

# The Poetry of Self:

## Thomas Merton and the Re-articulation of the Theological Project

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### Introduction

In his 2008 work *Divine Teaching*, Mark McIntosh writes that,

It is not so much thinking about theological topics that really constitutes theology; for distinguishable from that is the means by which the theological mind reflects. And a truly theological mind...is a mind that has begun to be shaped and attuned to God's way of thinking and loving. The work of theology certainly includes reflection on all things that Christians believe God has been doing. But this reflection has, itself, to spring from a continual conversion, a continual sharing in this hearing of the living voice of the author of life.<sup>1</sup>

This quotation presents the reader with an appealing vision of the formation of the theological mind and of theology as a whole. Here theology is not as it has so often been defined as a 'factual' discourse shaped by dualistic thinking and a modernist trajectory based on notions of reason, logic and 'progress'. It is, instead, a *poetics*; a *craft* rather than a rigid step-by-step technique.<sup>2</sup> By embracing this more fluid, creative, and ultimately more mature approach, the theological project seeks to take us out of ourselves, re-membling us in the all-engulfing presence of the Godhead. For David Ford, theologians therefore inhabit an essential role as apprentices, who, through being rooted and grounded in prayer, learn the craft of God:<sup>3</sup>

...the apprentice theologian is one who, 'in the Spirit', seeks for God's sake to read, pray, love, converse, serve, imagine, think, and have the mind of Christ; and also, like Jesus and John, seeks to be a witness who communicates with poetic care and creativity.<sup>4</sup>

McIntosh and Ford convincingly argue for a re-articulation of theology by contemporary practitioners. As the opening excerpt intimates, it is important that this takes place through what McIntosh describes as the 'continual conversion' of the self.<sup>5</sup> From this perspective, a grappling with one's own autobiographical theology becomes indispensable to the wider theological discourse. This means that the theological mind is one which is 'poetic', engaged with the self and 'attuned to God's way of thinking and loving', as McIntosh states. Thomas Merton (1915-1968) is the theologian *par excellence* of this understanding, with his life, witness and writings providing us with a model for a deeper – and arguably more authentic – way of engaging with both God and the self.

### Autobiographical Theology – The 'continual conversion'

Autobiographical theology is a branch of narrative theology which represents the turn to the self and the self's relationship with God. It has been subject to much interest and revision in recent years, particularly concerning the question of what constitutes the 'self' in the first place.<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding such definitions and debates, autobiographical theology is essentially that which Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Francis Ward describe as 'theology by heart' and 'living human documents'.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, James Giles suggests that, 'These stories do not merely illustrate or symbolise the self; they embody the self; they are the self.'<sup>8</sup>

Although often treated as a relatively new phenomenon arising from the advent of psychology in the early twentieth-century,<sup>9</sup> the autobiographical approach can be seen in St. Augustine's (354-430) *Confessions*. The earliest example of what we now understand as 'spiritual autobiography', this work ushered in a new literary genre which remains popular across the entire theological spectrum. In his *Confessions*, Augustine importantly discovered the intimate relationship between self-knowledge and knowledge of God. In order to find God, he mused, one has to search within. As he beautifully writes in Book 10,

...you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you.<sup>10</sup>

Such self-awareness is important for the formation of the theological mind, and Merton stands firmly within this continuing and persistent tradition.

Merton adopts an unashamedly autobiographical tone throughout his written corpus, with Elena Malits suggesting that,

More than any other contemporary religious personality and writer Merton has taught us to appreciate the theological significance of the quest for self-identity. He reintroduced and legitimated the use of 'I' in religious inquiry.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, Merton strikingly shows how he has been shaped by God *over time*. Likewise, the reader can witness the twofold process of Merton's growth into God and God's growth into him. In this way, Merton concurs with Giles' understanding of autobiography as 'the becomingness of the self'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, unlike the *Confessions*, which is framed around a clearly-defined 'conversion' experience, Merton's classic autobiographical text, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, reveals multiple moments of revelation. For Anne Hunsaker Hawkins,

The dramatic event of Augustine's conversion is discrete, distinct, and unforgettable, whereas there are a number of incidents in *The Seven Storey Mountain* that could represent 'the' climactic conversion episode. Later on in life Merton would come to see this pattern of continuing conversion as itself a valid paradigm to the religious life.<sup>13</sup>

Just as McIntosh describes, Merton's theological mind was nourished and expanded through the 'continuing conversion' which Hawkins here draws attention to. Merton repeatedly allowed his textual self to die and re-form, writing in *The Sign of Jonas* that, 'I have to be a person that nobody knows. They can have Thomas Merton. He's dead. Father Louis –

he's half-dead too.'<sup>14</sup> This encounter (or wrestling) with spiritual death and renewal is something we all encounter – albeit not as publicly as Merton – and yet by journeying with Merton we can claim varying degrees of affinity with him. Merton was powerfully aware of the ever-changing nature of the self, often re-working and re-publishing material to reflect insights made from new vantage points. It therefore seems strange that he remained stubbornly protective over *The Seven Storey Mountain*, reluctant to update its text, while also being dissatisfied that it came from the pen of a much younger, and different, Merton.<sup>15</sup> As he wrote in the preface to the Japanese edition,

...it was written when I was still quite young, and that is the way it remains. The story no longer belongs to me, and I have no right to tell it in a different way, or to imagine that it should have been seen through wiser eyes. In its present form, *which will remain its only form* [emphasis added], it belongs to many people.<sup>16</sup>

### Challenges

Autobiographical theology has not been universally and uncritically accepted, and has been subject to a plethora of critical voices. For example, it appears to contain an inherent incongruity. With a mystical or contemplative understanding of the relationship with God, the ultimate aim is to become more absorbed in the divine than in the self, but in autobiographical accounts the self seems to be the obsessive focus. Sara Maitland regards this as a strongly narcissistic trait, citing a journal entry by Merton as evidence:

I have tremendous preoccupations of my own, personal preoccupations with whatever is going on inside my own head and I simply can't write about anything else. Anything I create is only a symbol of some completely interior preoccupation of my own.<sup>17</sup>

Although James Kay appreciates the benefits of an autobiographical approach, he ultimately suggests that theology can get too caught up with such 'preoccupations' of the self instead of God. Kay argues that this can result in the 'transposition of theology into anthropology'.<sup>18</sup> However,

although Merton does appear to concentrate on the self, he also stands in direct descent from the great mystics in arguing that we need to escape from the 'false self' in favour of our true identity before God.<sup>19</sup> This search for the 'True Self', as Merton repeatedly called it, is a key theme of contemplative spirituality and is arguably much needed in a contemporary world and church too often caught up in the distractions and diversions of technology, social media and the like, leading to a proliferation of superficial reflections of our true identities. Yet seemingly paradoxically, one reaches this 'True Self' by handing the self over to God. This presupposes we have a self to give away in the first place. Merton recognised this, writing in *Thoughts in Solitude* that,

Self-conquest is really self-surrender. ...Yet before we can surrender ourselves we must become ourselves. For no one can give up what he does not possess.<sup>20</sup>

Our spirituality – and theology as a whole – can therefore be defined as a *kenotic* gifting of the self to God. This is why Merton wrote that contemplation is about 'getting our minds off ourselves'<sup>21</sup> and that 'To exist everywhere I have to be No-one.'<sup>22</sup> This latter statement is indicative of the monastic vocation which states that in order to be open to everyone – and to live in Christ – one has to be emptied of self. To become our true self means to embrace the nothingness (*le point vierge*<sup>23</sup>) at the core of our being, and the desert in the divine heart of God. Merton adhered to this vision when he entered the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky in 1941, and yet something of a contradiction remained. To all intents and purposes Merton 'vanished' from the world around him, while at the same time his writings ensured he continued to have a vociferous presence.

### The re-poeticisation of theology

In his essay 'Learning to Live' Merton states,

The purpose of education is to show a person how to define himself authentically and spontaneously in relation to his world – not to impose a prefabricated definition of the world, still less an arbitrary definition of the individual...<sup>24</sup>

In a similar vein, a journal entry from 27 January 1948 reads,

God defend me from the stuffy academic language and from the pious jargon I felt I got into in so many parts of *Exile Ends in Glory* on the theory that, since I was a monk, I had to write that way. NO! That is NOT the way to write. It does no good.<sup>25</sup>

In these quotations – a small selection of what could have been chosen – Merton offers a critique of education and the dominant theological discourse, implicitly suggesting the need for a re-poeticisation of theology. Scholars of all theological persuasions have long wrestled with how best to communicate God and the encounter with the divine, knowing along with the Welsh poet and priest R. S. Thomas (1913-2000) that 'My equations fail as my words do.'<sup>26</sup> It is a truism that our language will always be limited and faltering, relying as it does on metaphors and anthropomorphisms. Our words can, frustratingly, never be more than an approximation, and this is perhaps most painfully felt with regards to our language of God. The theologian is left in a precarious and somewhat paradoxical position when faced with the necessity of having to use imperfect words in order to convey something of the unsayable nature and being of the divine. But it is important to remember that our language is God-given, and this should provide us with a duty of care towards the words we use. The twentieth-century poet Anne Sexton (1928-1974) reminds us of this when she writes of words as being 'both daisies and bruises' and that,

Words and eggs must be handled with care. Once broken they are impossible things to repair.<sup>27</sup>

There is a strong and lively resonance between theology and the poet and mystic, united as they are in the task of attempting to translate the ineffable and perform 'a raid on the inarticulate'.<sup>28</sup> Both hesitate at the intersection of language and silence, recognising the ultimate futility of trying to capture the unlanguageable, yet neither do they renounce the challenge.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the theologian makes a profession out of scrabbling for scraps of divine letters, knowing that whatever is conveyed will always fall short of the mark while at the same time feeling an agonising compulsion to persist in the search for ever-better modes of expression.

Merton is one such theologian who saw, as did T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), that we will only ever achieve 'a husk of meaning'.<sup>30</sup>

It is of fundamental importance that contemporary theology reclaims its inevitable poetic nature, for there is no other way in which the discipline can be constructed (and de-constructed). Words have a tremendous power,<sup>31</sup> and so the utter mystery of God should be mirrored in a language which is playful, poetic, open-ended, dynamic and experimental.<sup>32</sup> Merton can potentially play an important part in this act of retrieval and reshaping of the theological enterprise. In his recent work *The Edge of Words*, Rowan Williams defines the most authentic theology as that which is poetic and prayerful, with an understanding that 'God' can only ever be conceived of 'lightly and poetically'.<sup>33</sup> Merton understood this, particularly in the light of his background in English literature. Perhaps he wrote so much precisely because he recognised the infuriating appeal of language in speaking of God. In his writing, Merton offers a beautiful inarticulation of God, with incomplete word-pictures which move us ever more tantalisingly towards the divine.

Like poetry, our theology should come 'alive' in our writing. Through his compositions, Merton sought to re-member and re-create both God and the self. He understood the essence of writing as a kind of 'resurrection'; a process by which what is hidden is brought into view – often in unexpected ways. Thus, Hawkins suggests that spiritual autobiography is the expression of what remains fundamentally inexpressible; an attempt to order one's life before God.<sup>34</sup> There is a sense in which all writers, whether theologians or poets, lack control over their compositions, speaking as they do of the way in which texts 'write themselves', being not completed but abandoned.<sup>35</sup> Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957) vividly expresses the relationship between the writer and the word,

...letters of the alphabet frighten me terribly. They are shy, shameless demons – and dangerous! You open the inkwell, release them: they run off – and how will you ever get control of them again! They come to life, join, separate, ignore your commands, arrange themselves as they like on the paper – black, with tails and horns. You scream at them and implore them in vain: they do as they please.<sup>36</sup>

Poets and theologians have often been strange companions in the post-Enlightenment landscape.<sup>37</sup> Yet in the early church no such distinction existed, as the theologian was often regarded as the *de facto* poet or mystic as well.<sup>38</sup> It is important that we reclaim this unity because, together, they could offer a radically different vision for a world which is crying out for a fundamental reformation. Poetical discourse contains the possibility of transfiguration, for as the American poet, essayist and feminist Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) argues, it is poetry which can redescribe and reconstruct the world.<sup>39</sup> Theology should embrace the poetic reconception of 'reality', particularly for the way in which this brings us to a deeper and more honest – if fragmented – way of being with God. This is surely a sign of a theologically mature mind. One of Merton's many vocations was to express this vision for 'doing theology', and we are invited to join him. The true theologian should be prepared to get one's metaphorical (and real) hands dirty, re-articulating the world through the medium of poetry. As Merton evocatively wrote in 'Message to Poets',

When the poet puts his foot in that ever-moving river, poetry itself is born out of the flashing water. In that unique instant, the truth is manifest to all who are able to receive it.

No one can come near the river unless he walks on his own feet. He cannot come there carried in a vehicle.

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.

Come, dervishes: here is the water of life. Dance in it.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

If theology is naively defined as being about the exposition of 'truth', then it is perhaps bound to fail. Rather, an authentic and mature theology knows that it is in the business of the presentation of evocative, but always incomplete, metaphors of God. As such, it is poetic. It is important – indeed essential – that the theological mind looks out beyond itself,



always straining towards the edge of language while also proclaiming new visions and sharing in the living voice of God. For as Merton said in *New Seeds of Contemplation*,

Contemplation is also the response to a call: a call from Him Who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being: for we ourselves are words of His. But we are words that are meant to respond to Him, to answer to Him, to echo Him, and even in some way to contain Him and signify Him. Contemplation is this echo.<sup>41</sup>

God speaks to us and we are the 'echo' of God's words, leaving us as both the author and a character belonging to a greater author: God.<sup>42</sup> Thus, for David Mulhall autobiographical theology is therefore a narrative co-authored between the self and God.<sup>43</sup> The theological mind does not stand still, but realises the constantly changing nature of God and the self. Merton accurately summarises the theological project in the opening lines of a poem when he writes that,

All theology is a kind of birthday  
Each one who is born  
Comes into the world as a question  
For which old answers  
Are not sufficient.<sup>44</sup>

The theologically-informed mind knows that the old answers are no longer enough, and so, as McIntosh suggests, we are called to be adventurers, pirates, mystics and sages.<sup>45</sup> Yet, we remain in a state of unknowing and vulnerable surrender as we, like Jacob, ever-tussle towards the divine, and our true selves. Autobiographical theology at least provides us with a significant template for the journey, for as Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) stated, 'Only shallow people know themselves.'<sup>46</sup>

## Notes

1. Mark A. McIntosh, *Divine Teaching: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 24.
2. Terry A. Veling, *Practical Theology. 'On Earth as It Is in Heaven'* (Maryknoll,

New York: Orbis Books, 2005), p. 15.

3. David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 168-191. This argument is also put forward by Terry Veling, who suggests that, 'Practical theology is a craft in which we continually "answer and respond"' to the call and vocation of apprenticeship and discipleship in God's ways.' See Terry A. Veling, *Practical Theology*, p. 16.
4. David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology*, p. 189.
5. For a detailed overview of the changing understanding of what constitutes 'the self' in philosophy and theology see James E. Giles, 'The Story of the Self: the Self of the Story', *Religion and Intellectual Life* 4.1 (1986), pp. 105-112.
6. For example, Anne Hunsaker Hawkins argues that the focus of interest has recently moved from the subject writing the life to the structure and function of 'literary selfhood.' From this perspective, there is no such thing as 'the self' as it is a literary invention. See Anne H. Hawkins, *Archetypes of Conversion* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1985), p. 22.
7. See Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005), pp. 18-47. For Frances Ward's detailed description of the 'living human document' see Frances Ward, *Lifelong Learning. Theological Education and Supervision* (London: SCM Press, 2005), pp. 129-153.
8. James E. Giles, 'The Story of the Self', p. 106.
9. Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection*, p. 30.
10. See St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 201.
11. Cited in Anne H. Hawkins, *Archetypes of Conversion*, p. 119.
12. James E. Giles, 'The Story of the Self', p. 110.
13. Anne H. Hawkins, *Archetypes of Conversion*, p. 17. See also p. 140.
14. Cited in Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action. Engagements with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2013), p. 17. See also Jonathan Montaldo, 'To Uncage His Voice: Thomas Merton's Inner Journey toward *Parrhesia*' (2012), from <http://monksworks.com/.../Montaldo-Oakham-Uncaging-His-Voice-Final-p.pdf> (accessed 15/2/2015), p. 8.
15. Interest is growing in Thomas Merton's 'late' writings, perhaps at the expense of the 'early' texts, which includes *The Seven Storey Mountain*. See Anne H. Hawkins, *Archetypes of Conversion*, p. 113.
16. Thomas Merton, *Reflections on my Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (London: Collins, 1981), p. 71.
17. Cited in Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence. A journey in search of the pleasures and powers of silence* (London: Granta Books, 2008), p. 259.
18. James F. Kay, 'Full Disclosure', *Theology Today* 63 (2006), p. 148. Although nervous of the dangers of autobiographical theology, Kay nevertheless

- appreciates its importance, arguing for a qualified approach with regards to theology and the self.
19. For a brief overview of Thomas Merton's approach to contemplation see William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton. An Introduction* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005), pp. 73-86.
  20. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1958), p. 29.
  21. Cited in William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton*, p. 82.
  22. Cited in John Moses, *Divine Discontent. The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 38.
  23. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), p. 158.
  24. Cited in Lawrence S. Cunningham (ed.) *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master. The Essential Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), p. 358.
  25. Cited in Jonathan Montaldo, 'To Uncage His Voice', p. 10.
  26. From 'The Absence' in Ronald S. Thomas, *Collected Poems 1945-1990* (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), p. 361. For a discussion of the relationship between mysticism and poetry see Mark S. Burrows, 'Raiding the Inarticulate': Mysticism, Poetics, and the Unlanguageable', in Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (eds) *Minding the Spirit. The Study of Christian Spirituality* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. 341-363.
  27. From 'Words' in Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1999), pp. 463-464.
  28. From 'East Coker' in *Four Quartets*. See Thomas S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 182. Indeed, poetry, according to Rubem Alves, is the 'desperate attempt to say what cannot be said.' See Rubem A. Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet. The Edward Cadbury Lectures 1990* (London: SCM Press, 1990), p. 26.
  29. Mark S. Burrows, "Raiding the Inarticulate", p. 342.
  30. As Thomas S. Eliot states in 'Little Gidding' from *Four Quartets*, 'And what you thought you came for / Is only a shell, a husk of meaning / From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled / If at all.' See Thomas S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 192.
  31. Terry Veling reminds us that words are never 'mere words'. Once spoken, our words are neither harmless nor without effect. See Terry A. Veling, *Practical Theology*, pp. 153-154.
  32. R. Kendall Soulen, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity. Volume One: Distinguishing the Voices* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 111.
  33. Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words. God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 34.

34. Anne H. Hawkins, *Archetypes of Conversion*, p. 28.
35. Maggie Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide. Volume 1: Process* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2014), p. 63.
36. Cited in Rubem Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet*, p. 16.
37. For example, Mark Burrows draws attention to the uncomfortable relationship between the poet and the theologian in the Western tradition. See Mark S. Burrows, "Raiding the Inarticulate", p. 341.
38. See Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology. The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 33 and Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God. What Religion Really Means* (London: The Bodley Head, 2009), p. 149.
39. Cited in Terry A. Veling, *Practical Theology*, p. 195.
40. From 'Message to Poets' in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 161.
41. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 2007), p. 3.
42. Thus, for Mark McIntosh, 'The more attuned to the author's speaking you become, the more alive, the more 'yourself' you come to feel as the purpose and truth of yourself grows more luminous within you.' See Mark A. McIntosh, *Divine Teaching*, p. 22.
43. See Stephen Mulhall, 'Theology and narrative: the self, the novel, the Bible', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 69.1 (2011), p. 31.
44. From an untitled poem cited in Lynn R. Szabo (ed.) *In the Dark before Dawn. New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 2005), p. 191.
45. Mark A. McIntosh, *Divine Teaching*, pp. 16-31. In particular, he writes that, 'Theology in the truest sense begins with this adventure, this conversion or transformation towards a new way of experiencing and understanding reality. While we may very well study Christian theology without this having happened to ourselves, we will never really see what theology is about until and unless we recognise that true theologians see everything from this new perspective, from this sharing in the dying and rising of Jesus.' See Mark A. McIntosh, *Divine Teaching*, p. 18.
46. Cited in James E. Giles, 'The Story of the Self', p. 111.

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