched lies of nuclear scientists, the military, or manipulative politicians.<sup>6</sup> His renewed interest in Joycean comedy and Joyce's unhampered linguistic experimentation was another attempt to transgress the rigid boundaries of inherited inscriptions, which subject every socialized language user to their subliminal, often destructive codings.

### A New Sense of the Comic

In the 1960s American literary critic Wilie Sypher wrote about 'the new sense of the comic,' whose emergence Sypher linked to the persistence and cultural ubiquity of the irrational and the nonsensical.<sup>7</sup> 'The comic now is more relevant or at least more accessible, than the tragic,' wrote Sypher, giving the following justification for his diagnosis. Firstly, in contrast to tragedy, which parades a cast of larger-than-life characters in clash with gods or Fate, comedy presents ordinary

people in their ordinary foibles, and this generates sympathy, acceptance of life's limitations, and a sense of identification in the viewer. Secondly, unlike tragedy, which focuses only on birth, struggle, and death, comedy embraces the whole ceremonial cycle of existence, including Resurrection.<sup>8</sup> Finally, and as a consequence of the above, the comic vision is 'a more pervasive human condition than tragedy.'<sup>9</sup> 'Should we say that the drama of the struggle, death, and rising—Gethsemane, Calvary, and Easter—actually belongs to the comic rather than the tragic domain?'<sup>10</sup> provocatively asked Sypher in 1965. 'The final answer is comic,' concurs Merton in one of his talks to the novices given in 1968, '[a]nd the real comedy is God's comedy. The Last Judgment is going to be an epiphany...of just how funny it really was.'<sup>11</sup>

### Comic Eschatology

My essay owes a debt of gratitude to Archbishop Rowan Williams for his excellent research into Merton's engagement with Karl Barth ('Not Being Serious: Thomas Merton and Karl Barth'). The title is a homage to the archbishop's lucid explication of Merton's appropriation of Barth's theology, which insists that only God is to be taken seriously and that 'the self before God is not serious'—most specifically when it tries to justify itself and 'be' anything. Additionally, Dr. Williams helpfully defines Barth's difficult

concept of 'the wrath of God'—which Merton appropriated in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*—as 'the destructive order of being which we set up when we attempt to fill the space that should be filled by the freedom of the love of God.'<sup>12</sup> I find this a most illuminating definition of Merton's Unspeakable. Equally interesting is the archbishop's demonstration of how Merton's interest in Barth links with Taoism and Zen Buddhism as expressions of the same 'revolt against the seriousness of images of the self.'<sup>13</sup> What Rowan Williams does not mention in his speech is how much Barth's analysis owes to proto-poststructuralist Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and his breakthrough theological concept of the 'infinite qualitative difference' between God and human being. What is of special interest here is that this groundlessness and un-seriousness of the self underpins Kierkegaard's theory of the comic as *praeparatio evangelica*, and of Christianity as 'the ultimate humorous worldview'<sup>14</sup>—which proposition becomes in turn crucial for understanding Merton's 'late' works (e.g. *Raids on the Unspeakable*) and for contextualizing his enthusiasm for French critic Roland Barthes' theory of the *gestus* of writing, along with its best twentieth century illustration—the experimental writing of James Joyce.

### The Comic as *Praeparatio Evangelica*

Kierkegaard's aversion to systems and systemic thinking is well known (he was violently adverse to Hegelianism and spoke disparagingly of Christendom as opposed to Christianity). His choice of titles—e.g., *Philosophical Fragments*; *Unconcluding Scientific Postscript*—or the confusing practice of attributing some of his work to pseudonyms such as Johannes Climacus, Johannes de Silentio, or Constantin Constantinus rather than himself, were to safeguard Kierkegaard's work against being interpreted as a coherent whole—a philosophical system in its own right. The same abhorrence of a premature, illegitimate closure inherent in a system made the philosopher address the single existing individual rather than an abstract collectivity and insist on the subjectivity of all accessible truth. His *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, a university thesis paper submitted in 1841, already drifts toward an existential understanding of irony as a weapon against all fixed truth claims and inherited notions of reality. By forcing the really existing individual to confront not so much what s/he knows, but what s/he has always taken for granted, known insufficiently, and mistaken for the whole truth, Kierkegaard's irony undermines the pompous pretensions of power.<sup>15</sup>

It is more than mere coincidence

that, having defended the dissertation, Kierkegaard went to Berlin where he would listen to Mozart's music while starting his work on the aesthetic and ethical stages of existence, eventually published as *Either/Or*—the manuscript that contains the famous fragment about the laughter of gods (quoted as one of the epigrams opening this paper). This information provides a fascinating link between Kierkegaard's, Barth's and Merton's awakening to Sophia, the 'divine child.' Inspired by the divine music of Mozart the man-child, Kierkegaard formulated a theory of the power of laughter; fascinated by Mozart's music, Karl Barth came to understand divine wisdom as the power that, in archbishop Williams' words, transforms the world into 'the theatre of God's glory and liberty.' If Kierkegaard, as argued by William Wells, was 'the reveille that awakened Karl Barth,'<sup>16</sup> the latter, as argued by Rowan Williams, was in turn the reveille that awakened Thomas Merton. In the long run, therefore, the Gethsemani monk's attunement to life as play<sup>17</sup> and the concept of the serious art of laughter celebrated by A's 'Diapsalmata,' would have been incomplete without Søren Kierkegaard, the patron saint of 'prophetic-anarcho-Danish deconstruction.'<sup>18</sup>

Kierkegaard's Climacus defined both the tragic and the comic in terms of contradiction, and believed that both required a dialectical conception of reality.<sup>19</sup> But

while the tragic is 'painful contradiction,' the comic can be seen as 'painless contradiction' because it always sees the way out of suffering and so is 'oriented toward healing.'<sup>20</sup> In his later work, *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), Kierkegaard calls *vis comica* a responsible 'weapon' in the hands of a mature individual. Will Williams explains that for Kierkegaard, 'a heightened sensitivity to comic contradiction is associated with a heightened sensitivity to the incommensurability between one's inner subjectivity and the outer world.'<sup>21</sup>

By passing through humour, the [Kierkegaardian] Christian has learned to see the contradictions in her own life in her failure to live up to the Christian ideal. Consequently ...the Christian observation of the comic is very often gentle and merciful, not dwelling on the failures of humanity but using such pain as is present in the comic to direct towards the way out of Christian redemption.<sup>22</sup>

As a consequence, Kierkegaard believed 'the comic dialectic...[is] essential to the Christian gospel's being appropriated by existing human beings' and perceived the denial of that dialectic as 'threaten[ing] the gospel.'<sup>23</sup>

In his poststructural postscript on *Either/Or*, subtitled 'Undecidability

and Two Concepts of Irony: Kierkegaard and Derrida,'<sup>24</sup> John Caputo demonstrates the irony of Kierkegaard's ethical stage of existence, depicted in 'Or' and represented by the figure of the Judge, whose task is to be always in the right. Contrary to the Judge's righteous pronouncements and his resulting good conscience, 'before God one is essentially in the wrong,' opines Caputo. Consequently, the Dane, as Caputo claims, believed a Christian to be a contradiction in terms and 'the impossible.'<sup>25</sup> 'Undecidability,' concludes Caputo, 'is first, last, and constant not indecision but the condition of possibility of decision'<sup>26</sup>—it demands the constant renewal of decision.

In 1966 Merton copied in his working book this statement from Kierkegaard's musings on the comic: 'it is in fact through error that the individual is given access to the highest, if he courageously desires it.'<sup>27</sup> Situated in the context of his own 'error' of the summer of 1966, Merton's mounting sense of failure in his monastic and poetic vocation, his interest in the irresolvable Zen *koans* and the un-concluding Joycean epiphany, these words are particularly self-revelatory—and potentially highly ironical.

### Raids on the In/Articulate: The Problem of Language

The title of Merton's collection, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, is a play on a line from T. S. Eliot's 'East

Coker' (*Four Quartets*). Eliot believed that every time a writer tries to use words, he or she makes a new beginning,

a raid on the inarticulate  
With shabby equipment always  
deteriorating  
In the general mess of imprecision  
of feeling,  
Undisciplined squads of emotion.<sup>28</sup>

Eliot was convinced that the world could not be expressed in words, and that every renewed attempt at articulating the inarticulate, no matter how skilled the artist, was doomed to failure. Writers of post-structural sensitivity would, however, be more alert to the traps of the medium itself, which not only distorts but positively constructs the message; they would claim that it is the imagination that finds coherence where there is possibly none. 'We are the coherence of what we creatively present to one another,'<sup>29</sup> John Dominic Crossan soberly reminds us in *Raid on the Articulate*, his important argument with modernist epistemology. Crossan's book, helpfully subtitled *Comic Eschatology in Jesus and Borges*, testifies to the postmodern shift, via Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, in viewing the comic as superior to the tragic, while registering the overwhelming impact of structuralist thought on the humanities. Published in 1976, it draws on Ricoeur's hermeneutics, Saussure's linguistics and Levi-

Strauss's structural anthropology, Parisian structuralism and post-structuralism, Bakhtinian analysis of the carnivalesque, and the post-modern revisions of Aristotelian poetics. Comedy and iconoclasm, especially the comic iconoclasm of the Zen imagination<sup>30</sup> and the comic eschatology of Christianity which 'laughs at the idea of a final ending'<sup>31</sup> (which, that is, restores the world *sub specie ludi*), are 'the only gateways to transcendence,'<sup>32</sup> opines Crossan.

Echoing the Kierkegaardian concept of the insubstantiality of the self and the Barthian view of the world as 'the theatre of God's glory and liberty,' Crossan starts with the acceptance of play as 'the supreme paradigm for reality.'<sup>33</sup> The theologian understands reality as 'the interplay of worlds created by human imagination,' and defines comedy as 'the conscience of play.' 'The comic vision,' specifies Crossan, 'is our consciousness and awareness of the inevitability and ubiquity of play.'<sup>34</sup> In a crucial passage Crossan warns:

...it is the human propensity to forget, ignore, or even deny this ontological destiny of as-if that comedy can never allow. Whenever and wherever humans bypass this perspectival obligation and attempt to speak, act, or exist outside or apart from structures of the human imagination, comedy lifts its



flaming sword and denies them any such passage.<sup>35</sup>

Arguing, after Roland Barthes, that 'realism' in literature should explore 'the unreal reality of language,'<sup>36</sup> Crossan quotes approvingly from Barthes' study *On Racine*<sup>37</sup>: 'To write is to jeopardize the meaning of the world, to put an indirect question that the writer, by an ultimate abstention, refrains from answering.'<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

In the talks to the novices already mentioned, when talking about aesthetics, Merton suddenly shifts to his recent readings in the Night-town section of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The book's most absurdist and ribald section, placed in Dublin's red-light district among the city's marginals and prostitutes, used to be for him the most problematic part of the Joycean novel. This time, he confesses, it was a 'fantastic' experience. All Merton finds in this section now is 'a sense of compassion'. 'You reach a point that underneath all the sin and corruption, everything is good. I don't know how he did it,' he muses, only to add after a moment's reflection, that the 'comic treatment' must have done it. The most significant discovery, however, was that Joyce's vision significantly overlaps with that of Julian of Norwich. 'The final answer is comic,' concludes Merton much in the combined sophianic, Kierkegaardian-Barthian

spirit. 'And the real comedy is God's comedy. The Last Judgment is going to be an epiphany...of just how funny it really was.'<sup>39</sup>

## Notes

1. The first section of the first part of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, 'Diapsalmata' ('refrains') contains some of Kierkegaard's most famous and poetic lines, such as 'What is a poet?', 'Freedom of Speech' vs. 'Freedom of Thought,' the 'Unmovable chess piece,' the tragic clown, and the laughter of the gods. 'Either' describes the 'aesthetic' phase of existence and consists of papers, supposedly found by 'Victor Eremita' and written by 'A' or the 'aesthete'. Part two, entitled 'Or,' comments on the ethical phase of existence and consists of letters from a retired Judge Vilhelm or William, to 'A.'
2. 'Raid,' *Wiktionary: The Free Dictionary*. Wiktionary.org. 2 April 2012.
3. Thomas Merton, 'Prologue: The Author's Advice to His Book,' *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p.2.
4. Merton's rejection of literal, reductive stories as insufficient in the post-atomic age and his subsequent embrace of irony is part of a wider distrust, postmodern in nature, of sentimentality and linear (master) narratives.
5. Quoted in John Dominic Crossan, *Raids on the Articulate: Comic Eschatology in Jesus and Borges* (New

- York: Harper and Row, 1976), p.126.
6. Merton eloquently deconstructed those newspeaks in his essay 'War and the Crisis of Language.' *The Critique of War: Contemporary Philosophical Explorations*, ed. Robert Ginsberg (Chicago: Regnery, 1969), pp.99-119.
  7. Quoted in Crossan, p.18.
  8. Op.cit. pp.22-23.
  9. Op.cit. p.18.
  10. Ibid.
  11. Thomas Merton, Tape 178, summer 1968, Track #2 'Introduction—Aesthetics.' Materials researched at the Thomas Merton Center in Bellarmine University, Louisville, Ky.
  12. Rowan Williams, 'Not Being Serious: Thomas Merton and Karl Barth,' a lecture given to the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of Merton's death in 1968. 10 December 2008. Archbishopofcanterbury.org. Accessed: March 2012.
  13. Ibid. Additionally, though not mentioned by Rowan Williams, the concept of the groundlessness of the self has powerful connections with poststructuralist thought, especially such concepts as the 'death of the author'.
  14. Howard V. Hong, quoted in Will Williams, *The Legitimacy of the Comic: Kierkegaard and the Importance of the Comic for His Ethics and Theology*. Online theological dissertation. (Baylor University's Digital

- Repository. Beardocs.baylor.edu. PDF, 2011), p.11.
15. John D. Caputo calls Kierkegaard a 'Christian' Socrates, as distinct from Derrida, who qualifies as 'khoral' Socrates.
  16. William W. Wells, 'The Reveille that Awakened Karl Barth,' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22/3 Sept. 1979: 223-233. Ets-jets.org. Accessed: 20 December 2011.
  17. The epigram to Merton's poem 'The Early Legend,' taken from Plato's *Laws*, reads: 'God alone is worthy of supreme seriousness. But man is made God's plaything and that is the best part of him. Therefore every man and woman should live life accordingly, and play the noblest games and be of another mind from what they are at present.... What, then, is the right way of living? Life must be lived as play,...then a man will be able to propitiate the gods and defend himself against his enemies'. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p.757.
  18. John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana UP, 2006), p.32.
  19. For Kierkegaard the comic is dialectical, argues Will Williams, because a presently existing Christian would be unable to understand the comic apart from its dialectic. Will Williams, ft 16. p.15.
  20. Quoted in Will Williams, p.41.
  21. Op cit., p.97.

22. Op. cit., p.98
23. Will Williams, ft 16. p.15.
24. *The New Kierkegaard*, ed. Elsebet Jegstrup (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 2004), pp.14-43.
25. In Kierkegaard's opinion, no honest man could call himself Christian.
26. Caputo, p.17.
27. Thomas Merton, *Working Notebook # 55*, 'Comedy' (not dated but probably 1966), p.30. Materials researched in The Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Ky.
28. T. S. Eliot, 'East Coker', *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943), pp.30-31.
29. Crossan, p. 168.
30. Crossan, p.46.
31. Op. cit., p.45.

32. Op. cit, p.47.
33. Op. cit. p.28.
34. Ibid.
35. Op. cit., p.29.
36. Quoted in Crossan, p.40.
37. Merton read this study and incorporated allusions to it in his review of Roland Barthes, entitled 'Roland Barthes—Writing as Temperature.' *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1985).
38. Op. cit., p.40.
39. Merton, Tape 178, 'Introduction—Aesthetics'.

**Malgorzata Poks** is the author of *Thomas Merton and Latin America* (2009) and an international advisor of the International Thomas Merton Society for Poland.