

Living the Question

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On the desk in my vicarage I have an article from a Swedish newspaper with a black and white photo of a man in a Roman collar. The man in the picture is obviously a priest and the article is put in a frame so I can see it while I am working. It dates from the third week of January 1969 and the rubric tells the sad news: 'Thomas Merton död' (Thomas Merton dead). It is an obituary written long before I had even heard of Thomas Merton, even before I was born. But after more than 20 years of friendship I find it suitable that he has this place of honour on my desk. In this essay I would like to share a few thoughts on that strange and rather unfair friendship: strange because I have never met him in real life and unfair because he cannot defend himself.

My reading of Thomas Merton began in 1992 when I was travelling by bus to the French ecumenical monastic community of Taizé. On a night stop in Germany a friend who was with me was reading the book, *The Sign of Jonas*, which made him laugh out loud. I asked what he was reading and to my surprise he told me it was a book by an American Trappist monk sworn to solitude and silence. How could he be so funny? Back in Sweden a week later I knew, for I had borrowed the book and had read it during my week in silence in Taizé. At the end a few lines stood out that have haunted, guided and comforted me in equal measure since then – 'But there is greater comfort in the substance of silence than in the answer of a question. Eternity is in the present.'¹

It all seemed like a paradox to me. So I began my own journey and took Thomas Merton as my companion with me to find out, how can

that be? Is it possible that silence and paradox have their place in a world that seeks more and more for rational answers? And if eternity collides with the present what happens with history, with our failures and shortcomings in life?

It took me 17 years before I could see the place where those words were written. But on my first arrival, in 2009, at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani where Thomas Merton had entered in December 1941, I was immediately struck by the words written above the entrance to the guesthouse. On the sign above my head were the same words in Latin that had met Thomas Merton 'Pax Intranitibus,' 'Peace to All Who Enter'. After 17 years of waiting, and fantasizing, I was finally on the same doorstep where Merton had stood. During that retreat I made a few notes which also laid the foundation for the reflections in this essay. And one result of that visit is that I nowadays have a medallion on the rosary in my pocket that says: Gethsemani: Place of Peace and Paradox.

Opening the doors to peace and paradox

When Thomas Merton entered the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, closing the gates of the world behind him, he seemed to be walking into a desolate desert of silence and poverty. But when we read his story we soon realize that it was actually the other way round, he did in fact leave the desert of the city to find the ocean of tranquility within the cloistered walls. In this essay I will describe how part of the life of Thomas Merton is a road of paradox leading to a life of outer peace and inner tranquillity, finding in the end that the substance of silence comforts more than the answer of a question.

The happiness and joy of life is not only to be sought in our success but also, and perhaps even more so, in our failures and shortcomings: God acts through our winding road of life and not against it. This is also what forms our identity and Thomas Merton suggests early on in his writings that the question of identity is not shaped by origins

but by something much deeper. In *My Argument With the Gestapo* he writes:

You think you can identify a man by giving his date of birth and his address, his height, his eyes' color, even his fingerprints. Such information will help you put the right tag on his body if you should run across his body somewhere full of bullets, but it doesn't say anything about the man himself. Men become objects and not persons ... But if you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I think I am living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for. Between these two answers you can determine the identity of any person. The better answer he has, the more of a person he is ... and there will be no further question, for with God's mercy I shall possess not only the answer but the reality that the answer was about.²

It is in between, in the gap, that reality opens up for us where we might find an answer, or if not an answer, a way of being that is in accordance with who we really are. Or rather who we are supposed to be. This destiny of life is something that lies ahead of us and until we reach the end we must seek to understand what the paradox is like. Ending his prologue in *The Sign of Jonas* Merton writes: 'I find myself travelling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox'.³

What then is a paradox? Is it everything we cannot understand in life? I would argue that the paradox is more than that. In his book *Paradoxes of Faith* the French theologian Henri de Lubac writes:

Paradox is the reverse of what, properly perceived, would be synthesis. But the proper view always eludes us. Each

of us contributes by his existence to the weaving of a wonderful tapestry but it cannot yet be comprised entirely within our range of vision. In the fields of facts as of spirit, synthesis can only be sought. *Quamdiu vivimus, necesse habemus semper quaerere.*⁴

Paradox is the search or wait for synthesis. It is the provisional expression of a view which remains incomplete, but whose orientation is ever towards fullness.⁵

In this view we find a challenge. Normally we search for a synthesis, an answer to a given question. When reading a text or doing research we like the idea of coming up to a new truth which previously was hidden and now, thanks to our work, has come to be revealed. We like to add to ideas and from them create a new third idea. When describing the life of Thomas Merton in this way a title could be 'The Setbacks, Failures and Disasters in the Life and Work of Thomas Merton' – quite fun to read, but would that correspond to the average reader's experience of his work? I guess not. There is something more to it, something that eludes the reader. It looks as if there is a gap in the storyline. A better title would be 'Setbacks, Failure and Prosperity in the Life and Work of Thomas Merton'. A qualified dialectician would now of course argue with me and say that dialectics also reveals a kind of truth and is full of complex structures. Yes I agree, but let us for a moment not oppose the two different ways and instead give opportunity for a paradoxical reading. Henri de Lubac writes:

Paradox has more charm than dialectics; it is also more realistic and more modest, less tense and less hurried; its function is to remind the dialectician when each new stage is reached in the argument that however necessary this forward movement is no real progress has been made.⁶

As an example of how this can be seen in the life of Thomas Merton, I will use the structure of a paradoxical reading and use that as a tool for a short analysis of one aspect of his life. There are four hallmarks that help us reveal this pattern.

First: An apparent lack of continuity

This means that when we look at several sequential experiences in his life each one of them can be looked at one by one but we don't immediately see the outcome. It is not enough to make an interpretation of just one single part of his life – to see a paradox emerge we need to see a longer series of life events put together.

Second: An experience in life can be seen and evaluated when it is seen as something completed

This means that to discover the paradoxical we must have both ends of the story. We can see the beginning and the end in each one of the experiences.

Third: while in progress it must contain actual experiences which are significant and valuable

This is in order to make the choice of experiences to analyze a little more significant. In a full life story there are of course hundreds and thousands of more or less important experiences that form and shape the person. When we choose our example which exposes the paradox it should be obvious that they were valuable and meaningful moments for Thomas Merton.

Fourth: When the life experience is part of a paradox it is the provisional expression of a view which remains incomplete, but whose orientation is ever towards fullness

This last point is not just to keep us humble, saying that in the end we don't know. Instead it leads us to see how a paradoxical way or experience of life can remain meaningful without giving a full answer to all questions. When we reach the end of the paradoxical journey

there is still something to wait and search for. You might say that when the paradox is settled it constitutes the foundation for a new beginning. Something that before the paradoxical events could not be seen waits in the unseen future. In this brief essay I cannot explicitly show the four different marks in each of our examples but below under the heading *failure* it will be seen how the analysis is made.

Patterns in the weave of life

There is no greater aspect of life than love. And I would dare to say that every human has his or her struggle to understand what love is. But love is not just something vague and elusive, even if it surely can be it is also part of our physical reality. And like all of us Thomas Merton lived a physical life. By this obvious statement I will make clear that any true identity is connected to the physical reality. But as Thomas Merton declares in the passage from *My Argument With the Gestapo* above, this physicality is not linked to the colour of our eyes or the weight of our body. It is not calculating our body mass index. It means that we accept that to be a true human person we have to acknowledge that our life experiences are linked to our bodily self. A person is mind, soul and body. It is also within this realm of life and body-love, that we shall see how the journey of Thomas Merton from inner turmoil to tranquility is bound up with his exterior journey from noise to silence, and from the desert of the city to the oasis in the hermitage.

When we read the life story of Thomas Merton and talk about love we almost always begin with his relation to his mother Ruth. But that would be to miss the point in our case. I believe that Thomas Merton had a complex relation with his mother when she was alive, like all children, and when she died his emotions and memories remained unresolved, unfinished. And that is not something unique to a kid who loses his mother when still a child.⁷ Searching for the paradox of body-love in his life we have to look beyond his puberty. The three headings we look into are setbacks, failure and prosperity.

Setbacks in love, the girl on the boat

The scene is as follows. The young, 16-year-old Thomas Merton embarks on the boat to America. With a clear ambition to fall in love, he succeeds with his mission, and after only three days on board he falls in love with a girl twice his age.⁸ He realizes that he must tell her about his feelings:

I made a declaration of my undying love. I would not, could not, ever love anyone else but her. It was impossible, unthinkable Love like this was immortal. It conquered time and outlasted the futility of human history. And so forth.⁹

She rejects him quite gently but the emotions and the experience stay in his mind for months and when writing about the episode while within the monastery, he describes it in the strongest possible terms: 'This kind of a love affair can really happen only once in a man's life. After that he is calloused. He is no longer capable of so many torments.'¹⁰

And so forth. This was clearly an emotional setback for Thomas Merton and he could not realize even when he wrote about it that something even stronger would lie ahead in the future. This was, though, clearly a setback for him regarding physical love. He felt strong and good looking. Our next example is both familiar and elusive.

Failure, the story of M

The story of the nurse M has been told in many ways before. In this context a first small reflection in contrast to the earlier experience is that Thomas Merton now has a failing body. He meets M whilst in hospital and he is much older. His confidence has also changed. I will give one short quotation which describes his feelings at the time. From *Learning to Love* we read:

All I know is that I love her so much I can hardly think of anything but her. Also I know that in itself this love is a thing of enormous value (never has anyone given herself to me so completely, so openly, so frankly, and never have I responded so completely).¹¹

To be honest, at first sight this might not be seen as a good example in the course of the paradox I am exploring. The reason is that when we first read the diary description Merton seems to be puzzled rather than uneasy with what has happened.²¹ However despite this, later, on August 20, 1968, he writes in his journal: 'Today, among other things, I burned M.'s letters. Incredible stupidity in 1966! I did not even glance at any one of them. High hot flames of the pine branches in the sun!'¹³

At the time of the meetings with M he seems to be confused but clearly in love. It is uncertain what he actually thinks of it. Nevertheless the affair can be regarded as a failure in two other perspectives. He fails to live by his vows and he fails to live up to the expectations that normally follow this kind of outspoken love. He fails both as a man and as a monk. When we read the story with the four hallmarks outlined earlier in mind, it is even more clearly and better understood. Firstly, this story lacks continuity. It has no pre-story of Thomas Merton leaving the monastery grounds to visit different women. Secondly, it stands in its own right. We can read this part of his life as one whole encounter with a beginning and an end. Thirdly, it is obviously a valuable experience for Merton, and fourthly, when put in the larger framework of his life it points towards something incomplete.¹⁴ This then leads to our third example, in the aspect of body-love.

Prosperity, love in unity with God

Thomas Merton is finally living a life in the hermitage when he decides to travel. On the first trip he goes to Alaska and the following quotation is from when he stays overnight at the City Lights

publications offices in San Francisco. He sleeps on a mattress on the floor and the noise from the cars on the street, the sound of the city, makes it hard for him to sleep.¹⁵ After midnight he falls asleep and in the morning he writes:

I am the utter poverty of God. I am His emptiness, littleness, nothingness, lostness. When this is understood, my life in His freedom, the self emptying of God in me is the fullness of grace. A love for God that knows no reason because He is the fullness of grace. A love for God that knows no reason because He is God; a love without measure, a love for God as personal.¹⁶

This experience bears witness to the complexity of the body-love aspect of his life. He is in fairly good shape physically, he is content with his way of life and the opportunity to travel, and still his own words are not connecting love with all those things. Instead he mentions emptiness, lostness, poverty, even nothingness – all words normally used to describe an unsatisfied life. But the paradox is evident. When Thomas Merton accepts his own inner and bodily emptiness he finds the longed for unity with God's love. The silence that he has won in the hermitage he carries with him out into the city. The inner tranquillity becomes outward peace. Still there is more to come. The answer to his own inner search for love was not to be exclusively found in his bodily experiences, but transformed by another source of his life. This source, the union with God he could also carry with him like a seed in his hand.

Living the question

I have no summary, no conclusion and no right answer to the question: who is Thomas Merton? I know that he is more than just the picture, the man in the framed article on my desk. And that is one of the reasons why he is there. Seeing the paradox is perhaps seeing what

Thomas Merton calls 'the reality that the answer was about.'¹⁷ Yet from the example of his life I think we can learn something about our own lives. Our seeming setbacks and our felt failures are only parts of a reality where our final vision is yet to be sought. And if his legacy is to be found in my life I hope it is the courage to live the question. Because he reminds me:

There is greater comfort in the substance of silence than in the answer to a question. Eternity is in the present. Eternity is in the palm of the hand. Eternity is a seed of fire, whose sudden roots break barriers that keep my heart from being an abyss.¹⁷

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Image Books, Doubleday & Company, 1956) p.350.
2. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* (New York: New Directions, 1969) p.160.
3. *Sign of Jonas*, p.21.
4. 'As long as we live, we deem it essential ever to seek.'
5. Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987; French original *Paradoxes*, Montreal: Fides Publishers, 1948) p.9.
6. *ibid.*
7. A further and deeper reflection is made in Lars Adolffsson, *Mary, Mother of Jesus, Mother of Me; an Ecclesiological Study on the Marian Sermons of Thomas Merton* (unpublished MA in Ecclesiology, University of Uppsala, Sweden, 2010) p.31.
8. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1948, this edition 1999) p.97.
9. *ibid.*, p.99.
10. *ibid.*, p.98.
11. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Six 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998) p.47.
12. *ibid.*, p.126.
13. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton Volume Seven, 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998) p.157.

14. *Learning to Love*, p.336.
15. *The Other side of the Mountain*, p.102.
16. *ibid.*, p.102.
17. *My Argument with the Gestapo*, p.161.
18. *Sign of Jonas*, p.350.

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