

# Brother Silence, Sister Word: Merton's Conversion and Conversation in Solitude and Society

By  
Fernando Beltrán Llavador

Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still. Shrieking voices  
Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,  
Always assail them.

(T.S.Eliot, *Four Quartets*)

Thomas Merton's journey was one from many words to One Word and back to words; from society to solitude and back to society; from conversation to conversion and back to conversation; from communication to communion and back to communication. Words mediate in the social fabric of our world.<sup>1</sup>

Necessary yet insufficient, Merton realized, without an elected silence language is reduced to mere sound and fury; without conversion human speech turns out to be a promethean enterprise, the expression of self-enclosed and narcissistic egotatry; without communion communication proves to be alienation. The Word brings ever-new life to human language through silence. However, silence in itself does not grant automatic access to the Ground of Being. Rather than a contemplative technique it involves a healing and a hearing: a *pray-ear*.

Merton's message to both lay and professed contemplatives of the *Zossima* type<sup>2</sup> is that the promise of the monastic vocation, that is, the possibility for everyone to be "monachos", to reach final integration and wholeness, can be cultivated by enabling the conviviality of complementary polarities within us and by embracing action and contemplation, independence and obedience, gratefulness and repentance, formation and transformation, meekness and courage; above all, it can be achieved by transcending them through Christ.

In Christ – Merton affirmed – we find our true self, not an island but a *person*, that is, "one through whom His Word resonates"; in Christ we remember our belonging to one holy body, whose true society is organic, relational<sup>3</sup> and celebratory;

He is the very model around which that workshop of unforgetfulness which is a monastery revolves. Merton went beyond the paradox of defending solidarity under a solitary guise by following God, for, as he put it, "He is at once infinite solitude (one nature) and perfect society – (three persons)."<sup>4</sup>

When my students read a selection of writings by and about Merton and shared their impressions a common response emerged: "He always seems to be saying the same although in different manners; he is both like an old sage from ancient times and a contemporary to us". I would like to suggest that this combination of tradition and revolution is precisely what he advocated for in monastic renewal; this points also to the very essence of spiritual *metanoia*, rooted in an unshakeable foundation while always ready for merciful action and dynamism towards the suffering and oppressed of the earth. In other words, the law of love which Jesus brought with His Person remains unaltered, yet it acts upon all different personal and historical situations in a way that makes all things new and unexpected<sup>5</sup>. Love lies at the heart of real solitude and society, and "without it man is isolated, alienated from other men, separated from God, from truth, wisdom and strength. By love man enters into contact first with his own deepest self, then with his brother, who is his other self, and finally with the wisdom and power of God, the ultimate Reality."<sup>6</sup>

St. John of the Cross said that in Jesus Christ God had uttered His one and only Word and everything He had to say to us is contained in that Word. Under this light, prophecy is a letting go of the false self and a letting come of Him through our listening to His Word. Prophets are therefore not interested in fore-seeing the future but in constantly being seen-through; only when this happens can they be pushed to see and say, to announce and denounce. The following passage may explain Merton's passionate use of language, in paradoxical fidelity to his vow of silence:

The Acts of the Apostles is a book full of speech. It begins with tongues of fire. The apostles and disciples come downstairs and tumble into the street like an avalanche, talking in every language and the world thinks they are drunk but before the sun has set they have baptized three thousand souls out of Babel into the One Body of Christ. At Pentecost we sing of how they spoke. The antiphon "loquebantur" even now displays its sunlit cadences in my heart. The false Jerusalem, the old one that was a figure and had died, could not prohibit them from speaking (Acts 4). But the more they loved one another and loved God, the more they declared His Word. And He manifested Himself through them. That is the only possible reason for speaking - but it justifies speaking without end, as long as speech grows up from silence and brings your soul to silence once again.<sup>7</sup>

Merton came to appreciate the differences between external and internal language, between inner and outer silence. He had always enjoyed good conversations with friends and even with himself through his diaries, while in his life-long conversion process he had gradually been acquainted with verbal, mental and

silent-centering forms of prayer.<sup>8</sup> It is prayer precisely which has the spiritual potential to reconcile all dichotomies and thus heal the wounds of separation among and within ourselves. In prayer – a silent language or a spoken silence – we meet in a space of sacred memory and holy gathering: we re-member who we truly are. Words, Merton suggests, are seeds of prayer<sup>9</sup>.

In one of his Alaskan conferences, Merton said: “When I pray I am, in a sense, everybody (...) I meet other people not only in outward contact with them, but in the depths of my own heart. I am in a certain sense more one with other people in that which is most secret in my heart than I am when I am in external relations with them. The two go together; you can't separate them.”<sup>10</sup> Long before that, Merton had initiated an ecumenical encounter with representatives of different religions; he had kept a rich correspondence with scholars and religious people from Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism<sup>11</sup>; he had read, written and lectured about it but, most importantly, he had begun to meet his brothers and sisters in the Spirit through prayer. Far from being callous or evasive, prayer paved Merton's way towards compassion, a sharing of the joy and pain of his fellow human beings. In 1967, Merton came to consider himself “a hermit, solitary in the forest ... in contact with groups of poets, radicals, pacifists, hippies, artists, etc., in all parts of the world.”<sup>12</sup>

Merton viewed language as both a symptom and a treatment of a dismembered society. He searched for a re-membered society, encouraged us to use our “paradise ear” and rejoiced in those who did it<sup>13</sup>. The problem of modernity – Merton held – is that there is not a single voice to listen to but a thousand ideologies competing for attention.<sup>14</sup> The crisis of language evokes and provokes a society in a permanent state of war with itself: “The incoherence of language that cannot be trusted and the coherence of weapons that are infallible, or thought to be: this is the dialectic of politics and war, the prose of the twentieth century”<sup>15</sup>. For him, one of the contradictions of a society at odds with its own identity is the fact that to the extent communication through mass media increases, incommunication becomes more pervasive and gets ingrained within the soul of social structures. A capitalist society which does not speak truth, but only *newspeaks*<sup>16</sup> or *nukepeaks*<sup>17</sup> can be as totalitarian as a communist dictatorship, the difference lying only in whether the means of oppression are overt or covert. In both cases, though for different reasons, collectivities of people are mere collections, numerical addings of individuals without the possibility of having vital choices, for they have been “devoiced”<sup>18</sup>. Merton also cautioned us against the strategies of a society which goes as far as incorporating dissent into it.<sup>19</sup>

Slogans, propaganda, clichés, empty rhetoric and verbal pomposity, all of them inform the consciousness of common men and women at the edge of our century. Merton did not make a retreat away from the incoherence, distortions and strangeness of the discourses of his fellow citizens and his own. He faced them squarely and gave them a creative turn. He prayed and played with language. His friend Robert Lax; conveyed this idea in a beautiful poem:

his work was play	did he play
his play was play	seriously ?
his play was work	he played
his work was play	seriously
his work and play	
were prayer	lightly and
	seriously
his prayer was	at once ?
work and play	
did he play	lightly
lightly ?	and seriously
he played	at once. <sup>20</sup>
lightly	

By doing so, Merton displayed his spiritual pedagogy, one which counted on the possibility of redemptive transformations after embracing the shadow in our own psyche; within the Jungian frame of thought this reveals a process of individuation, a realization of the wholeness of the Self.<sup>21</sup> Merton's own poetry played a seminal role in this process. At the beginning of *Cables to the Ace*, Merton offers the picture of a solipsist innerscape which reflects the control of language over people:

Decoding the looks of opposites. Writing down their silences. Words replaced by moods. Actions punctuated by the hard fall of imperatives. More and more smoke. Since language has become a medium in which we are totally immersed, there is no longer any need to say anything. The saying says itself all around us. No one need attend. Listening is obsolete. So is silence. Each one travels alone in a small blue capsule of indignation. (Some of the better informed have declared war on language.)

[Cables to the Ace: Page 3]

Merton's attentiveness to the sounds of the world, his engaging in a conversation with it and his "pray-acting" were all part of an ongoing conversion, a project of universal rather than individual salvation. Radical conversion and empathetic conversation interplayed in something deeper than wordplay; so when Merton came to propose some "principles of peace" he thought one of them should be serious dialogue, because for him Christian thinking needed to transform political attitudes, which "(meant) overcoming the 'split' between the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the political".<sup>22</sup>

On yet another level of dialogical action, Merton's conviction that a sapiential reading of literary works was both possible and rewarding<sup>23</sup> can in retrospective be extended to his whole reading of the word and the world, but it is arguably in his literary concerns where it is more evident. Merton defined sapiential reading as "... the capacity to bridge the gap between our minds and the realm of the transcendent and the unknown, so that without 'understanding' what lies beyond the limit of human vision, we nevertheless enter into an intuitive affinity with it...",<sup>24</sup> Merton's last poem, *The Geography of Lograire*, was potentially the written parallel of a visual mandala, an archetype of integration and the rendering of a sacred cosmivision, "a personal search for his own self- location", in the words of Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr.<sup>25</sup> The poem included mosaic samples representative of various types of consciousness, from the aboriginal to the technological. Merton attempted to overcome the split between literate and illiterate cultures. Behind these anthropological distinctions, his real interest was the teaching of spiritual literacy.

Spiritual literacy involves a kind of communication which goes beyond but also finds expression within human togetherness; according to Marilyn King, S.M.: "The communication that flows from communion with God and forms true community is not a monologue, but a dialogue, for love which is the fundamental message must be *shared*. Merton often spoke of the need for mutual exchange – of ideas and of one's deepest being – with others. We learn from each other by sharing insights, clarifying ideas, articulating the truth".<sup>26</sup>

Once again, in Jesus Merton found the perfect model of a Christian articulation of truth, through deeds and words. Merton wrote:

Jesus made no compromise with a merely worldly society. Confronted with kingship His answer was not even a word - it was rejection and solitude. But he emerged from his solitude to teach of a "society" that was to be one flesh and one bloodstream with himself, a mystical union of all men in His Body, where solitude and the common life are realized perfectly both together at the same time.<sup>27</sup>

In following Jesus, the monastic vocation does not reject the world, but its presence operates at a deeper level of participation. In his last conference in Bangkok, Merton defined the monk as someone "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."<sup>28</sup> The monastic vocation is fulfilled in social solitude and shared silence. *Conversio morum* is indeed a vow of conversation. Both the eloquence of silence and the freedom of speech are needed. Both Martha and Mary play a unique role within a Christian community. "... after all Martha and Mary are sisters and they should dwell together in the same household in peace."<sup>29</sup>

Merton deliberately mixed the secular and the religious voices, bringing the Logos to the level of words while at the same time elevating the poverty of human language to the transforming power of God.

He was aware of the power of language to oppress or to emancipate. Merton's standpoint on the crisis of language makes sense within the views of systemic linguistics, which claim that "the wordings and meanings of a language are not arbitrary with respect to the community's living of life. Society, in a very real sense, is operative 'in' language just as much as language is operative 'in' society (...)" (that is, language) acts in the creation, maintenance and alteration of human relations, which range from consensus to conflict, from cooperation to exploitation and from accommodation to submission"<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, in contemplation language acquires a completely new meaning, for words can travel beyond their confines into the mystery of God.

Words – Merton writes – lose their capacity to convey the reality of holiness in proportion as men focus on the symbol rather than on what it symbolises. The sense of the sacred, of the "numinous" without which there can hardly be any real or living religion, depends entirely on our ability to transcend our own human signs, to penetrate them and pass beyond their manifest intelligibility into the darkness of mystery, to grasp the reality they can suggest but never fully contain.<sup>31</sup>

This is precisely the revolutionary character of *parrhesia*, a 'free speech' which works beyond any psychological, social, economic, political, or structural determinism yet it can produce changes in all these fields of human concern from within. "This free speech with which God and man...familarly converse together is and can only be the conversation that begins with, or implies, pardon."<sup>32</sup> Only this sort of conversation will bring a complete transformation of consciousness, restore the brotherhood of silence and language, the sisterhood of solitude and society. A deep dialogue based on forgiveness will surely bring more effective changes than what can possibly be imagined. This is the kind of conversion and conversation which is urgently needed in our world today. This is the very heart of monasticism, the heart of mercy and the heart of Christ.

I would like to close these reflections rephrasing one of Merton's prayers which I think best summarises his deepest aspirations. Let God make them our own as well:



To be here with the silence of Sonship in (our) heart is to be a center in which all things converge upon you (...) Therefore, Father, (we) beg you to keep (us) in this silence so that (we) may learn from it the word of your gentleness to the world: and that through (us) perhaps your word of peace may make itself heard where it has not been possible for anyone to hear it for a long time...<sup>33</sup>

## Notes and References

1. See, among others, Trudgill, P. *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. (Harmondsworth, Penguin., 1983).
2. Thomas Merton in *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (see note below) uses Dostoevski's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* to illustrate the contrast between two radically opposed attitudes towards monasticism: The rigid, authoritarian, self-righteous, ascetic Therapont, who delivers himself from the world by sheer effort, and then feels qualified to call down curses upon it; and the Staretz, Zossima, the kind, compassionate man of prayer who identifies himself with the sinful and suffering world in order to call down God's blessing upon it. (41)
3. Chakravarty, Amiya in "True Religion: Experience and Relation", in Timothy Molhearn, ed., *Getting it All Together* (Wilmington, Delaware, Michael Glazier Inc., 1984) p.32, affirmed: "if religion is not relational it is not religion."
4. Merton, Th., *New Seeds of Contemplation*. (New York, NewDirections, 1972)
5. "This purity, freedom and indeterminateness of love is the very essence of Christianity. It is to this above all that monastic prayer aspires." Merton held in *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*; (Kalamazoo, Michigan, Cistercian Publications, 1981) p.129.
6. Merton, Th., *Disputed Questions*, (London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985) pp. 101-102
7. Merton, Th., *The Sign of Jonas*, (San Diego, Calif.,Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) 1981, pp. 299-300
8. For a detailed study of this aspect, see Higgins, John, S.J., *Thomas Merton on Prayer*,(New York, An Image Book, 1975)
9. Merton, Th., *The New Man*, (New York,The Noonday Press, 1990) p.87
10. Merton Th., "Prayer and Conscience" *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals and Letters*, (New York, New Directions, 1989) p.135
11. See his five volumes of letters and, among them, particularly William H Shannon, ed. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985)
12. Merton, Th., "Answers for H. Lavin Cerda", *Punto Final*, Aug.1967, Chile, 1
13. See his commentaries on the poet Louis Zukofsky in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ( New York, New Directions, 1981) pp. 128-133.
14. Merton, Th., *Contemplation in a World of Action*, (New York, Image Books) I 1973. p.46.
15. Merton, Th., "War and the Crisis of Language" in *On Peace*, (London & Oxford, Mowbray, 1984) p.139.

16. In his novel *1984*, George Orwell gave a detailed explanation of the principles of newspeak. which described and anticipated the features of a language which aimed to diminish the range of thought through the suppression of vocabulary items. One of the items of the new vocabulary is the acronym *prolefeed* described as "the rubbishy entertainment and spurious news which the Party handed out to the masses". (Harmondsworth, Penguin 1954) p.243
17. Chilton. P.. *Language and the nuclear arms debate: nukespeak today*. (London, Francis Pinter, 1985)
18. For an extensive approach to the opposite notions of "voicing" and "devoicing", see the work of Paulo Freire in Brazil. New York and Africa. About him see Giroux, Henry, "Literacy and the Pedagogy of Voice and Political Empowerment". *Educational Theory*, Vol.38/1, pp.61-75.
19. Merton.Th. *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*. (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1992) p.129.
20. Lax, Robert, "Harpo's Progress: Notes Toward and Understanding of Merton's Ways" in Daggy, Robert F. et al. ed., *The Merton Annual*, Vol.1, (New York AMS Press, 1988) p.40
21. Waldron, R.G., *Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul: A Jungian Perspective*, (Notre Dame, Ind.,Ave Maria Press, 1994) p.145.
22. Merton, Th., "Christianity and Defense in the Nuclear Age", in *On Peace*, Op cit., p.24.
23. Merton, Th., "Baptism in the Forest": Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner", Op.Cit., p.115
24. Ibid., pp. 100-101.
25. Lentfoehr, Sr. Thérèse, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton*, (New York, New Directions, 1979) p.115.
26. King,Marilyn.S.M. "A Soft Voice Awakens Me: Merton's Spirituality of Human Communication". in Daggy, Robert E., ed., *The Merton Annual*, Vol.2, (New York, AMS Press, 1989) p.216.
27. Merton,Th., *The Sign of Jonas*, Op.cit.. p.219
28. Merton,Th.. "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives", in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, (New York, New Directions, 1975) p.333.
29. Merton, Th., *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*; Op. cit., p.75
30. Hasan, Ruqaiya. "Contexts for meaning" (hardcopy handed by the author to participants at the Systemic Functional Linguistics Seminar, University of Córdoba, Spain, 5-7 May 1993).
31. Merton, Th., *The New Man*, Op. cit., p.87.
32. Ibid., pp.95-96.
33. Merton, Th., *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, ( New York, Doubleday, 1989) p.178.