

Infinity in a Grain of Salt

by Gary Hall

Margaret Tuckerman's letter (The Merton Journal, Easter 2000) - in response to Michael Woodward's article in the previous edition of the Journal - focused in on the notion of "linearity" or (as Margaret put it), "the 'straight way' which all must traverse if they seek to pray contemplatively." I'd like to take up the invitation to join the discussion.

My own reading of Merton is inevitable filtered through the dusty lens of personal experience, whose only certain linear development is that today follows yesterday and tomorrow I wake up a day older. Even that apparent fact blurs as I recall a late adolescent era when religious zeal was enriched with mystical moments which now seem but a vague memory. I'm more inclined these days to echo the words of blessed Bob Dylan: "I was so much older then; I'm younger than that now..."

Perhaps I've just stopped trying so hard. Personally, that feels like growth and development. Your story, being unique, is no doubt different, but I want to set in context my unease with the troublesome notion of linear development in the spiritual life, a pervasive theme allied latterly to the Modernist impulse for Progress and a correlative quest for self-improvement. Fine goals, to be sure - and arguably more edifying (if less accurate) than the current diet of Post-modern soup. The question remains as to whether, in personal or social experience, the straight line is an adequate or helpful metaphor.

Margaret was responding to the interpretation of a specific text of Merton's. It may be that I am spinning off at a tangent, but want to consider how, as fellow pilgrims, we receive what Merton wrote - what was true for him - as reference for our own spiritual movement. That the notion of progression runs through Merton's general testimony and the text in question (Contemplative Prayer, DLT, 1973) is unequivocal. Ann Hunsaker Hawkins, in her excellent study on autobiographical theology, offers an angle on this:

The attitude that the spiritual life is one of continual conversion and ongoing change is characteristic of Merton at all stages of his writing. It achieves formal expression in the notion of epektasis which Merton appropriated from Gregory of Nyssa" (1)

This principle of epektasis, according to Hawkins, "embraces linear, developmental movement, but... locates this kind of change, which is by nature unending, within the context of an Absolute that does not change" (p.123). That "the Absolute does not change" is an article of faith, a choice, a grounding decision which arises from within our experience. If this was indeed Merton's belief (and why do we still assume changelessness a necessary divine attribute?), then his conception of "the Absolute" did change radically during his monastic years: We find him, for example, on the eve of his fiftieth birthday railing against "those who think that God is a mental object and that to 'love God alone' is to exclude all other objects and to concentrate on this one!"

Is Merton chastising his younger self? Here is evidence of a kind of development which, whilst anchored in a fundamental assurance of God as God, dares to re-assess the very notion of an "objective" God (whatever that may mean).

If Merton's fundamental interpretation of Reality can shift so radically, then we might anticipate shift and change in his understanding of the way into contemplation, the way of entering into or encountering that Reality. (2) So even if we arrive at some conclusive interpretation of the text in question, we can find Merton saying something different - perhaps contradictory - elsewhere in the corpus. His writing is characterised by continual revision, refining, honing - a process echoing and symbolising something of the inner journey itself. Merton's legacy - a story of the spiralling

interplay of re-membered experience, re-discovered language, insight, and integration of the fragments - testifies to a God who calls forth and graces us with the understanding we need in order to move on from moments of impasse, to “break on through to the other side” as Jim Morrison would put it. Only there is no “other side”; simply another standpoint, one of an infinite number.

This new standpoint may be experienced as clearer intuition of what was previously seen, “through a glass, darkly”, or it may come as a shock which overturns what we thought we once knew. The model which describes the coming of such a “revelation” may involve linear, progressive attention, or may equally be ebb and flow, or free-form, or explosive. One interpretation may “work” better than another, to the extent that it “makes sense” of the psychic experience, which consequently becomes part of our Reality. What seems important is that we cling not too tightly to any one pre-determined model of meaning, but dare to loosen the grip of our retentive minds and allow God to carry us into the Present, one way or another.

When a thought is done with, let go of it. When something has been written, publish it, and go on to something else. You may say the same thing again, some day, on a deeper level... All that matters is that the old be recovered on a new plane and be, itself, a new reality. This too, gets away from you. So let it get away. In other words, I have tried to learn in my writing a monastic lesson I could probably not have learned otherwise: to let go of my idea of myself, to take myself with more than one grain of salt. (3)

Merton makes clear the functional nature of writing in his spiritual practice. We need to read it that way: The texts are like cairns along the way; discarded, even, as a snake discards its old skin. “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here...”

From the reader’s perspective we might conclude that Merton’s vocation, his life project, was a (linguistic) framing of experience, a dialectic of inner and outer discourse. Indeed, those of us who never knew the man can encounter only his narrative fiction, his “written version or interpretation of the self constructed by memory gathering together or ‘recollecting’ the disparate elements of experience.” (4) And that fictive, creative process involved a choice of interpretative schema. Merton’s pivotal choice was to embrace the rich heritage of Catholic language and symbolism, with its varied and detailed accounts of the “straight way” ratified by tradition. This in turn gave shape to and contained the form of his autobiographical self. But the wine skins of archaic form cannot always contain the fullness of new reality, of vital experience: The language explodes and both are lost.

Merton’s spiritual maturing can be read in terms of the erosion or critical breakdown of structured patterns of language and meaning, and a continual, necessary restructuring of the same. (5) The very notion of a “straight way” falls into a particular meaning-scheme, describing one interpretation of our growth in relation to Divinity, It implies perfectibility, movement through degrees of holiness, and has sound scriptural foundation. (As a Wesleyan I am particularly bound to take seriously this model). The attraction of the “straight way” and of growing in (pre-defined) holiness is that it gives us a sense of “getting somewhere”. But where? The next storey of the mountain? Perhaps there is another mountain - or valley, or ocean, or cosmos - and another map, equally valid, equally Christian: “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.” (6)

Merton’s appeal is to those who seek clues about life, about responding to “the more of reality” (7). The essence of what Merton sought was not in ideas, but in life. The descriptions and metaphors matter in so far as “Wrong ideas may prevent love from growing and maturing in our lives. Once we love, our love can change our thinking. But wrong thinking can inhibit love.” (8)

Merton himself experienced more than once the liberating impact of new insight and of a linguistic, symbolic world which gave meaning to experience, taking him beyond an impasse, beyond the fault line which separated the old world from the new. On the other hand, his most direct attempt to

systematise an understanding of the contemplative path - in *The Ascent to Truth* - coincided with a bleak, depressed era. Letting go of that book, whose very title evokes linear progression towards an objective goal, symbolised his emergence from that linear-speculative framework towards a more richly existential - even absurdist - theology (9).

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In his published tribute, Daniel Berrigan wrote of how Merton reminded him of a Vietnamese Buddhist monk sitting in protest before an oncoming tank: “The impasse comes to this,” he writes: The monk is more ready to die than the tank is to kill. And that is the rub indeed, for the tank is built to kill, only to kill. But the monk is not ‘built’ at all. If he is ‘for’ anything, if he serves any purpose, if he has any goal in life, it quite surpasses the understanding of the tank.... Indeed, the monk would also rub his skull in bewilderment at talk of ‘goals’, ‘efficiency’. For he serves no purpose, he has no goals, he is not ‘for’ anything. If he were to put the matter into words (and that also is unlikely), the monk might say something like this: He is called to be a pure and truthful expression of life itself. Of life. To be. (10)

Merton seems to concur with this view when, in June 1965, he concludes that “‘being anything’ is a distraction. It is enough to be, in an ordinary human mode, with one’s hunger and sleep, one’s cold and warmth, rising and going to bed.... There is no need to make an assertion of my life... I must learn gradually to forget program and artifice....”

It is enough to be, to forget program and artifice, the symbolic structuring of being. Merton, of course, did put the whole matter into words - unlike Berrigan’s Vietnamese monk - and that is the reason many of us know Merton at all. His words mediate an experience of God resonating in a particular life, offered to us as paradigm of Christian living. The map of his journey (along with all the rough sketches along the way) are offered to those who choose to set out along similar paths. The evolving narrative may resonate with our own, a theological language by which we name our own experience. (11)

In Thomas Merton’s *Dark Path*, William Shannon writes that Merton offers an understanding of contemplative prayer as “a way of life which may perhaps help you to see that most of the problems you wrestle with are pseudo-problems.... It offers a sense of the authentically Real to a human existence that otherwise would be lived only on the level of the artificial” (12) We whisper with caution any reference to ‘authentic Reality’, for the linguistic philosophers might tell us that ‘reality’ is nothing more than conformity to established genres and expectations. (13) But in T. S. Eliot’s sense of reality, of that which human kind cannot bear very much, the shift from artificiality to reality is less about straight paths, more about waking up, learning to bear the beams of Love. Until, in God’s good time, “One graduates by rising from the dead.” (14)

Notes for Enthusiasts

1 Ann Hunsaker Hawkins, *Archetypes of Conversion: The Autobiographies of Augustine, Bunyan and Merton*. London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1985, p. 118

2 Worth referring at this point to the Preface to *New Seeds of Contemplation*, where Merton writes that “the worst disadvantage of the word [contemplation] is that it sounds like ‘something’, an objective quality, a spiritual commodity that one can procure, something that it is good to have; something which, when possessed, liberates one from problems and from unhappiness. Among all the million other projects suggested to us in our lifetime: to become contemplatives.”

3 Author’s Preface to *A Thomas Merton Reader*, pp. 16ff.

To have to hold / is all the rage / turn a new page / let go let go
(Daniel Berrigan, *A Buddhist Chants His Epitaph*)

4 T.R. Wright, *Theology and Literature*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988, p. 93.

Wright goes on to quote Roland Barthes on the fictiveness of his own autobiography: “I do not say ‘I am going to describe myself’, but ‘I am writing a text and I call it R.B.’.... I myself am my own symbol”.

5 One of the best studies on this process, I would suggest, is the incisive work of Brazilian theologian and pedagogue, Rubem Alves’: *Protestantism and Repression*, SCM Press, 1985

6 Merton, *Eighteen Poems*.

7 This is Jon Sobrino’s term. See his *Spirituality of Liberation: Towards Political Holiness*. English trans. New York: Orbis, 1988, especially Chapter 1.

8 Merton, *Love and Living*. London: Sheldon Press, 1979, p. 36

9 A note for the serious enthusiasts:

George Steiner (*On Difficulty and other essays*, Oxford: OUP, 1972), considering the “crucial reciprocity between outer and inner discourse, between the inter-personal and the intra-personal dimensions in the linguistic whole” could set this conversation in another direction as we delve into what Merton was doing and experiencing as a writer-contemplative. If, as Steiner proposes, this reciprocity is crucial, then ‘a change of relative weight is one that would affect the personality of the individual and his stance in the world.’ Elsewhere in the essay he writes that ‘one might almost define the decline of a classic value-structure... as being a shift from an internalised to a voiced convention of personality and utterance. Whether it is this shift, rather than any political-economic crisis, that underlies the widely-debated but little understood phenomena of anomie, of alienation, of anarchy of feeling and gesture in the current situation, is a question worth raising.’ Indeed.

10 *From Portraits - Of Those I Love*. New York: Crossroad, 1982. Also in *Poetry, Drama, Prose*, ed. Michael True. New York: Orbis, 1988, 89-94.

11 The “emphasis on Merton’s person as the prime vehicle of his ikonic vocation leads us directly to the recently-developed genre of theological exploration which goes under such names as ‘parabolic’ or ‘intermediary’ theology. For the purposes of this genre, biography and autobiography have been seen as sources for a theology which is immediate, concrete and sacramental....” (Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian*, Edwin Mellen Press, 1985, 29f.)

12 *Thomas Merton’s Dark Path*, New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1981, rev. ed. 1987 pp. 14f.

13 See Don Cupitt, *The Time Being*. London: SCM, 1992, p.8

14 *Love and Living*, p.5. Everything I write may be wrong.

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