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Prophecy and Contemplation

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Thomas Merton, although a monk, remained a guilty bystander, distraught by the anxieties and sufferings of the world, incensed by oppression and injustice, outraged by racism, nuclear violence, imperialism, and the mad zeal that brings the world close to extinction. As a young man drawn to the work of Dorothy Day and Catherine de Hueck Doherty, serving the poor of inner city New York, and later as a monk impressed by the civil rights heroism of John Howard Griffin, Merton increasingly saw the role of the monk as in part prophetic, defined by its empathetic marginality and heightened compassion. The monk is called to *engagement*.

As the monk-archbishop Rembert G. Weakland observes:

Perhaps the most attractive aspect of Merton's concept of monastic renewal was his interpretation of the *fuga mundi* (the flight from the world) not as a selfish and individualistic withdrawal from the trials and troubles of the world around him but as a "monastic distancing" of himself to help bring about positive change in contemporary society. His criticisms of the United States and the culture of his day are acerbic and in the spirit of the prophets of old. He felt free, through his monastic vocation and the detachment from worldly life it offered, to make such judgements.¹

And make judgements he did—freely, often, and with mounting energy and relentlessness. But if his grounding as a Christian monastic emboldened him, and if his reading of the Hebrew

prophets inspired him, there was one figure of heterodox genius that defined him.

More than any other single individual, William Blake, the visual artist, poet, visionary and prophetic figure who conceived of the mystical in new and exotic ways and who called into question the narrow constraints of reason and logic, shaped Merton's thinking and his poetry throughout his life. Blake's presence in Merton's poetry and poetics can be traced from the very beginning with *Early Poems* culminating with his grand mythdream *The Geography of Lograire* published posthumously and more a fragment than a finished work. But Blake's abiding, perduring and instrumental role in defining Merton's thought and religious sensibility is not limited to his literary influence *per se*. Merton's mentor—and he was his mentor—became, by a means of creative and inventive appropriation, *the* model of the poet as prophet and contemplative/mystic.

Like Blake, Merton repudiated the comfortable rationalism of his time, the easy manipulation of truth to serve private ends, the natural atheism that denied the divinity of creation and reflected science's contempt for prophecy. The vocation of the prophet was for Merton inextricably linked with his Blakean conception of the poet as a silent-speaking visionary. The genuine prophet rejects the impurity of language and of spirit in which words, deliberately reduced to unintelligibility, appeal mindlessly to the vulnerable will. Let us parody and deride this magic with other variants of the unintelligible, if we want to. But it is better to prophesy than to deride. To prophesy is not to predict, but to seize upon reality in its moment of highest expectation and tension toward the new.²

The poet/prophet is called to "seize upon reality in its moment of highest expectation" in the way Blake seized upon eternity:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour. ("Auguries of Innocence")

To prophesy is not to calculate; it is to perceive. It is to see with the

eye of the imagination, the spiritual and not the corporeal eye, as Blake put it. To see in this way one must love what one sees, for all that exists in the human imagination and everything that lives is holy. The poet/monk/dervish is called to dance in the water of life, called to proclaim the holiness of matter.

In "Prologo," a 1965 prose poem dedicated to Venezuelan poet Ludovico Silva, Merton speaks with vicious irony about the poets who are condemned to life, who "have been chosen inexorably by the injustice which is called life and which refuses to obey the laws which must align all equal and alike in the rich experience of finality which is death."³

The poet is a witness to life in the valley of death and must as a consequence evade society's efforts to neutralize him, to demand that he speak with brio and optimism when he knows that the words he must speak are a sign of contradiction:

[The] cross is the exclamation that nobody understands, and it is also the prototype of torture as "speech." But Christ said nothing, except ritual words and quotations that were pure and full of silence. They had no political implications, they defined nothing, they uttered no program. They abolished all programs: *consummatum est*.⁴

The poet must be political without being political, a herald of the Kingdom of Life in the very midst of the Kingdom of Death, while all the others in society, as Merton notes in "Prologo,"

are embalmed in the vast whispering perfumed cybernetic silence of the millennium of death (Death the millionaire, Death the dictator, Death the engineer).⁵

The poet must remain ever vigilant, careful never to be seduced by the social identity, the social construct, of the "artist." As Merton writes in his 1965 essay "Answers on Art and Freedom," the artist has:

whether he likes it or not, inherited the combined functions of hermit, pilgrim, prophet, priest, shaman, sorcerer, soothsayer, alchemist and bonze. How can such a man be free?

How can he really “find himself” if he plays a role that society has predetermined for him? The freedom of the artist is to be sought precisely in the choice of his *work* and not in the choice of the role as “artist” which society asks him to play, for reasons that will always remain very mysterious.⁶

One could just as easily substitute “monk” for “artist” in this essay to get a good reading on Merton’s adamant refusal to be reduced to a label—a marketable commodity, known, predictable, and reliable. Such is the dulling of prophecy. By contrast, Merton called on poets and all monks, marginal figures who dwell in Blake’s “Realms of day,” to “dance in the clarity of perfect contradiction.” In his poetic essay “Atlas and the Fatman,” first published in *The Behavior of Titans* (1961) and reprinted in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, he recalls Blake’s discovery that one can see “Heaven in a Wild Flower”:

Every plant that stands in the light of the sun is a saint and an outlaw. Every tree that brings forth blossoms without the command of man is powerful in the sight of God. Every star that man has not counted is a world of sanity and perfection. Every blade of grass is an angel singing in a shower of glory.⁷

It is to remind humankind that “every blade of grass is an angel” and that the spirit-enslaving technocracies of the world conspire against human liberty, that Merton’s understanding of the role of the poet acquires a pronounced political, even if antipolitical, tone.

In a scintillating correspondence with the Nobel Prize Laureate in Poetry, fellow savant, poet and marginal man, Czeslaw Milosz, Merton came to realize the high importance of resistance, of a countercultural critique that went beyond romantic posturing, of the moral demands attendant upon seeing beyond the superficialities and monstrous ideologies that blind us to the raw beauty of truth. Milosz saw Merton as an indispensable guide for those who would break away from the constraints of orthodox thinking—in politics, literature, and philosophy as well as in religion:

It seems to me that your role in America is determined

by the following factors: a) a nostalgia to get out of the “rat’s race,” a sort of revolt against values accepted by a commercial civilization, the proof of which are beatniks, Buddhism, Zen etc.; b) intellectual and moral weakness of American Christian churches; c) chaos in the world of literary and artistic values.⁸

Although Milosz considered himself an outsider with no right to instruct the church on how to behave, he did share a common spiritual and intellectual heritage with Merton, saw the prophetic possibilities in monasticism, and remained, strangely and quixotically, a fervent Thomist, committed to Being, an essentialist, and like all serious philosophers and poets a servant of the one verb that really, substantively matters: to be.

Merton knew in his bones that the prophetic witness of the monk could not be confined to the monastic enclosure, that although initially the life of a monk necessitates not only a withdrawal from the world but a concomitant spurning of the world’s claim on his sympathies, such a world-hating attitude could easily lead the monk to see the contemplative calling as the most exalted of human endeavours with its very clear and righteous repudiation of the allurements of all that flesh can offer. In that way, though, the multifold richness of the monastic charism would be diminished rather than expanded.

Still, a monk is more than a prophet or, rather, the monk is a kind, a *typos*, of prophet, one whose special insight, moral clarity, and urgency of expression are forged in contemplation. In Merton that fusion of the prophetic and the contemplative was brilliant and volatile, a fecund commingling that resulted in scores of books, articles, and letters. But it is important to note that Merton’s understanding of what it means to be contemplative and what it means to be a contemplative would evolve over his quarter-century as a monk of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, Kentucky.

Although in his early life as a monastic Merton embraced a narrow understanding of the monk’s vocation, it never had a complete hold on him. Eventually, after years of meditation and spiritual

growth, he came to see the contemplative life as a *dependence* on God, a dependence organized in such a way that God is both the nexus and the guiding spirit of the individual's life. It is possible, Merton concluded, to be a contemplative outside the cloister:

What is called the contemplative life is really a life arranged in such a way that a person can more easily and more simply and more naturally live in an awareness of direct dependence on God – almost with the sense of realizing consciously, at every moment, how much we depend on Him; and receive from Him directly everything that comes to us as a pure gift; and experience, taste in our hearts, the love of God in this gift, the delicacy and the personal attention of God to us in His merciful love, which St. Thérèse de Lisieux brought out so beautifully.⁹

And contemplation for Merton is nothing less than the perfect and ultimate guarantor of human freedom. The free person, the genuine contemplative, is in harmony with the order of creation, undeceived by political whim, alert to the real threats to civilized society. With his contemporary, the French Catholic existentialist Gabriel Marcel, Merton would agree that a

civilization in which technical progress is tending to emancipate itself more and more from speculative knowledge, and finally to question the traditional rights of speculative knowledge, a civilization which, one may say, finally denies the place of contemplation and shuts out the very possibility of contemplation, such a civilization, I say, sets us inevitably on the road towards a philosophy which is not so much a *love of wisdom* as a *hatred of wisdom*.¹⁰

Contemplation, then, seen as the guarantor of human freedom, is not just a metaphysical proposition. It is a political one as well. Indeed, for Merton contemplation became his only political article of faith. Not an ideologue by temperament and continually suspicious of all political platforms, Merton discovered in contemplation the only remaining measure that could secure human freedom in an environment of unsympathetic and destructive

forces. Even in the peak years of his political awakening—the 1960s—Merton the anarchist, the subversive voice of his novel *My Argument with the Gestapo*, was never far away. In 1968 Merton would go so far as to argue that the monk, the contemplative *par excellence*, is engaged in an activity not unlike that of the Marxist revolutionary. Though he stands in judgment, like the Marxist, on the alienating forces of society, the monk is loath to use those means—guerrilla warfare, kidnappings, and sabotage—that are too common a feature of revolutionary resistance. The monk seeks liberation from the restrictive and archaic structures of society in order to liberate people from their own self-oppression. As he remarked in his final public address, “Marxism and Monastic Perspectives,” delivered only hours before his death:

The monk is a man who has attained, or is about to attain, or seeks to attain full realization. He dwells in the center of society as one who has attained realization—he knows the score. Not that he has acquired unusual or esoteric information, but he has come to experience the ground of his own being in such a way that he knows the secret of liberation and can somehow or other communicate this to others.¹¹

It is important to note that at the time he spoke the above he preferred to speak of the contemplative/monk as one who dwelt in the center of society. No longer on the periphery, no longer the sentinel or marginal person as was the case in the 1940s and 1950s, the contemplative is now at the very heart of society as a witness to freedom's possibility.

In a rousing address on the nature and challenges of contemplative life published within a year of his death, Merton made clear his conviction that in the end all the words uttered and all the words published on the contemplative life cannot simulate or replicate the unique experience of tasting God's encompassing love:

[T]he contemplative is not the man [or woman] who has fiery visions of the cherubim carrying God on their imagined chariot, but simply he who has risked his mind in the desert beyond language and beyond ideas where God

is encountered in the nakedness of pure trust, that is to say in the surrender of our own poverty and incompleteness in order no longer to clench our minds in a ramp upon themselves, as if thinking made us exist. The message of hope the contemplative offers you [. . .] is not that you need to find your way through the jungle of language and problems that today surround God; but that whether you understand or not, God loves you, is present to you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons.¹²

Although true, Merton's love of word-making and word-declaring in no way subsided. Persuaded that contemplation is not restricted to the professionals, that it is a *way of being* and a *way of seeing*, Merton knew that in its advanced stage—contemplative illumination or mystical union—contemplation is profoundly transformative, that we are made anew:

In Blake's words, "the doors of perception" are opened and all life takes on a completely new meaning: the real sense of our own existence, which is normally veiled and distorted by the routine distractions of the alienated life, is now revealed in a central intuition. What was lost and dispersed in the relative meaninglessness and triviality of purposeless behavior (living like a machine, pushed around by impulses and suggestions from others) is brought together in fully integrated conscious significance. This peculiar, brilliant focus is, according to Christian tradition, the work of Love and of the Holy Spirit.¹³

Merton was not unaware that for the "doors of perception" to be fully opened, for the "brilliant focus" to be rediscovered, some fundamental truths about our human condition need to be remembered, that the contemplative quest for integration is a life project and not a passing fancy, and that the dialectic played out between the "true self" and the "false self" requires discipline, discernment, and detachment. The "false self" Merton understands to be all that

which is illusory, self-inflating, distancing from grace, sealed from the rays of liberation. The "true self" by contrast

is our entire substantial reality itself, on its highest and most personal and most existential level. It is like life and it is life; it is our spiritual life when it is most active. It is the life by which everything else in us lives and moves. It is in and through and beyond everything that we are. If it is awakened, it communicates a new life to the intelligence in which it lives so that it becomes a living awareness of itself.¹⁴

Contemplation is at the heart of the making of the fully human; contemplation brings the subject into a rare intimacy with the Transcendent; contemplation allows for the casting off of the shackles of self-delusion; and contemplation ensures our true freedom.

Thomas Merton's understanding of contemplation—sophisticated, highly nuanced, historically-flavoured and spiritually expansive—and his appreciation of the role of prophecy combine to guarantee his continued reputation as a monk open to the world, a critic of Catholicism's institutional inadequacy, and an astute and rigorous judge of the world's political, social and philosophical pathologies of the spirit.

In the words of his former student and fellow monk, the psychiatrist John Eudes Bamberger, Merton presented contemplation

as the activity of a person who becomes whole in his humanity through seeking intimate union with God. Merton thus gave a fresh life to the word *contemplation* and to the ideal of a contemplative life that continues to speak to the minds and hearts of Cistercian monks today and which has a broad appeal to persons living in our modern world.¹⁵

Endnotes

1. Thomas Merton, *Survival or Prophecy? The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq*, edited by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), xvi.

2. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, (New York: New Directions, 1966), 159.
3. Thomas Merton, "Prologo," in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 744.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, selected and edited by Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), 225.
5. Merton, "Prologo." In *Collected Poems*, 743.
6. Merton, *Raids*, 173. Merton's emphasis.
7. Merton, *Raids*, 106.
8. Thomas Merton, *Striving Towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, edited by Robert Faggen, (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 87.
9. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, (New York: Doubleday/Image, 1973), 386.
10. Gabriel Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society*, (Chicago: Henry Regenery, 1962), 65.
11. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, edited by Naomi Burton Stone, Patrick Hart, OCSO and James Laughlin, (New York: New Directions, 1973), 333.
12. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, edited by Brother Patrick Hart, (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1977), 173.
13. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 176.
14. Thomas Merton, "The Inner Experience," *Cistercian Studies*, 18 (1983) 5, 6.
15. John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO, *Thomas Merton: Prophet of Renewal*, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2005), 78.