

Like a mad woodpecker

Peter Ellis

Introduction

In Morgan Atkinson's film about Thomas Merton, Michael Mott tells us that 'he sat there at a manual typewriter pecking away with one or two fingers – and he must have been like a mad woodpecker.'¹ That image comically encapsulates the amazement that Merton's output evokes in us faced with the huge numbers of letters, articles bidden and unbidden, book reviews, books and journal entries that Merton produced, of which the *Road to Joy*², a collection of his letters to old and new friends, is a small part. Behind the questions 'Why was Merton writing?' and 'How so creative?' are others like 'What is writing?', 'What is an author doing?' and beyond that 'Why is writing so much less a joyous activity than the pleasure of reading?' To get ahead of things my answer to these questions will be that writing involves an absencing of oneself so as to be open to an other, and that the contrast between writing and reading is key to the strange role words play in our lives, a role that Merton was wrestling with as he bashed away at his typewriter.

A desire to meet with the reader

The *Road to Joy* letters, however, are characterised principally by their ease. Occasionally they ask for specific items or information but on the whole they just flow expansively over whoever is the recipient, with little sign of preparation. The tone is conversational and approachable. In contrast to some people's collections of letters which read as though they have been exhumed from a distant and obscure past, there is no need for a great apparatus of footnotes explaining each letter's political and social context or recalling once important but now forgotten people and events.

Instead we are brought right into a living presence, right into the sound of the typewriter. What makes reading these letters worthwhile is that we are present at a kind of conversation that comes from a deep background of care, and from a habit of writing that embodies a desire to meet with the reader.

Writing exposes a writer's personhood at a deep level, and what is exposed in these letters is a concern for honesty, for real contact, for sharing. As Merton advised a correspondent: 'Write . . . what is deepest in your own heart and what you know . . . is also deep in theirs.'³ Missing is any kind of backward glance or reminiscing, any lecturing or pushing of a point of view; and there is no repetition. The letters are open to the realisation that the other person is different, and indeed – because he has been a different person himself – that Merton sees both writer and reader are not settled beings but always having the potential to be different in the future. Though apparently so much of the passing moment these letters evidence someone trying, despite failures, to get away from the falsity of the writer self and to be truly present in his writing.

But it is also clear that Merton had a highly conflicted view of writing. In many places he explores the question of whether writing might be the death of the contemplative life. In the *Seven Storey Mountain* he writes in a well known passage that Merton the contemplative and Merton the writer cannot go on together – one must go.⁴ In an early essay he discusses how writing and the aesthetic instinct might become not a precious gift but a fatal handicap to a true relationship with God.⁵ He writes in one place: 'To put myself down on paper ... is a kind of crucifixion'⁶, and in another that 'most of the hardship [of monastic life] has come in connection with writing'⁷, and in yet another that 'the whole business [of writing] tends to corrupt the purity of one's spirit of faith. It obscures the clarity of one's view of God and of divine things. It vitiates one's sense of spiritual reality.'⁸ What he says in the *Road to Joy* collection about his letter writing is uncompromising: 'putting out the most abominable trash'⁹, 'the ineptitude of my own writing – rambling and redundant'¹⁰, 'trying to answer the usual flood of requests to write every possible kind of triviality'¹¹, 'letters from nun crazies and laypeople crazies ... I am the father of all crazies'¹², 'so snowed under with mail requiring that last stupid answer'¹³. Despite this the tap tap tapping went on.

When what is the often disappointing product for the writer starts from its unloved beginning out on the road to the reader, the unloved words become loved words that bless people's lives, and in the case of the

letters gathered by the editors in *Road to Joy*, bring people together in a shared communion. This is one of the great paradoxes of the written word: that it is painful to write but it is a deep joy to read. 'Easy reading', someone said to Dr Johnson – 'Damned hard writing', he replied. Reading confers a blessing – as anyone with a lonely childhood will confirm. In childhood reading is for many associated with the cusp of bedtime, something that softens the passage from being awake to the fearful loss of self in sleep – so reading becomes a half way place, a waking dream. A person reading is someone abstracted from life, at peace, no longer the mobile dispersed person of everyday but instead a concentrated receptor.

Writing leads to self criticism while reading leads to self-realization. The contrast between the author and reader, the one condemned to isolation, subject to anxieties, to a sense of not having said what they wanted to say, the other basking in the joy of reading and belonging freely to a community of fellow readers, is the paradox of words. On the one side the writer grapples with disenchantment, and on the other side the reader gets near to a sense of being enchanted.

Where are reader and writer closest but in the writing and receiving of a letter? The word for letter writing is correspondence meaning the exchange of letters, tweets or emails; but there is also a deeper correspondence of two people brought together by two separate acts – the writing and the reading – joined by the words on the page or screen. Later readers then join this correspondence and experience that strange frisson of being privileged to look in from the outside at straightforward communication between two people. Voyeurism is perhaps not the right word for this complex feeling because reading the *Road to Joy* letters is an uncomplicated pleasure as though we are catching someone off guard in their truest self – but in voyeurism the drawing back from actually relating derives from an underlying yearning for simple communication in a world where communication is often so difficult. It is an answer to the question 'How to get on with people?', and carries with it the voyeur's sad knowledge that it is, of course, an illusion to think that you can learn this from a book.

It seems so much easier to get on with people when just written words are involved. There people are better known to each other than face to face where they can be, and often are, strangers to each other. The face we see sometimes stops us from hearing what is being said. To truly listen to and to hear someone we need to disregard all surface appearances. That might be the attraction of the theatre or cinema – to sit

in the dark and uncomplicatedly be caught up in other people. Maybe this is why ever more complex ways of communicating are developed. In a letter, an email or a book people know each other more intimately. Grief, pity, sorrow, joy, desire can be felt to a different degree alone than when actually with another person. It is writing that allows us to do this – whilst our everyday existences involve us in confusion and misunderstanding.

Perhaps we should be delighted to see people with their heads buried in their iphones and blackberrys. Someone engrossed in reading and smiling at a tweet is as much caught up in the enchantment of reading as with a classic text. The French philosopher Michel Serres sees these new forms of communication as bringing into being new message-bearers like those in the ancient myths and asks: 'Are these the signs of a new legend of angels, these interchanges and annunciations, networks and visitations ... all part of the search for mercy and redemption?'¹⁴ The place where, in Wim Wender's film *Wings of Desire*, the angels seem most at home is in a library. and it is often possible for library readers to indeed sense the shadow of a guardian angel. People are perhaps closest to who they really are when reading, and from the Creator and his angels' point of view perhaps at their most likeable.

Being human through the letter form

Over the years at Gethsemani Merton tried to address these conundrums of writing, reading and other people. His letters show someone trying to go further in being human through the letter form. A letter lies between face to face communication and author-reader communication. It has the intimacy of I and You with the space to think that reading gives. Merton's intention was not to 'communicate' with other people or to achieve some goal. He was well aware that we will still get it wrong with other people – just as we get ourselves wrong. In a 1952 letter he writes about 'the betrayal of our deep self that sometimes takes place in our effort to communicate with others exteriorly.'¹⁵ His whole critique of modernity, war and peace, advertising, pointless consumption, and political psychopathology shows that he understands that well. Doublespeak writing and the misuse of words is the great paradigm of that betrayal. Perhaps he saw that personal communication in a letter or in the publication of deeply personal journal entries was the correct scale for writing, and that grand political statements addressed to millions inevitably block understanding.

What can be gleaned from Merton's writings, and especially from

Road to Joy, about his sense of what he was up to, and, more widely, what he thought creativity was? How did Merton write what was 'deepest in his heart'? Where did 'the ring and bite of a certain ironic clarity'¹⁶ come from? In a letter to Bob Lax he wrote: 'When I talk about writing, all I want to write is what I just wrote now about Christ.' He was referring to a preceding paragraph where he had said about life at Gethsemani: 'a lot of my brothers are really saints, and it makes you really happy to see them walking around full of God. All the joy in this house is Christ.'¹⁷ This suggests a writer wanting to be as one taking dictation rather than as an author, to look at the last paragraph and wonder where it came from. He develops this sense of the author as a conduit in the preface to the Japanese edition of the *Seven Storey Mountain* where he writes that 'it is not as an author that I would speak to you ... I seek to speak to you, in some way, as your own self. Who can tell what this may mean? I myself do not know. But if you listen, things will be said that are perhaps not written in this book. And this will be due not to me, but to One who lives and speaks in both!'¹⁸ And in the preface to the Japanese edition of *Thoughts in Solitude* he explains that he wants to produce pages 'concerned with a spiritual climate, an atmosphere, a landscape of the mind, a level of consciousness: the peace, the silence of loneliness in which the Hearer listens, and the Hearing is No-hearing.'¹⁹

A letter to Mark van Doren in the *Road to Joy* gives an answer to the question about his productivity. Merton writes that he sees the individual's relationship with God as being to fulfil a 'special, peculiar destiny which no one else ever has had or ever will.' Once his destiny is established, Merton continues, 'the possibilities are without end. Unlimited fruitfulness, life, productivity', although he qualifies this by saying, 'I don't think it will be merely writing.'²⁰

In an essay on Roland Barthes' book of literary criticism *Writing Degree Zero*, Merton is sympathetic to the debunking of myths that made Barthes such a key figure of the 1960s.²¹ Barthes' argument is that intentionality in art – the desire to communicate, to sway people, to flag wave, to be a realist, a symbolist or an engaged writer – should go if it gets in the way of the pure and simple gesture of writing, leaving the famous 'writing degree zero'. Barthes is not writing about the 'death of the author' but about writing as a gesture, a necessity, a gift; and of the written word as something drawn from the writer. Most importantly the person who writes is not a magically different person and writing is not a mystical category. Instead all cultural projections of great artists, iconic figures and grand traditions should be dismissed to be replaced by the

ordinary everyday act of writing.

This connects with the argument of another French literary critic, Maurice Blanchot, about what is really going on in art and writing. Blanchot argued that the writer needs to become other, not another, but a 'nobody, an empty animated space' where thoughts and words come alive.²² This sounds like a description of contemplation – something that Merton avoided describing but that, perhaps, his journals, letters and books, are all expressing. Opening yourself to nothing to become nothing, becoming nothing to open yourself to nothing. Of course contemplation is silence but then again so is writing (apart from the tap tap) and so is reading, and so – if it is seen as being rather than a productive activity – is thinking. Looking at the silence that lies behind words, the idea can be taken that little bit further. What are all Merton's books on the shelves, and those of so many others, but an answer to the call of contemplation which could be described as prayers in which we can share?

This simple embodiment of the writer as meditator and of words as vivified by an other fits with religious, and especially Christian, writing. The way that writing is viewed as being divided into a spectrum from high writing at the top – poetry and works of the imagination – to everyday writing – shopping lists etc – at the bottom, goes against the Bible both in the Hebrew scriptures and in the gospels. In his gospel, John's interpretation of the incarnation as the 'word made flesh' is a radical subversion of the more expected 'word made thought'. St Augustine pointed out how revolutionary Christian writing was, for it allows ordinary language to express the sublime, and sublime language to express the ordinary.²³ This differs from earlier Platonic thought which sees a distinct ladder of expressive significance leading from the profane to the sacred. This struggle between Greek and Judaeo-Christian thought is a constant of Christian discourse. Is God really here or actually in some higher different place? One example is *The Cloud of Unknowing* which urges us to turn away from the flesh, from our embodiedness, and sees language as an enemy, something where our 'blabbing fleshly tongues' drag us away from God and pure contemplation.²⁴ But the *Cloud of Unknowing* is one of the first and greatest example of using vernacular language, its author deliberately choosing the spoken English of his time rather than the purity and elitism of written Latin.

Speaking of God in ordinary words

The special nature of Christian writing was theorised by the Jewish writer Erich Auerbach in the last century as the humble sublime.²⁵

Merton is one of our greatest modern examples of a fearlessness about speaking of God in ordinary words. He knew this early on as is shown in *My Argument with the Gestapo* where the author persona writes that his books would be 'all about God in a new witty and pertinent way, face first through the muck of the reeky civilization we got ourselves stuck with, and out of the other side with double-talk in my hair like a swimmer free of the weeds!' ²⁶

It is our 'blabbing fleshly tongues' that define our relationship with God. In an essay on Pasternak Merton writes that the poet and language come together (as the word of God and human nature, Divinity and Sophia), and through inspiration the 'poet utters the voice of that wonderful and mysterious world of God-manhood – it is the transfigured, spiritualized, and divinized cosmos that speaks through him, and through him utters its praise of the Creator.'²⁷ Perhaps something similar is happening in every piece of writing from the grandeur of poetry to the mundanity of letters, tweets and emails. In all the millions of communications every day, in all their mimicry of how things should sound, all their inauthenticity and all their capacity to mislead, words can still be seen floating free of their authors and readers.

Merton's creativity perhaps came from a sense that his destiny was to be a writer, though the task often annoyed him; and that therefore in writing he laid himself open to being written. This absenting of the self is akin to contemplation, and the product of writing takes the form of prayer in the sense of a correspondence with the God who has destined him to type the words that fly out of the mad woodpecker. In Isaiah God addresses us and tells us that his word will leave his mouth and come down to water the earth like rain 'bringing forth life and giving growth, bread to eat and seed to sow' ²⁸, only returning to him when it has achieved the task he has given it. And then at the beginning of the gospels God's word is encountered again not just giving us life but being life incarnated.

Conclusion

Where the word is so central in life then the writer surely has the greatest cause for anxiety and the reader the greatest cause for joy – which is indeed precisely the case. Merton knew the presence of God in writing as in all that he was doing. In a journal entry in 1949 he writes that writing 'helps me to pray because, when I pause at my work, I find that the mirror inside me is surprisingly clean and deep and serene and God shines there and is immediately found, without hunting, as if He had

come close to me while I was writing and I had not observed His coming.’²⁹ Writing is in the end the conferral of a blessing and the written words are stepping stones between ourselves as well as between us and God. So rather than Merton’s typewriter producing words that are to be studied objectively, his writing enables us to respond to words that act on us, that live on after the event, and that carry meanings that Merton found, after many difficulties, he was inescapably called upon to be open to and to express.

Notes

1. *Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton* (2007).
2. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy* (London: Collins, 1990).
3. *The Road to Joy*, p. 336 – Letter to John O’Keefe – Nov 4th, 1965.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Signet Books, 1952), p. 491.
5. W. Shannon, C. Bochen, and P. O’Connell, *The Merton Encyclopaedia* (New York: Orbis, 2002), p. 360.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1953), p. 228 – Journal entry for Sept 1st, 1949.
7. Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. T. McDonnell (New York, Doubleday, 1974), p. 16. This quote comes from Merton’s own preface to this selection of his works, originally published in 1962. The work was subsequently revised by McDonnell to include later works.
8. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity*, ed. Bro. Patrick Hart (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace, 1993), p. 89 – Letter to Dom Jean Leclercq – Aug 11th, 1955.
9. *The Road to Joy*, p. 238 – Letter to Sister Therese Lentfoehr, S.D.S. – May 10th, 1961.
10. *The Road to Joy*, p. 201 – Letter to Sister Therese Lentfoehr, S.D.S. – May 6th, 1950.
11. *The Road to Joy*, p. 263 – Letter to Sister Therese Lentfoehr, S.D.S. – Aug 20th, 1968.
12. *The Road to Joy*, p. 286 – Letter to Edward Rice – Aug 3rd, 1964.
13. *The Road to Joy*, p. 355 – Letter to John Wu Jr. – Jun 9th, 1967.
14. Michel Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth*, trans F. Cowper, ed. P. Hurd (Paris and New York: Flammarion, 1995), text inside cover.
15. *The School of Charity*, p. 32 – Letter to Dom Jean-Baptiste Porion, O. Cart. – Feb 9th, 1952.
16. *The Road to Joy*, p. 339 – Letter to Mery-Lu Sananes & Jaime Lopez-Sanz – Mar 7th, 1966.
17. *The Road to Joy*, p. 166 – Letter to Robert Lax – Nov 21st, 1942.
18. Thomas Merton, *Reflections on my Work*, ed. R. Daggy (London: Collins, 1989), p. 76.

19. *Reflections on my Work*, pp. 125-6.
20. *The Road to Joy*, p. 22 – Letter to Mark van Doren – Mar 30th, 1948.
21. Thomas Merton, ‘Roland Barthes – writing as temperature’, in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Bro. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1985), pp. 140-6.
22. Maurice Blanchot, *The Siren’s Song: Selected Essays*, ed. G. Josipovici (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p. 9.
23. see Ronald F. Thiemann, *The Humble Sublime: Secularity and the Politics of Belief* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), pp. 10-11.
24. A. C. Spearing, Introduction to *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), pp. xxvii-xxviii.
25. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
26. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* (New York, New Directions, 1975) p. 188.
27. Thomas Merton, ‘The Pasternak affair’, in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, p. 49.
28. Isaiah 55:6-11.
29. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence, Becoming a Monk and a Writer*, ed. J. Montaldo (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1997), p. 338.

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Robert Lax 30th Nov 1915 - 26th Sep 2000

This year also marks the centenary of the birth of the poet Robert Lax, Merton’s lifelong friend from their days at Columbia University. Like Merton, Lax sought more and more solitude throughout his life, eventually living in seclusion on the island of Patmos. Apart from a few meetings at Gethsemani, their later friendship was sustained through correspondence. Their letters are characterised by their humour and wisdom.

And in the beginning was love. Love made a sphere: all things grew within it; the sphere then encompassed beginnings and endings, beginning and end. Love had a compass whose whirling dance traced out a sphere of love in the void: in the center thereof rose a fountain.

from Lax - *Love had a Compass* (1996)