

A Flood Which Breaks the Dam: Seeking Advent reflections in Merton's private journals

Gary Hall

*'... something is building up to break the dam and this 'word' is
inscrutably different from the comforting platitudes of the Superiors.
But this sense pervades all society...'¹*

Thomas Merton, First Sunday of Advent, 1966

There are words which reveal, and words which conceal. Words can be built into structures like dam walls, monastery walls, castle walls; or words can facilitate communication, even communion. Words can protect a writer or speaker (or at least their public profile); they can also render their

writer or speaker more vulnerable. Thomas Merton was aware that his raw, candid writing in the form of private journals would eventually be available and open to judgement. On Bastille Day 1967 he refers to the Merton Room being set up at Bellarmine College in Louisville, Kentucky:

... all the business of filing and cataloguing every little slip of paper I ever wrote on! What a comedy! But I like it and cooperate wholeheartedly because I imagine it is for real. That I will last. That I will be a person studied and commented on ... This is a problem, man.²

The sheer volume of Merton's writing, his colloquial style and the unguarded nature of his 'private' work (in journals or letters) can generate an impression of intimacy between reader and author. One might say this is Merton's art, his gift to the reader. He is more than 'a person studied and commented on' but one whom many interested readers 'get to know' in more elaborate ways. How this actually happens or what this in fact means for a particular reader I hesitate to guess, and am not even considering those readers who knew Merton 'in the flesh' or read his work as and when it was first published. What I *am* considering is an interesting distinction between the kind of orderly approach to mapping and connecting the different elements of Merton's output (tracing the route from letters to essays to books, or from 'private' journals to published art, each time with reference to his reading and reported events, and so on), and the kind of reading which is more about pastiche, impressionism, and the kind of disclosure which takes place be-

tween reader and text. This distinction may be imprecise, and attentive readers may combine these and many other approaches seamlessly. If these are indeed recognizably different approaches then they will each conjure up a different understanding of what 'getting to know Merton' might mean, and (this is the important part) of what a 'complete' or 'whole' picture of Merton might be like. In other words, the different approaches carry different ideas about 'wholeness' or 'completeness' in relation to knowing Merton and, in turn, with regard to what it might mean to speak of Merton's 'wholeness'. Perhaps one approach more than the other finds great satisfaction in 'containment.' Merton in his lifetime was not readily contained.

Whilst seeking Advent reflections from the sixth volume of Merton's journals, I noticed how certain passages were striking a chord or holding my attention, how particular ideas seem to connect with others. I began to wonder whether the connections a reader might see were connections Merton intended. Sometimes he makes that plain, sometimes not. Detective work can reveal some answers. Interpretation is a sophisticated art and also a personal one. What happens between Merton and his readers may sometimes echo what happened between Merton and what he read, but we are unlikely ever to know. Words disclose and words conceal

in so many different ways.

Merton was not readily contained. His reference to the Merton Room is framed by reflections on the monastic community ('all those guys, some solid, mostly half-wits I think, who are nevertheless good, well-meaning people and honest in their way'³) to which he belonged in his own exceptional way ('always trying to wangle a special community for myself on my own terms.'). Merton had been officially resident in the hermitage since August 1965. On 23 March 1966 he went to hospital for back surgery. There, a week later, he met a student nurse with whom he fell in love. A substantial portion of this sixth volume of the published journals narrates this brief and intense relationship. The writing is sometimes moving, sometimes profound, sometimes silly and irritating. The love to which he *almost* surrendered seems to have brought Merton both joy and confusion. The journal reveals that the experience both thrilled him and threw him off balance; it caused him to question repeatedly the meaning of his vocation as solitary, as monk and as writer. An onlooker might conclude that the relationship both hurt him and healed him. It was formative. In mid-November 1966, Merton seems temporarily reconciled:

All I can do is thank God that I am in this peace, solitude, joy. The ambiguity that love has brought into it is no

cause for disturbance. Somehow in the depths of my being I know that love for her can coexist with my solitude, but everything depends on my fidelity to a vocation that there is no use trying too much to rationalize. It is *there*. It is a root fact of my existence.⁴

On the next page of the published journal, the entry for the first Sunday of Advent has a less contented tone. Merton writes of seeing no future for the monastery, and rails against 'illusory' changes which barely address a structural crisis reflected in his relationship with Abbot Dom James, who here represents 'the arrogance of nice, self-satisfied rich people who have everything and imagine they are kind and good because they are pleased with themselves.'⁵ Merton sees this personality trait projected through 'the God-image subtly imposed by Dom James', an image contrasting starkly with his intuition of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who 'reveals himself to "the people" as *their* God, God "for them".'⁶ This self-revealing God is, to Merton's mind, the God who gave the love and blesses the commitment between himself and his nurse, M. He records the intuition which confronts previously-held assumptions. Meanings crystallize, or wash away, less convincing, less authentic narrative. These 'private' journals beckon the reader into the mix

of chemistry, artistry and discernment, an echo of which some readers may in turn experience as insights that resonate and captivate. Is this how the Word breaks through and gets under our skin or into our hearts? The journal entry for 27 November 1966 concludes with a vivid depiction of the confrontation between revelatory language and self-protective language:

'The Word' (of God) is 'a flood which breaks the dam.' This from a Babylonian source, but in Spirit of O.T. [Old Testament]—and of Marxism for that matter. But basic. One senses this in our community to some extent. Uneasiness, anguish, disease, because something is building up to break the dam and this 'word' is inscrutably different from the comforting platitudes of the Superiors. But this sense pervades all society—is resisted by those who erect *their word* in to a dam and are determined to 'hold' it at any price.⁷

Merton senses a potential dam burst in the community, in society at large, and (when he recognizes his tendency to project⁸) finds the same word-building, wall-building tendency in himself:

I am stubborn
I build ten theories out of
stone

In a stone wall Eden⁹

Walls of stone or of words, walls which guard a once-imagined paradise, come to represent so much more, not least a strategic defence against the irruption of passion, of a love both simple and complex. This particular relationship between a monk and a student nurse has been relentlessly scrutinized and interpreted, not least by Merton himself. One strand only I want to highlight, because it leads towards another perspective on the flood which breaks the dam, an Advent story in strange guise. The theme of the child recurs throughout Merton's writing as a core theological motif. Nevertheless readers may find discomfiting the ways in which Merton frequently refers to and delights in children, especially girls. He is charmed by them. Here, for example, on the same published page as the Advent Sunday reflections, the previous journal entry records:

Lunch at Tommie O'Callaghan's the other day. Her sweet little girls, the utter loveliness of children. The little blonde girl in the doctor's office, so delightful in her littleness, her love of her mother and grandmother, her happiness at being loved.¹⁰

Such comments suggest that a vivid, loving, simple presence—

which in Merton's dreams or developed thought may become Sophia, Proverb, Mary, even the Christ-child—encounters him through the several girls he mentions meeting or seeing. Then on April 28 1966 Merton records having called M from the Cellarer's Office, and having been seen by several community members in the process. Despite some regret about his indiscretion, Merton concludes that 'it was once again a wonderful call. She was perfectly happy and at peace, with a blissful, childlike kind of happiness ...'¹¹ He continues to relish the moment:

There is in her a wonderful sweet little-girl quality of simplicity and openness and I suppose this is closest to being her true self. It is with this self that she told me 'I will love you always.'¹²

The 'sweet little-girl quality' is 'closest to being her true self.' Something about innocence, lack of guile, authenticity, even a recovery of paradise outside a stone-walled Eden. And, ultimately, another form of projection he would eventually recognize as an inadequate and incomplete perception of a young but adult and complex woman.¹³ In the meantime, his journal of the following week describes 'a sweet little girl happiness that completely disarms and ravishes me' and confesses that 'I just don't know what to do with my life, finding myself so

much loved, and loving so much ...'¹⁴

Following Advent Sunday, Merton reports that he has been reading William Faulkner's *The Bear* which he describes as 'a mind-changing and transforming myth that makes you stop to think about re-evaluating everything.' Merton generalizes the experience: 'All great writing like this makes you break through the futility and routine of ordinary life and see the greatness of existence, its seriousness, and the awfulness of wasting it.'¹⁵ Words which break through—as the Word of God is like a 'flood which breaks the dam.' These different yet related images of being overwhelmed, of breaking open, are to some extent typical of Merton's descriptions of epiphanic moments. The comment about Faulkner carries a clear assertion of the place of 'great writing' in the process, whereas his comments about the 'Babylonian' reference describes a divine initiative which crashes against words erected as defensive walls. The emphases differ, the experiences connect. Merton's journal reveals the extent to which he was immersed in Faulkner during late 1966 and into 1967, and a recording of his monastic conference on *The Wild Palms* captures something of the enthusiasm with which Merton attempts to convey what the novel has left with him. His 1967 essay, "'Baptism in the Forest": Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner', includes rich

and measured meditation on complex interwoven themes in *The Wild Palms*, whilst his journal—like the recorded conference—homes in on the elements of the story which first strike Merton and hold his attention: ‘...the void, the great power of evil, the alone man, the woman, their relationship, the ark—paradise—hell of snakes where the child is born...’¹⁶ Here again is a child, and here again a flood, this time ‘with all its evil,’ despite which in Faulkner’s story it seems to have ‘lifted humanity to a supreme level of stark, lonely meaning—nameless. The convict, the woman, the child is only a bundle, yet alive...’¹⁷ A new-born child is protected by a convicted man swept from a levee by the swollen Mississippi waters. Later, Merton writes:

The ironic epic journey of the tall convict on the flooded river in *The Wild Palms* is a mystical navigation ... but other important mythical elements enter into it. The flood is indeed seen as an eschatological deluge. It is not only a mystical journey for the tall convict ... but also a parable of judgment and a revelation of the meaning or un-meaning of human destiny. But the journey of the convict is a spiritual one, and its goal is a deeper sense of his own identity and his own ‘vocation.’¹⁸

This flood brings destruction, an unplanned and uncontrollable journey, an unexpected and reluctant encounter between a prisoner and the woman he rescues, whose baby he helps bring into a chaotic and threatening world. Amidst the deluge he is protecting the child within. Does his life have meaning? Does the story have meaning? Does Faulkner reveal un-meaning? Merton’s answers may not be our own. His writings interpret as they disclose an intricate, personal, studied response to Faulkner. Our reading of Merton’s reading further complicates the chemistry. Our emotional responses and circumstances have some part to play in whether or not we are fascinated, gripped, intrigued. Merton’s reflections on Faulkner’s deluge, his erratic receptivity to human love, the image of a bursting dam, frequent mention of children and childlikeness, the upsurge which delivers a new child in the midst of destruction ... are these elements of an Advent message? Another reader might notice quite different pieces in Merton’s journal of this period, and construct a different kind of Advent message.

Dams are built for containment. Does the Word of God come to us as explosively as a dam-burst, breaking apart the ways in which we have sought to contain the idea of God or a view of the world? Does the torrential activity of God deliver not only a divine child, but also a fresh innocence? Following the turbulent summer of that year, Merton

on Labour Day 1966 reflects on years when his monastic life had ‘an appearance of substance and consistency—but actually I was floating in a kind of void!’¹⁹ He concludes that he was living ‘a sort of patched up, crazy existence, a series of rather hopeless improvisations, a life of unreality in many ways.’ Five weeks previously, in a letter to Fr. John Eudes Bamberger which appears as a page in Merton’s journal, he had written:

My fall into inconsistency was nothing but the revelation of what I am. The fact that in community this could comfortably be hidden is to me the most valid argument why I should never under any circumstances get myself back into the comfort of pseudo-wholeness. I am now in several disedifying pieces.²⁰

This was not the end of the story, but what may be revealing is the extent to which it matters to us whether or not Merton remained in ‘several disedifying pieces.’ Merton himself offers other interpretations now and then. But as his thinking and reinterpretation continue, one possible reading is that he just became more at ease with being perceived as neither complete nor contained, but in pieces, cleft by the coming of the inexorable word of God.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 6*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p.163.
2. *ibid.*, p.264.
3. *ibid.*, p.264.
4. *ibid.*, p.162.
5. *ibid.*, p.164.
6. *ibid.*, p.164.
7. *ibid.*, p.165.
8. See for example the letter to Bamberger (note 20) where Merton writes: ‘Now it is entirely possible that as a result of projecting my self-hate on to the community I am refusing the humble and realistic possibilities that could come from taking some active part in the life of the community ... I am so totally loused up on the question that any decision to participate would be phoney.’
9. Thomas Merton, *In The Dark Before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*, ed. Lynn Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005), p.192.
10. *Learning to Love*, p.163.
11. *ibid.*, p.46 (my emphasis).
12. *ibid.*, p.47.
13. See for example *Learning to Love*, p.192: ‘The beautiful illusions surrounding a core of reality—in my love for M. have not really made me happy—or her either... And though the love was real, yet it was (is) full of unreality, deception and unhappiness.’
14. *Learning to Love*, p.50.
15. *ibid.*, p.165.

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16. *ibid.*, p.173. Entry for 22 December 1966.

17. *ibid.*, p.173.

18. Thomas Merton, "'Baptism in the Forest': Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner", pp.401–25 of *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays*, ed. with an introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), p.412.

19. *Learning to Love*, p.125.

20. *ibid.*, p.106.

Gary Hall is a theological educator at The Queen's Foundation, Birmingham, and will be a keynote speaker at the 2014 Oakham Conference. This is a revised version of a presentation to the Advent gathering of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland at Winchester in 2012.