

## New Words for God: Contemplation and Religious Writing

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IF YOU LOOK IN Merton's work for definitions of poetry or of the poetic, you may sometimes be a little disappointed. As theologians have often found, it is quite difficult to give positive definitions of what matters most. You may find yourself defining more clearly by negations, by saying what you're not talking about. And what I want to begin with this morning is four areas which Merton identifies as the sort of thing that poetry isn't.

And as a way of finding a path into what he thinks about contemplation, I think this has its value. You'll see why, I hope. I'm relying here mostly on two quite familiar pieces, both reprinted in *Raids on the Unspeakable*: 'The Message to Poets' of 1964,<sup>1</sup> the short essay that was read at a meeting of Latin American poets in Mexico City in February of that year; and the 'Answers on Art and Freedom'<sup>2</sup> from around the same time, also written for a Latin American audience.

Both texts clearly lay out not only what poetry isn't, but what it is that poetry is against.

First of all, poetry isn't, and is against, magic. Poetry is not about words that work. 'It is the businessman, the propagandist, the politician, not the poet, who devoutly believes in the magic of words,' writes Merton; 'For the poet, there is precisely no magic, there is only life in all its unpredictability and all its freedom. All magic is a ruthless venture in manipulation, a vicious circle, a self-fulfilling prophecy.' Words that work, independent of their transparency to truth, are magical words. They live without anchorage in reality. They exist in order to exercise power, to control or develop a situation according to the will of the speaker.

Of course, there is an immediate relevance here to some of the unforgettable essays that Merton wrote in the middle sixties about the language of war, which for him was a cardinal example of

magical language. You speak about war in such a way that the reality of conflict or of suffering is occluded. You speak about war in a way whose sole purpose is to create a consciousness like yours, another will projecting itself into the void. But I think too that Merton is casting a sidelong glance at some sorts of poetic self-consciousness, in the malign sense of the phrase, a poetic style that becomes self-referential, inclusive only of self. That sort of poetic freewheeling can be licensed as a parody of the unspeakable language of the state, 'The Ogre,' as W.H. Auden would have called it; but it isn't of itself the essence of poetry. And you might compare some remarks in 'Answers on Art and Freedom' on formalism... 'a meaningless cliché devised by literary and artistic gendarmes... a term totally devoid of value or significance as are all the other cultural slogans invented in the police station.'<sup>3</sup>

Poetry then may at times be parodic and playful in order to show up what magical language is like, to expose the evils of the magical language of the state, or the military machine, or the police station. And somewhere in the background here is an allusion ringing off to Auden's short poem, already mentioned, written in 1968 after the invasion of Czechoslovakia. It's about 'the Ogre' striding across a plain covered with ruin and darkness. The Ogre has mastered everything except speech.

The Ogre stalks with hands on hips  
While drivel gushes from his lips.<sup>4</sup>

I think Merton's 'Unspeakable' and Auden's 'Ogre' have a good deal in common with each other.

Poetry isn't, and is against, magic and therefore, more generally, poetry isn't, and poetry is against, being useful, particularly that usefulness which we think of in terms of moralism. Here again, I'm turning to the Message to Poets:

Let us not be like those who wish to make the tree bear its fruit first and the flower afterwards. A conjuring trick and an advertisement. We are content if the flower comes first and the fruit afterwards in due time.<sup>5</sup>

Useful moral poetry is an adjunct to something else. It might be there or it might not. Poetry isn't and can't be decorative in that way and in that sense it's never simply rhetoric. It is never simply about persuading someone to do something, or to think something. However significant the purpose, however good the end, poetry that is about defined goals, poetry that is functional, an advertisement, is

betraying itself. And that phrase, 'a conjuring trick and an advertisement' is very telling. Poetry which is an advertisement is poetry whose point is not in itself. This means that authentic poetry is labour, it's work, the doing of something which has its own integrity.

This leads me on to the third thing which poetry isn't and poetry is against. Poetry is against any focus on the artist rather than the work. To focus on the artist rather than the work is to draw our attention precisely to the manipulating, controlling will that is the enemy of all really truthful utterance. And I find myself turning, not wholly accidentally, once again to W.H. Auden. Auden, as many of you will know, was already a most austere critic of his contemporaries' poetry when he was an undergraduate, and there is a fine anecdote of an early encounter with Stephen Spender, who burst into Auden's room one day to say that he intended to be a poet when he grew up. Auden said, "You mean you don't want to write poetry?"

This same emphasis comes out in a quite early letter to Mark Van Doren, written in March 1948:

I can no longer see the ultimate meaning of a man's life in terms of either "being a poet" or "being a contemplative" or even in a certain sense "being a saint," (although that is the only thing to be). It must be something much more immediate than that. I – and every other person in the world – must say "I have my own special peculiar destiny which no one else has had or ever will have. There exists for me a particular goal, a fulfilment which must be all my own – nobody else's – & it does not really identify that destiny to put it under some category — "poet," "monk," "hermit." Because my own individual destiny is a meeting, an encounter with God that He has destined for me alone. His glory in me will be to receive from me something which He can never receive from anyone else.<sup>6</sup>

There is in this, of course, some of the ambiguous individualism that shadows a good deal of early and middle Merton, but the point stands. 'Being a poet,' 'contemplative' or whatever is not what it's about, because this can direct attention once again to the will and psyche of the artist constructing a self. And there is a fundamental sense in which the will is inimical to art.

Finally then, the fourth thing that poetry isn't, and poetry is against, is any sense of the self and its awareness that indulges the notion that we have indefinite choices. Poetry is against the romanticism of a will whirling in the void.

The artist must not delude himself, [writes Merton in *Answers on Art and Freedom*], that he has an infinite capacity to choose for himself and a moral responsibility to exercise this unlimited choice, especially when it becomes absurd.

If he does this then let him take my word for it. He will find himself with the same problem and in the same quandary as those monks who have vegetated for three centuries in a moral morass of abstract voluntarism.<sup>7</sup>

The sense of indefinite choice, that the artist is someone with an infinite well of creativity that simply has to be activated in selecting what is to be uttered, focuses our attention once again on the role not the work, because work is always about finite choices. Labour is to do this rather than that and to engage in the discipline and the limits of doing this rather than that. Work, labour, involves local commitment and specificity. Work is what has to be done in this moment, here and now, by this person, in the 'encounter' Merton speaks of in the letter to Mark Van Doren.

He speaks of 'this unique instant' in terms of 'the sense of water on the skin'<sup>8</sup> a very powerful image. The poet acts, works, in that moment of contact with truth. And in another of the letters, this time to Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, written in 1948, where he was obviously thinking quite a bit about this business of role and labour, he writes:

With me, I know what the trouble is. I come upon a situation and the situation seems to require a poem. So I write a poem. But the poem turns out to be not the precise, individual poem which that specific situation had demanded from all eternity but just "a poem." A generic poem by Thomas Merton that is something like all the other poems by Thomas Merton and which he drags out of his stock to fit on every situation that comes along. That is why *Figures for an Apocalypse* is a whole string of complete misses. All I can say is that the arrows were in the general direction of some target or other but I'd be hard put to it to connect the firing with the real object that was there to be fired at.<sup>9</sup>

You'll forgive me, I hope, for quoting Auden just one more time. Auden in his prose reflections on *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, (Poetry and Truth),<sup>10</sup> speaks of the poem that presents itself and to which you have to say 'Too late, my dear' and the one that comes along to which you have to say 'Not yet.' 'Be a son of this instant,' writes Merton again in one of the texts reprinted in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, this time

one of the texts which emerge from his meditation on the Sufi mystic, Ibn Abbad, 'Be a son of this instant.'

So there are the four enemies of poetry; and a writing that avoids and resists those temptations and distortions will be, I want to suggest, religious writing. Now I hope you'll understand that as I develop these reflections, I'm using this phrase, 'religious writing,' to describe not writing about religious things but writing that is a religious activity; because what we have just been looking at, the four things that poetry isn't, provides us with one way into understanding what writing might be when it is a religious labour. A writing that resists magic and will in their various disguises is writing that will allow truth, allow God. Or to put it still more theologically it is writing that aligns my action with what is being done in my environment. This, I hope you'll see, is something totally different from passivity. Aligning one's action with what is being done in the environment is different from sitting there and saying 'let me be done things to.' It is to require from me that most demanding of all activities, the weaving in of my action with the action, the act, that is at work around me in the universe: not passivity, but an attempt, (to misuse the popular and rather horrible phrase), to be where action is. When we speak colloquially of 'being where the action is,' that's mostly the most appallingly trivial kind of aspiration we could have. Religious writing, poetry that is authentic religious writing, writing that is religious work, is very precisely an attempt to be where the action is, God's action, where this reality, me, my words, my perception, meet what is fundamental, God — the encounter spoken of in the letter to Mark Van Doren.

So that 'being a son of this instant' in the phrase Merton adapts from Ibn Abbad, 'is encountering and entering into that elusive 'there before us' quality of God's action, that active reality, or, indeed, to use the scholastic language which was not at all alien to Merton's thinking, that 'pure act' which is beyond both memory and fantasy, the active 'being' of the world now, in this moment. Religious writing is an open door to what God is doing in making and loving the universe — which of course God does in every moment. Religious writing, writing that is religious work, is part of our attunement to the doing of God, made real and concrete here in how we see and how we attend: a loving and acting, a perceiving without egotistic will, but without passive resignation.



Now it is that attunement to the 'pure act' of God that seems to me to be fundamental, in the last analysis, to all that Merton says about the activity of poetic writing. But it is precisely there that you touch the unity of what Merton has to say about poetry and what Merton has to say about contemplation. I don't think I need to labour the point too much, but in order to come around at it by another route, I'm going to step back a little and look at one or two of the things which the tradition tells us about contemplation. I'm going to look at St. John of the Cross for a moment, and particularly at a passage which grows and grows in my imagination as the years go by, in a passage in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, where St. John describes the process of contemplation, the process of growth into God's fullness, as a total restructuring of our inner life. Memory, understanding and will are transformed into hope, faith and love. "The renewed self or heart or imagination which has embarked upon the contemplative journey becomes hopeful. It becomes open to God's future. It becomes faithful; that is it becomes trustful in what it can't perceive and control. It becomes lovingly attentive to the truth. All very splendid; and the bad news is, of course, that this entails the blockage and frustration of the ways in which our human faculties habitually work, the Night of the Senses and of the Spirit; because in this process the ordinary objects of memory, understanding and will disappear. That's to say, my awareness of myself, the way I build up a picture of myself from memory, self-perception, becomes blurred. I don't know quite who I am. My understanding meets a brick wall. I don't know what I am supposed to be engaging with. And my will goes completely down the drain, because there is no way in which I can impose what I want or prefer on the situation I am in. My only way through is for memory, understanding and will to become hope, faith and love. And it strikes me that this dismantling of the imagination and its reconstructing by the gift of God in darkness is by no means distant from what Merton has to say about overcoming the false poetic consciousness, about what poetry isn't, and what it's against.

Memory can be the conscious self-indulgence of a role, the clear sense of who and what I am. I am 'a poet'— and, one of these days, I'll get around to writing some poetry. False poetic activity is about justifying what is being done, being useful, getting people to do things, to have the right ideas and do the right actions. Faith is about

justification by God and by Grace. The will can turn in on its own fantasies of being a kind of creative abyss out of which come constant, endless, infinite new things; and this will must be translated into the labour of love, attention to the instant, to what God does now.

It seems to me then that Merton probably could not have written precisely what he did about true and false poetry without, at the back of his mind, some very deep awareness of what the contemplative transformation involved. All real poets know that. Merton had read his John of the Cross, of course; and knew it better than most; so that, at the heart of what I want to say is that we will understand best the point of contact, the point of convergence between Merton on poetry and Merton on contemplation when we put side by side Merton's negative theology of poetry as expressed in the 'Message to Poets' and the negative vision of John of the Cross; both of them being about attunement to the act of God there before you in every instant, the act of God which neither memory nor fantasy, neither images of the past nor images of the future can capture; the act of God which can only be apprehended by a particular kind of costly openness, that refuses the comforts of memory and the comforts of fantasy in order to 'be' where we are.

And from that new imagination come 'New Words for God.' That bit of my title is more ambiguous than I realised it was when I suggested it. Obviously new words for God emerge from this process because, on the far side of what I have been talking about, God's act can be spoken of in and by my attunement to it, by words that make room for attention; which is why God is spoken of, and spoken for, or indeed just spoken, precisely in writing that has no explicitly religious content, because of the character of the writing as a labour of the instant. 'New words for God' then, on the far side of the negative theology, will be words that have room for the act of reality, the 'there-before-us' reality which is God's act in the present moment. And the religious writing that is, in the more obvious sense, words for God, will be precisely those words that escape the prisons, or the possible prisons, of memory and fantasy as we often use those categories.

Equally though, 'New Words for God' could be understood in a rather different sense. The poet and/or contemplative becomes herself a new word for God. In the act of challenge and suspension of the will,

of the controlling ego, the life, the concrete identity of the poet and the contemplative, becomes itself Word, becomes itself a communication. It is God acting. Merton's own interest in the Eastern Christian tradition justifies some connections to be made here between this vision of the poet and the contemplative and the deep-rooted Eastern Christian idea that the 'logos' of each item in the universe is the utterance of the Logos of God in a particular and unique way. And I think back again to the letter to Mark Van Doren...

[God's] glory in me will be to receive from me something he can never receive from anyone else because it is a gift of his to me which he has never given to anyone else and never will.<sup>12</sup>

We are to be 'new words for God' in that sense. And we are here celebrating Merton partly because of the belief, which I think most Christians share, that the lives of certain people will become, in a very particular sense, 'words for God.' This life, this identity, this face, this voice, this tonality of being, becomes a word for God to us, a word God addresses to us.

Poetry and contemplation, both identifying, sketching or pointing at what it might be for God to find words in the world, alike challenge other kinds of words for God, old words for God, safe words for God, lazy words for God, useful words for God. I taught Christian doctrine for many years and I'm not going to cut away the ladder on which I climbed; but it seems to me that Christian doctrine is there essentially in order that we may grasp how God acts in creating and transfiguring. Christian doctrine exists so that certain obstacles may be taken away to our openness to the action of God. We need Christian doctrine because we need some notion of what it is we are trying to be attuned to. Attunement to the void isn't very much use and out of that come other kinds of unspeakable language. But if doctrine doesn't make possible poetry and contemplation, then doctrine is a waste of time. It becomes purely and simply old, safe and useful. Which is where, (and this is not at all irrelevant to the matter of this conference), the poetic and contemplative touch the prophetic, because the prophetic is all about the diagnosis of dead words and false acts. And, if I may borrow a phrase that I used in another context recently, the prophetic task is to smell out death in a situation.

In conclusion: I've tried to sketch a negative theology of the poetic, and I've preferred that, as a way in, to a positive definition of

the poetic not simply because I find Merton's positive definitions of the poetic occasionally a bit disappointing, but because most people who try to find words for God are likely to be more acutely aware of what it is they mustn't do than what it is they must do or say. This doesn't mean that we privilege inarticulacy or even silence. It does mean, though, that poetic and contemplative language, the struggle to find new words for God and to understand that the nature of religious writing, of writing as religious activity, is nothing if not a deeply self-critical enterprise, a living under judgement. But that is only another way of saying that these are activities which we can't begin to grasp or get any purchase on, without the vivid and sometimes frightening sense of what they are open to. The poet and the contemplative alike live under a very broad sky — which is sometimes a night sky. The attempt to build shelters or dig holes, the attempt to draw helpful charts of the sky which will allow you to find your way around, is a seduction that is always present. Perhaps the most important thing we can do if we are at all interested in the language of poetry and contemplation is to set up warning signs on our desks and our altars and our prie-dieux; yet to know at the same time that these are not warning signs telling us that about the punishments for making a mistake, but reminders of how very easily we become prisoners of the controlling will that we love and indulge — and how very bad prison is for any of us.

### Notes and References

1. Thomas Merton, *Raids on The Unspeakable* [hereafter referred to as *Raids*] (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Burns & Oates, 1977) pp. 118-124
2. *Raids*, op.cit. pp.125-135
3. *Raids*, op.cit., p.132
4. W.H.Auden: 'August 1968', *Collected Poems*, London: Faber & Faber, 1976, p.604
5. *Raids*, op.cit., pp.122-3
6. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends* ed. Robert E. Daggy [hereafter referred to as *RTJ*], (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989) Letter to Mark van Doren, March 30 1948, p.22
7. *Raids*, op.cit., p.133
8. *Ibid.*, p.124
9. *RTJ*, op.cit., Letter to Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, Nov.18 1948, p.189
10. W.H.Auden: 'Dichtung und Wahrheit' *Collected Poems*, London: Faber & Faber, 1976
11. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* Bk.II c.vi.
12. *RTJ*, Letter to Mark van Doren, op.cit., p.22