

The Fiction of Merton

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I am grateful to Thomas Merton for writing. For writing his life. The person who emerges through text is the only Merton I have known. He is therefore in some sense a 'fictional' Merton; but not in the sense of unreal or untrue. He is, rather, a literary presence who became an occasional companion in the business of trying to live well. Over forty years after his death, we have an abundance of mementoes of Merton's life: audio and video recordings, photographs (of him or by him), calligraphies and sketches which, along with stories from his friends, all feed the imagination with impressions of the Merton we read. But he became significant to many of us simply because he wrote his life.

Every 'telling' of myself is a retelling, and the act of telling changes what can be told next time, because it is precisely, an *act*, with consequences, like other acts, in the world and speech of others. The self lives and moves in, only in, acts of telling – in the time taken to set out and articulate a memory, the time that is a kind of representation (always partial, always skewed) of the time my material and mental life has taken, the time that has brought me here. To step aside from this kind of telling and retelling, this always shifting and growing representa-

tion of the past, is in effect to abandon thinking itself or language itself.¹

The manner in which Merton wrote his life or 'told' himself, and the way in which he grappled with the ambiguities of becoming thereby a public presence, may be amongst his most significant gifts to this present age in which appearance and impression sometimes seem to matter more than life itself. The scale of this present obsession may yet prove to be our undoing, though the problem itself is not a new one.

I think everybody in the world wants people to read his autobiography or his letters or his diaries or his state papers or even his account books.

Everywhere I look people are full of their autobiographies or their own collected notes or something of the sort.... the medium the whole age seeks expression through most readily is autobiography...²

Merton wrote autobiography. Indeed, he gained celebrity by doing just that. But Merton went beyond autobiography into autobiographical theology: he didn't just write *about* his life as though the writing were merely a record of events and

thoughts which happened some time previously. He wrote his life. Writing was also living. Merton's writing styles vary greatly over the years, and writing evidently functioned in many different ways for him as for others. Above all, however, the trajectory of Merton's vocation is in the continuous (if occasionally faltering and sometimes repetitive) literary movement towards a more precise and vivid expression of the experience of being human and Christian at the convergence of particular streams of mid-twentieth century realities. Perhaps this is what the editors of *The Intimate Merton* mean when they say that, 'Writing was the religion that bound Merton over to his God. He would give birth to God in himself by writing about his need for God to be born in him.'³ Writers other than Merton may produce more potent or lucid prose – or better poetry – yet manage to reveal little of the life out of which the writings emerge. Other religious may glow more brightly in the crucible of God's calling, and God alone may know of it. But the way in which Merton lived by writing, leaving a kind of paper trail in his wake, brings his life into relationship with our own. His acts of telling and retelling, text to eye rather than voice to ear, continue to have consequences.

For readers who feel a sense of resonance with Merton, the experience can be something akin to an actual relationship, and we may speak of 'knowing Merton'. Yet he was also a 'person who nobody knows,' as Rowan Williams described him in a paradoxical tribute thirty years ago:

Truth can only be spoken by a man nobody knows, because only

in the unknown person is there no obstruction to reality; the ego of self-oriented desire and manifold qualities, seeking to dominate and organize the world, is absent. There is no-one there to know; but what is there to know is the form, the configuration of a wider reality as expressed in one place, one story. It will not be the story of an interesting and original personality, but the story of one series of responses to and reflections of the currents and structures of the world.⁴

To say there is 'no-one there to know' is not to question the reality of Thomas Merton, or the integrity and authenticity of his testimony. That would be absurd: his friends, brother monks and many others who knew the man continue to ground his written legacy in the person they have known and loved. The unknown Merton, the fictional Merton, also continues to speak from his experience into our own, in disarmingly familiar and engaging ways. He continues to engage us as though a fellow pilgrim. His words do evoke the person, but the person is not the focus or the abiding impression. The reader, rather than lingering in the shadow of a personality who appeals or words which hook into us, is prompted instead to respond to the perspectives, insights and moods which his words communicate. Merton wrote his life whilst he followed a divine voice and forged meaning out of memory and immediacy; the writing seeps into and becomes in turn part of our present lives. Something vital flows between us – between myself and this Merton, between you and me – be-

cause he lived his writing. Sometimes it is just a matter of having our feelings, longings and experiences affirmed. Other times, as we pay attention to whatever it is that happens in the wider reality of our connectedness, we find ourselves re-focused in the midst of a fragmented, distracting world by artful yet candid sentences.

Perhaps it was a mistake to let my interest in Merton evolve into the subject for a thesis, where inevitably the contemplative companionship was overshadowed by disproportionate attention to meaning in texts. Writing can sometimes get in the way of living. Those texts became for a while more static and cumbersome, rather than clues about a *way* of doing theology. I had found it easier to connect with the existential creativity of Merton the parable than to scrutinize Merton as a scholar. From certain perspectives he is persistently contradictory and notoriously averse to systematic thought; but meaning emerges to rejuvenate or guide our own attempts at living well if we can trust and engage his testimony. Time and again in Merton's writing, vocation is expressed through a yearning to live well. And living well seems to involve some understanding of the mystery of both the particularity and the universality of our shared human experience in the world and in God. For Merton, on balance, the living was the thing. The act of writing and a walk in the woods were both *life*.

Merton did seem somewhat amused and a little dismissive when he was approached by a student wishing to make him the subject of an academic thesis. And academic theologians have tended to be dismissive of Merton as theologian: 'As a theologian I have always been a pure

amateur,' he wrote in a dark mood on June 6, 1961, 'and the professionals represent an amateur making so much noise.'⁵ Merton was the first to admit he published some mediocre work, yet he teaches us to read each of his immensely varied texts as contextual, as transient sketches, always incomplete, serving to carry the writer to another place where he might some day re-work the same themes or recollections in solitude or in public. Writing as action, not product.

A few years ago I addressed a research seminar of staff and students at the college where I then worked. Having been invited to present something about Merton to a group engaged primarily with theological formation, I chose to focus on some of Merton's thinking about the meaning of education.

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 himself.⁶

There was general empathy in that mission-oriented college where authentic, spontaneous adaptability to new worlds was a skill we sought to inculcate and develop. The strength of reaction from some present surprised me, however, as I continued with Merton's assertion that such education 'means more than learning; and for such education one is awarded no degree. One graduates by rising from the dead. Learning to be oneself means, therefore, learning to die in order to live.'⁷

Merton's apparent dismissal of academic qualification and style – along with honour, recognition, status and 'success' in general – was heard by some of that college audience not only as critical but as hypocritical: he had a public voice; of course he needed no degree or academic status in order to be heard. He was greatly advantaged by circumstance, context, language and freedom from disruption.

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tion. He had time to write.... Merton's point was lost to scholars from situations where formal educational qualifications and time to write are a rare privilege, and the likelihood of being published very slim. Merton was aware of the ambiguity: writing and monasticism sometimes felt like incompatible vocations. The psychiatrist Gregory Zilboorg⁸ disturbed Merton with the suggestion that the monk was overly concerned to draw attention to himself and to a life whose virtues traditionally implied obscurity, anonymity, withdrawal from the public stage. Was this really 'learning to die in order to live'? Whether we agree with Zilboorg's

assessment depends to some extent on whether we think that an impulse to communicate, to publish, is necessarily or primarily about gaining public recognition, or indeed about narcissism. It is an assumption even more easily made in the era of *Facebook*, celebrity-saturation, and the cravings of adolescents of all ages for fame or a public profile. Can we read an author who seemingly writes so much about themselves, without some distaste?

We can if we approach Merton's words as an authentic attempt to remain focused on the essentials of living well (that is, for a Christian, to live 'in Christ'). We then meet a companion rather than an aspiring celebrity, and may in the process discover that our own 'dying to the world' requires us to withdraw from the artificiality of our own circumstances, in order to rise in Christ. Merton's choosing and his insights prompt us to consider our own choosing. And if there are tensions between our aspirations and our longing to live, these tensions may turn out to be a gift on the path of discipleship.

Merton originally caught my attention because of the way in which he lived and wrote existential, vocational tensions. At the age of nineteen I was reeling after a disturbing and transformative time in North Bihar, India, and was preparing to go up to Cambridge. Craving both solitude and a clue as to how to respond to extreme poverty and injustice, anxious like so many others about the persistent nuclear foreplay of the Cruise missile era, struggling to make connections and to find my feet and my soul, I sat with a good man – minister, activist, friend – who heard between the lines. He handed me a copy of Monica Furlong's biography of Merton.⁹ "I think you'll like this," he

said. I'd heard the name of Thomas Merton and read a few quoted excerpts, little more. Peter was right: I did like it.

Furlong's book was met with some criticism, particularly from over the Atlantic, but it was well-written and effectively drew this reader into the recorded life of Merton. The abiding impression on first reading was of a young man grappling persistently with questions of vocation, seeking his place in the world: would he opt for social commitment or contemplative solitude? How does a person make a difference in times of social upheaval or in the midst of corrosive decadence? Why do some people feel such a strong impulse to live a life that counts for something in the public arena? I found in Merton a trail of questions and preoccupations which echoed some of the distracting thoughts which hung around like mosquitoes on an otherwise balmy evening. I homed in on whatever he had written during the years when, preceding Gethsemani, his need to decide and to act intensified. I became fascinated with *My Argument with the Gestapo*,¹⁰ the only 'novel' Merton published. In the more loose and playful style of a writer still finding his literary voice, the book comprises creative impressions of a mind both hemmed in and tossed about by the world.

But if you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I am living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for. Between these two answers you can determine the identity of any per-

son. The better answer he has, the more of a person he is.¹¹

The novel – written just before he entered the monastic life, and published just after his death – remained a kind of benchmark for Merton, the product of a vital and creative episode, a time of discernment and of choosing. He would eventually evolve the voice which expressed life with precision and transparency and with a poet's art. Meanwhile, *My Argument with the Gestapo* – by no means great fiction – carried the seeds of an existential theology which could emerge more fully after the author had largely dealt with the need to lay down some sort of autobiographical framework. He returned to the novel in his final year with some affection, and rediscovered there traces of the dynamic impulse of God forging vocation out of chaos. Merton commented that he enjoyed mixing up episodes of his actual experience with pure invention in that novel-writing period. If he had continued to work in similar vein we would not 'know Merton' as we do. But Merton grew way beyond *My Argument* and *The Seven Storey Mountain*, producing writing which draws the reader into a more candid, serious, unguarded dialogue of the heart.

There are better ways of describing what I am reaching for here, and I found one in a description of the work of the late great bluesman, John Lee Hooker, who conjured with few words, fewer chords and rhythmic moans an effect not dissimilar to that which Merton could sometimes achieve in text. This description might also help put into perspective the many passages in Merton which speak of grief or pessimism or self-deprecation:

And this is his art: the art of the Healer. This is what a blues singer actually does. Behind all of the idiosyncrasies of taste and style, behind all the stagecraft and devices which any long-term performer develops, behind the songs and the riffs and the schtick and the musicianship, is the bluesman's true role: that of our confidant. The bluesman hasn't heard our personal, individual story – not unless he's a close personal friend, that is – but he should make us feel that he knows it anyway, that he has heard us and understands us. By telling his story – or a variation of his story, or several variations of his story, or even an outright embroidery of his story – John Lee Hooker enables us to face our own. In this sense, the bluesman is our confessor, our shrink; it is his job to forgive us and comfort us, shoulder our burdens as he invites us to help him shoulder his own. Against the forces of wickedness, the preacher is our leader; the general who marshals our forces; the conductor who orchestrates our instruments. But when the preacher's mantle passes to the bluesman, it is so that he can enlist us in an epic battle against despair.... If he were a doctor, he would inject us with a small, controllable dose of that despair, an inoculation to protect us from ultimately succumbing to it. And it doesn't matter who you are. I haven't lived like John Lee Hooker. Neither have you. Nor

has anyone who didn't come up in the racist apartheid South between the wars. But his pain – recollected in tranquillity as it may be, but evoked with the immediacy of a fresh bruise – sounds as if it feels like mine.... His music has, even if only temporarily, inoculated us against despair; and that triumphal, climactic boogie is where we testify that the cure, for the time being, proved successful. Once again, the Healer has done his work....¹²

The work he has done is to give language and therefore meaning to moods or feelings – his own, and by extension those captivated or comforted by empathetic tones. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo, in their introduction to *The Intimate Merton*, say that, 'Merton knew his personal dilemmas were universal' and that. 'Merton's journals encourage his readers to write themselves as large as he did into the Book of Life by acknowledging their own hearts just as they truly are.'¹³ It is a way of describing how Merton encourages in the reader a habit or appreciation of writing as a vital activity in religious life; but writing as action not indulgence, and one action amongst many which arise from attention to the essentials:

By hearing Merton's literary voice, readers are seduced into listening to that still, quiet voice within themselves, one that longs to become incarnate in some outward gesture uniquely their own.¹⁴

The still, quiet voice can indeed be seduc-

tive, and lure the unsuspecting soul into a passivity masquerading as piety. Merton's writings can be used in this seductive way (though he wouldn't thank us for it) if we ignore the agitated heart which is also his experience of God. Writing similarly can be avoidance of the need to act decisively in the messy realities of a pressured world, and Merton was often enough troubled by the thought that he had been writing his life instead of living it.¹⁵ No doubt that is sometimes what was happening. But he was also writing his life *in order to* live it, or perhaps living his life as he wrote it.

In a way each one judges himself merely by what he does. Does, not says. Yet let us not completely dismiss words. They do have meaning. They are related to action. They spring from action and they prepare for it, they clarify it, they direct it. They are not, by themselves, enough. Yet, united with action, they constitute *testimony* and therefore decision, judgment.¹⁶

Merton's attempts to express the interplay of word and act sometimes falter or reach an impasse, so he moves on – seeking different tongues, deeper silences, other religious frameworks – extending his experience and searching for language by which experience acquires meaning. And *there* is God.

Notes

1. Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* London: T.& T. Clark Ltd, 2000, p.144.

2. Journal entry, November 20, 1939, in Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton: His Life From His Journals* Oxford: Lion Publishing plc, 2000, pp.26-27.
3. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (eds.) in *The Intimate Merton*, p.10.
4. Rowan Williams, *A Person That Nobody Knows: A Paradoxical Tribute to Thomas Merton*, Cistercian Studies (Vol. 13, 1978:4), reprinted in *The Merton Journal*, Advent 2002, Vol. 9, no 2, pp.46-7.
5. *The Intimate Merton*, p.221.
6. Thomas Merton, 'Leaning to Live' in *Love and Living*, London: Sheldon Press, 1979, p.3.
7. *Love and Living*, p.5.
8. Fiona Gardner describes and assesses this episode in 'Thomas Merton and Dr. Gregory Zilboorg: Understanding the Dynamics', *The Merton Journal*, Vol. 11 no. 1 (Easter 2004), pp.6-12.
9. Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* London: Collins, 1982.
10. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* New York: Doubleday, 1969.
11. *My Argument with the Gestapo*, p.160.
12. Charles Shaar Murray, *Boogie Man: The Adventures of John Lee Hooker in the American Twentieth Century*, London: Penguin Viking, 1999, pp.9-10.
13. *The Intimate Merton*, pp.15-16.
14. *The Intimate Merton*, p.15.
15. See Journal entry for September 26, 1952 in *The Intimate Merton*, p.138.
16. Journal entry for August 16, 1961 in *The Intimate Merton*, p.230.

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