

To Uncage His Voice:

Thomas Merton's Inner Journey toward *Parrhesia*

By Jonathan Montaldo ©

Our destiny is to live out what we think,
because unless we live what we know, we do not even know it.
It is only by making our knowledge part of ourselves, through action,
that we enter into the reality that is signified by our concepts.
Living is the constant adjustment of thought to life and life to thought
in such a way that we are always growing, always experiencing new things
in the old and old things in the new. Thus life is always new.

Thomas Merton. *Thoughts in Solitude*

Thomas Merton's spiritual legacy exhibits a special relationship to the philosophical notion of *parrhesia*, a concept he had learned by his study of the ancient Greek classics and early Christian Patristic texts. *Parrhesia* is generally the right to voice a fearless, risk-taking freedom of speech. Free speech, as opposed to muted and restrained speech, is a primary category in Merton's diagnosis of the inner tension in personal development between one's "true" and "false" selves. *Parrhesia* is symbolic of the more fully realized person in the mystical theology of Merton's book, *The New Man*. More existentially, the goal of excavating his true self fearlessly guided Merton's inner journey toward becoming his own person "in Christ". The struggle to uncage his true voice was at the heart of Merton's enlightenment as he became, in his own unique way, a contemplative human being realized in the forms of monk and writer.

Thomas Merton considered that the only life worth living was engaging the struggle to attain a conscious exercise of personal "spiritual liberty". Merton proposed that "spiritual liberty" was the "deepest and most crucial need of the human person as

such.” In his book *Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander* he defiantly defined “spiritual liberty” as

freedom from domination, freedom to live one's own spiritual life, freedom to seek the highest truth, unabashed by any human pressure or any collective demand, the ability to say one's own "yes" and one's own "no" and not merely to echo the "yes" and the "no" of [the] state, party, corporation, army or system.

Merton insisted, counter-intuitively to its institutionalized expressions, that a religion is most authentic when its primary function is to mentor a person’s spiritual liberty.¹

Merton’s declaration of a universal human right to exercise *parrhesia* warrants nuance and elaboration. If, however, we receive Merton’s declaration as a personal manifesto of his own inner task to uncage his voice and speak his own true “word” for the benefit of others, then a main gate opens to the grounds for regarding Merton as one of his century’s significant witnesses to freedom. Merton’s struggle to speak freely and fearlessly accounts for his legacy’s continuing vitality for us who are living beyond his own life’s day.²

The French philosopher Michel Foucault delivered six lectures at UC Berkeley in 1983 on the Greek notion of *parrhesia* which he translated generally as “frankness in speaking the truth”. In a transcription of these lectures published under the title *Fearless Speech*,³ Foucault deftly summarized the classical definition of *parrhesia* as

a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain

¹ Thomas Merton *Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966): 77.

² Thomas Merton *Witness to Freedom*. Edited by William H. Shannon (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994).

³ Michel Foucault *Fearless Speech*. Joseph Pearson, editor (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001).

type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. More precisely, parrhesia is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In parrhesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy.⁴

Writing forty years before Foucault's lectures, Merton published his own reflections on spiritual liberty in a central chapter of his book *The New Man* to which he gave the title "*Parrhesia* [Free Speech]". His chapter is an imaginative reading of the narrative of Adam and Eve's creation in the book of Genesis. Merton grounded his poetic reading of the origin of human beings in symbolic terms consonant with early Christian writers, who had themselves, in turn, imaginatively intuited that Adam and Eve's free conversation with their Creator in the Garden experience was symbolic of an original human potential to be perfectly free in being and expressing oneself. Merton, following the early Christian philosophers, likewise idealized humankind's original spiritual liberty as a free response to the Creator's invitation to co-create a continuing elaboration of the Creator's original acts of world-making.

Adam in Merton's *The New Man* conversed freely with his Creator. "Before the fall," Merton wrote, "Adam, the prince of creation, conversed familiarly with God in the

⁴ Ibid., 19-20.

sense that he was constantly meeting Him in flashes of mystical intuition, either in the existential reality of his own spiritual depths, or in the reality of objective creation”.⁵

Merton thus imagined Adam and Eve as humankind’s original co-communicants, concelebrants of their joy at being together in the world, conversing heart-to heart to one another in a spiritual liberty blessed by their Creator’s gift to them of a free and creative speech. Adam and Eve were humanity’s original poets who co-created new expressions of what it meant for one another to be alive:

After having drawn forth the living beings out of nothingness, God elicits from the depths of Adam’s own liberty words, names and signs. These, in their turn, will flower into many kinds of creative intellectual activity. They will become, first of all, poems which will express man’s inexpressible intuitions of [a] hidden reality in created things. They will become philosophy and science, by which man will objectify and universalize his private vision of the world into thought-systems that can be shared by everyone. Finally, words will become sacred signs. They will acquire the power to set apart certain elements of creation and make them holy.⁶

In Merton’s religious anthropology Adam and Eve were at home with one another and their Creator without alienation:

Man was exactly what he was intended to be by God: that is to say, he was perfectly himself. To be perfectly oneself, in the highest mystical sense in which we are constantly using this expression in these pages [of *The New Man*], not only gave man access to all the latent powers of his own rich human nature, not only

⁵ Ibid., 73

⁶ Ibid., 84-85

placed him in complete communication with all created things by giving him command over them, but finally kept him in constant and unimpeded contact with the Spirit of God.⁷

It is highly significant, considering Merton's personal aspirations, that he named the first flowering of human "creative intellectual activity" as poetic speech, which, to state again, he defined as the symbolic rendering of a human being's "inexpressible intuitions of [a] hidden reality [or meaning] in created things". Human beings as poets excavate the deeper realities of human existence that they perceive within themselves to be latent and "hidden". The poet's first movement is a turn toward inner experience that brings forth out of the unconscious symbols that evoke, first to the poet and then to others, fresh dimensions of being alive in the world. The poet offers these fresh and deeper expressions of inner experience to others. Through exercises of meditation and self-excavation, poets render themselves available to the hidden heights and depths of meaning within each being the poet encounters. The poet's speech is free, but only tested as true, to the extent that the poet's symbols are communicated to others, that is, to the extent that the poet's speech becomes inter-subjective":

Man does not fully know himself so long as he is isolated in his own individual self-hood. His identity comes to light only when it fully confronts the 'other'. We are created for freedom, for the options and self-dedications implied by the highest kind of love. We discover and develop our freedom precisely by making those decisions which take us out of ourselves to meet others as they really are. But we are incapable of knowing and experiencing reality adequately unless we see things in the light of Him who is All Being, [the] all real. The Spirit of God,

⁷ Ibid, 74.

penetrating and enlightening our own spirit from within ourselves, teaches us the ways of freedom by which alone we enter into vital spiritual contact with those around us. In this contact we become aware of our own autonomy, our own identification. We find out who we really are. And, having made the discovery, we are ready for the love and service of others.⁸

Merton's view of humanity's original spiritual liberty is certainly idealized. In this our own real time in human history, thrown out of a paradise of fearless conversation with one another, we no longer easily speak of our inner experiences that are the sources of our relationships to ourselves and to others in the world. When we do attempt to disclose the meaning of our inner experiences to ourselves and to others, we realize that we are always speaking approximately. We are unable to realize completely the meaning of the flow of our inner experiences. Our true inner experiences seem always too profound for words. Nevertheless, we intuit that to ignore these hidden meanings of our inner experience is to alienate ourselves from what we sense we are called more fully to become. Our very being alive invites us to explore the riches of our hidden experiential depths. To open ourselves to hear our own true voices, to wait in silence for further self-disclosures, initiates our entering *parrhesia* and spiritual liberty. Furthermore, to disclose ourselves to others ever more transparently is to access a way of going forward toward spiritual liberty. T.S. Eliot in *The Four Quartets* confessed that we must struggle to excavate and communicate our inner experiences, that such communication is always a "raid on the unspeakable":

⁸ Thomas Merton *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961): 67-68.

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
 Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
 Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
 For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
 One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
 Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate.”⁹

Merton communicated his creative mystical theology, as expressed in books like *The New Man*, by speaking symbolically in poetic speech. *Parrhesia* as an inner goal to speak truthfully without fear is a symbol for his monastic quest to know his true identity. He truly sought to converse with God. As a writer, he sought to disclose himself to his readers in symbols that communicated who he more inclusively was. He hoped that his transparency would in turn free his readers to excavate their own identities as they more inclusively were.

Merton presented a poetics of his own true identity as Love. The ultimate goal of Merton’s creative exercises in spiritual liberty was Love. He declared who he sensed he most deeply was in his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*: “Love is my identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my true name”.¹⁰ His autobiography, private journals, his letters, of course his poems, and even his drawings and photography, all functioned on an existential level as his exercises in voicing a true and fearless speech that would symbolize his inner experiences of being in existential communion with the Source of All Being and all his neighbors in the world.

⁹ T.S. Eliot “East Coker, V” in *Four Quartets*.

¹⁰ Thomas Merton *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York, New Directions Press, 1961): 60.

Once he began publishing his books, a frequent feature in his private journaling was allowing himself a reflective open space within which he could attempt to expose the “truth value” of his identity as it had been presented by him in a newly published work. Within his journals Merton often explored to what extent a recently published book had conveyed the depth dimensions of his inner life as he existentially knew it. Even risking his reader’s confusion, his desire to communicate transparently had impelled him to declare in *The Sign of Jonas*, the sequel to his autobiography, that the man who had written *The Seven Storey Mountain* was dead, and the person who had once known himself as Thomas Merton was dying over and over. Merton re-read his published books, not only for indications of who he had been, but, more importantly, for their clues to the person he might yet become. His published works questioned his identity. They revealed to him his spiritual vicissitudes, his twists-and-turns, his ups and downs, on the path toward God; his continuing discovery of yet deeper dimensions of what he previously thought was his “true self”. Merton’s journals assisted his passage through way-stations on the road toward spiritual liberty. The journals mapped out a way to walk in the world and more openly dialogue with the history he was sharing with all his neighbors.

Complementing the self-excavating exercises of his journals, Merton’s extensive letter writing to a wide audience of correspondents likewise partially functioned as another means to test his “true speech”. He listened as his identity was read back to him in the affirming and negating voices of his correspondents. And then, by the technique of his voracious reading through a broad geography of subjects, Merton sought exposure to an expansive world of conversation with voices whose music was not his own. Through journal writing, letter writing and intensive reading, Merton consciously exercised his

voice for “free speech” and struggled to manifest what theologian Christine M. Bochen has emphasized as his “courage for truth”.¹¹

All writers face barriers to exercising a liberating, truthful speech, but being an institutionalized monk, Merton had to overcome unique obstacles to parrhesia. The customs of his religious institution, the Trappists, forced him to submit his writing in advance of publication to monastic and then wider church censors. The criterion for the censors approving his voice was negative: would his new book tarnish the good public image of the Trappist community and the wider interests of the Roman Catholic Church? Already writing with an adult convert’s sensitivities, Merton learned to hide dimensions of his experience, even in his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, so as not to offend his Order’s narrowly perceived Catholic audience. The harm of the monastic institution’s impingement on Merton’s voice was that it trained him in self-censorship. He trimmed his voice in advance so that it could pass the gauntlet of his Trappist censors. The reality and experience of self-censorship might well have been the basis for Merton’s judging that every new book he published forced him to examine his conscience. He greeted the publication of *Seeds of Contemplation* in 1949, for instance, by noting in his journal that “Every book I write is a mirror of my own character and conscience. I always open the final printed job with a faint hope of finding myself agreeable, and I never do.”¹²

As he re-read his early pious books that had preceded the publication of his autobiography, Merton made numerous observations in his journals as to how much he discovered his public voice had become impersonal, coldly abstract and “caged”:

¹¹ Thomas Merton *The Courage For Truth: Letters to Writers*. Christine M. Bochen, editor (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993).

¹² Thomas Merton *Entering the Silence*, Journals Volume 2. Edited by Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996): 287.

January 4, 1948. I just read some of the notes I wrote in the journal a year ago (the end of 1946), and I am wondering what I thought I was talking about. The first thing that impresses me is that practically all I wrote about myself and my trials was stupid because I was trying to express what I thought I ought to think, and not for any especially good reason, rather than what I actually did think. I couldn't very well know what I meant when I hardly meant it at all.¹³

January 26, 1948. Yes, there are too many speeches in the *Mountain*. How dead they are. And all the speeches in this thing [this journal], too. I wonder why? Why do monks get the idea they have to preach sermons all the time to everybody else and if nobody else will listen, they still preach to themselves?¹⁴

January 27, 1948. God defend me from the stuffy academic language and from the pious jargon I felt I got into in so many parts of *Exile Ends in Glory* on the theory that, since I was a monk, I had to write that way. NO! That is NOT the way to write. It does no good.¹⁵

When, however, Merton's writing achieved a break-through beyond self-censorship, his prose became poetry, as he translated for his readers his intuitive grasp of hidden, sacred realities that became present for him in flashes of his religious imagination.¹⁶ While it is true, as Merton noted in *The New Man*, that "the personal and

¹³ Ibid., 154.

¹⁴ Ibid., 160.

¹⁵ Ibid., 161.

¹⁶ March 6, 1966: "[The] beauty and necessity (for me) of [the] solitary life—apparent in the sparks of truth, small, recurring flashes of a reality that is beyond doubt, momentarily appearing, leading me further on my way. Things that need no explanation and perhaps have none, but which say 'Here! This way!' And with final authority! It is for them that I will be held responsible. Nothing but immense gratitude! They cancel out all my mistakes, weaknesses, evasions, falsifications. They lead further and further in that direction that has been shown me, and to which I am called." Thomas Merton *Learning to Love*, Journals Volume 6, Christine M. Bochen, editor (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997): 367

direct grasp of sacred realities by each individual soul is an incommunicable experience”, so that none of us can fully reveal to others our personally intuited meanings of being alive, Merton’s conscious vocation to *parrhesia* entailed that he try. His ultimate goal, as his writing progressed, was to “name” himself in truth so as to be in ever more right relationships with everything he encountered in the world. He struggled to uncage his voice, not so as to become a new Adam, since the reality of sin made this role impossible. Merton wrote more with the aim of becoming another Job. He intuited God’s demand that he stand on his own feet and stutter forth his conversation with God in truth. Merton’s monastic vocation itself demanded fearless speech for God’s sake every day. He began the office of Vigils with his brother monks every early morning with the same plea from *Psalms 51* sung three times: “O Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall declare your praise.” In his private journals for July 31, 1961, Merton wrote:

During the night office and morning meditation, seeing that my whole life is a struggle to seek the truth (at least I want it to be so) and that the truth is found in the reality of my own life as it is given to me, and that it is found by complete consent and acceptance.by “creative” consent, in my deepest self to the will of God which is expressed in my own self and my own life. And indeed there is a sense in which my own deepest self is in God and even expresses Him, as [a] word”. (Such is the deep meaning of Sonship)¹⁷

If we survey the path Merton took from the cosseted pious voice in an early book like *Exile Ends in Glory* to the extravagantly personal, long poem of his last years *The Geography of Lograire*, we cannot take for granted that his journey to writing a progressively more “free and fearless speech” was a natural and pre-ordained process.

¹⁷ Provide the footnote

Merton became the inclusive human being he became, not by following a script of some other monk's life, but by writing his way into a life and a voice uniquely his own. Merton throughout his writer's progress made numerous creative choices to map the path of his personal monastic journey. In 1958, for instance, after having published many more well-received pious books, Merton wrote in his journals of the appearance of a "new and necessary struggle" in his "interior life":

I am finally coming out of a chrysalis. The years behind me seem strangely inert and negative, but I suppose that passivity was necessary. Now the pain and struggle [begins] of fighting my way out into something new and much bigger. I must see and embrace God in the world.¹⁸

In journals for 1961 he sought liberation from what in his writing reflected what he perceived to be "the popular Catholic image in this country". He challenged himself to write in new ways: "Certainly I can write something and write, if possible creatively. But [I should] not [write] to preach, to dogmatize, not to be a pseudo-prophet, not to declare my opinions."¹⁹ He no longer wanted to exercise his previously accepted role as the "lackey of pious journalists and editors: the right-thinking rabbit who gives birth to litters of editorials every morning before breakfast."²⁰

Merton importantly turned a corner toward his more inclusive self, when he published an article in *The Catholic Worker* in October, 1961, in which he declared himself "one of the few Catholic priests in the country who has come out unequivocally for a completely intransigent fight for the abolition of war, for the use of non-violent

¹⁸ Thomas Merton *A Search for Solitude*. Edited by Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996): 200.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 133.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 135.

means to settle international conflicts.”²¹ But paradoxically, at this very juncture of his becoming a war protester and public intellectual, Merton began having part-time use of a hermitage at Gethsemani from 1961-1964. This on-going hermitage experience, as he raised his voice on issues of peace and social justice, created a cognitive dissonance in him arising out of his love for silence and his new-found responsibility to engage the social issues of his time. He was discovering deeper levels of his identity in silence and in a hermitage just at that moment when his writing on social issues of his day was gaining the attention of a new and different audience for his voice. He addressed this new tension between apparently opposed dimensions of his monasticism:

Here at the hermitage, in deep snow, everything is ordinary and silent. [The] return to reality and to the ordinary, in silence. It is always there if you know enough to return to it. What is not ordinary—the tension of meeting people, discussion, ideas. This too is good and real, but illusion gets into it. The unimportant becomes important, words and images become more important than life. One travels all over vast areas, sitting still in a room, and one is soon tired of so much traveling.²²

Merton’s hermitage experiences also produced challenges to his integrity when he sensed his voice was being co-opted by both old and new audiences. There is a poignant example of his voice being co-opted by the monastic institution in 1963. There had been a meeting of the Cistercian American Abbots at Holy Spirit Monastery in Conyers, Georgia. Returning to Gethsemani, Merton’s abbot James Fox informed him that next year the Abbots had decided to meet at Gethsemani and that Merton would be expected

²¹ *Ibid*, 172.

²² *Ibid*, 294.

to give conferences. When Merton learned through the grapevine that Abbot James had agreed to Merton's participation in the next meeting only if it were held at Gethsemani, since otherwise Dom James would not permit him to attend elsewhere, Merton went ballistic:

When the canary is asked to sing, well, he is expected to sing merrily and with spontaneity. . . . Everyone can come and see me in my cage, and Dom James can modestly rejoice in the fact that he is in absolute control of a bird that everyone wants to hear sing. This is the way that birds stop singing—at least those songs that everyone wants to hear because they are comforting and they declare that all things are good just as they are. One's song is forced at times to become scandalous and even incomprehensible.²³

The justice of Merton's remarks might be questioned, since he did love being heard, but Merton revealed a great deal of his inner tensions by deploying this metaphor for himself as a song bird in a gilded monastic cage.

Turning now to his letter-writing, the dialogical nature of Merton's extensive correspondence reveals his exercising himself in "fearless speech" in more forceful ways than his journals do. In the majority of his letters, Merton did "pose" for the snapshot of himself that his particular correspondent expects to see. When, however, Merton wrote to persons he wanted to encounter most seriously, he boldly revealed dimensions of who he was behind the protective layers of his monastic cowl. In his most personal letters, Merton expressed his voice with an innocent and sympathetic transparency, as in his first letter to the Russian writer, Boris Pasternak, whose novel *Doctor Zhivago* had pierced

²³ Ibid. 320.

Merton's erotic consciousness to the quick. Merton here pens a "love letter" to a writer he does not know:

August 1958: It may surprise you when I say, in all sincerity that I feel much more kinship with you, in your writing, than I do with most of the great modern writers in the West. That is to say that I feel that I can share your experience more deeply and with a greater intimacy and sureness... When you write of your youth in the Urals, in Marburg, in Moscow, I feel as if it were my own experience, as if I were you. With other writers I can share ideas, but you seem to communicate something deeper. It is as if we met on a deeper level of life on which individuals are not separate beings. In the language familiar to me as a Catholic monk, it is as if we were known to one another in God. This is a very simple and obvious expression for something quite normal and ordinary, and I feel no need to apologize for it. I am convinced that you understand me perfectly. It is true that a person always remains a person and utterly separate and apart from every other person. But it is equally true that each person is destined to reach with others an understanding and a unity which transcend individuality, and Russian tradition describes this with a concept we don't fully possess in the West—*sobornost*.²⁴

Parrhesia took a similar form of great warmth when Merton wrote the Latin American poet, José Coronel Urtecho, to say how pleased he was to participate in a literary project with him and Ernesto Cardenal: "[This project] is a joy to me because it brings me more in contact with you both, for what is important is not the project but the

²⁴ Thomas Merton *The Courage For Truth: Letters to Writers*. Edited by Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993): 87-88.

communion of which the project is an expression.” Merton then proclaimed his solidarity with all Latin American poets:

Our great vocation as poets is to learn from one another, and to find the great mercy of God hidden in a distant jungle, as well as near at hand. For the voice of God must always come to us at every moment both from near and far and from the point that is nowhere and everywhere, from the O of admiration which is a boundless circle, and from the humility of love that breaks through the limits set by national pride and the arrogance of wealth and power. Let us then live in a communion [a sobornost] which undermines the power and arrogance of the great of this world, which seeks to separate men in the power struggle.”²⁵

In describing the Argentinian poet Victoria Ocampo, for a commemorative volume produced by her friends, Merton revealed something of an ideal for his true self as he praised Ocampo’s *parrhesia*:

Is there anyone in the world of western culture today who does not know Victoria Ocampo, and who has not come within the sphere of her radiance? She is one of the wonderful people who includes in herself all the grace and wisdom of a universal culture at a given time.She is, in our age of miraculous communications, miraculously a person who has something to communicate. The rest of us, perhaps, use our fantastic instruments merely to echo one another’s noise. And all communication must always fulfill one essential condition if it is to exist at all: it must be human; it must have resonances that are deeper than formal statements, declarations and manifestoes.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid., 171-172.

²⁶ Thomas Merton *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964): 283.

In his letter to the Venezuelan Ludovico Silva, editor of the literary magazine *Papeles*—that translates into English as “bits of paper” or “litter”—Merton rehearsed elements of the essay he would eventually write for Silva’s magazine in response to Silva’s question of how Merton spent a typical day in his hermitage. In his letter to Silva Merton boldly voiced his contempt for what he considered *parrhesia*’s polar opposite—religious speech that is caged in formulas and dead words:

The religion of our time, to be authentic, needs to be the kind that escapes practically all religious definition. Because there has been endless definition, endless verbalizing, and words have become gods. There are so many words that one cannot get to God. . . . When [God] is placed firmly beyond the other side of words, the words multiply like flies and there is a great buzzing religion, very profitable, very holy, very spurious. One tries to escape by [words] of truth that fail. One’s whole being must be an act for which there is no word. . . . My whole being must be a yes, an Amen and an exclamation that is not heard. Only after that is there any point in exclamations. . . . That is where the silence of the woods comes in. Not that there is something new to be thought or discovered in the woods, but only that the trees are all sufficient exclamations of silence, and one works there, cutting wood, clearing ground, cutting grass, cooking soup, drinking fruit juice, sweating, washing, making fire, smelling smoke, sweeping, etc. This is religion. The further one gets away from this, the more one sinks in the mud of words and gestures. The flies gather.²⁷

Merton’s fully elaborated essay for Ludovico Silva’s magazine, “Day of A Stranger”, is among his best. His essay relates a “day” in Merton’s life at his hermitage.

²⁷ *The Courage for Truth*: 224-225.

Merton allows himself to speak in the unexpurgated voice of the self he was excavating to be most true. He speaks of who he has become through his unique monastic journey in three simple, declarative sentences:

What I wear is pants.

What I do is live.

How I pray is breathe.

Merton's speech, for this one day at least, becomes terse and impoverished. He distills his voice down into its ordinary communion with the chorus of all simple beings inhabiting the world:

“What I wear is pants.” (He puts off his monastic robes and the cowl that implicates his distinction and “specialness” from others. He knows himself only as he is, another ordinary man in blue jeans accomplishing ordinary tasks. He sweeps his porch, he tends his fire.)

“What I do is live.” (His vocation is a call to be simple. He needs no other place to go than where he is now. He has no one else to meet. He quiets his pronouncements. He surrenders, to this one day at least, all his grandiose plans. He considers the next task in front of his nose, even just chopping wood, as God's will for him right now.)

“How I pray is breathe.” (Being grateful to be alive is prayer. Being awake and watching as day breaks, and staying up all night as the stars dance, is his contemplation. He forgets whatever he has written on prayer and prays. He listens to whatever voices in the trees or in the gardens of his mind call out for his attention. Silence harmonizes him; it renders him receptive to the ‘hidden wholeness’ of each thing with every other thing on

which his heart lands. Alone in the woods, he listens to the speech rain makes.²⁸ He plays his small part in the simple ecologies of another day. He realizes, for this one day at least, the way the wind is blowing. And thus he receives the fruits of a sermon by the birds living near his hermitage: they are inviting him to share their liberty, to know the ordinary freedom of those who do not know they have names.)²⁹

In a journal entry for July 25, 1963, Merton transcribed in English two notes from the French in an article by M. Moré in the magazine *Dieu Vivant* (12). Not only could Merton have written these notes himself, but these insights he culled from his reading are a gloss on the three simple declarations of his true voice: “What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breathe”. Moré had written that

We don’t ever stop being plagued by words: they devour us... We spend most of our lives editing pamphlets, manifestoes, reports, writing articles, essays, novels. We rush in crowds to conferences whose numbers grow each day in inverse proportion to the interest they hold.

Then, from further down in the article, Merton copied a second more significant insight:

The witness required of each of us is much more that of a transparency rather than a witness of words—a word, even an exact one, can raise a lot of contradictions, but nothing can resist the radiation of a silence that is filled with love.”³⁰

²⁸ Thomas Merton “Rain and the Rhinoceros” in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966): 9-10

²⁹“Mark Van Doren, when he was here, said, ‘The birds don’t know they have names.’ Watching them I thought, who cares what they are called? But do I have the courage not to care? Why not be like Adam, in a new world of my own, and call them by my own names? That would still mean that I thought the names were important. No name and no word to identify the beauty and reality of those birds today is the gift of God to me in letting me see them.” *The Search for Solitude*: 123-124.

³⁰ *Turning Toward The World*: 344-345.

The “radiation of a silence that is filled with love” encapsulates Merton’s hopes for himself as monk and writer to become a “silence” that witnesses, by its inclusiveness, to the “hidden ground of love” that binds us all.³¹

It is more than strange that the Abbey of Gethsemani was the mothering spirit that gave birth to Merton’s true voice and his passing-over to a greater *parrhesia*. Gethsemani was an odd “cage” for a writer with Merton’s expansive personality, but, in retrospect, it must have functioned as a necessary and disciplined enclosure, full of secret seeds to feed Merton’s longing for spiritual liberty. Gethsemani, as a strict good enough mother, gave birth to Thomas Merton’s true voice, but, in the end, she could not contain him. Having matured and found his truer voice in Gethsemani’s “school of charity”, Merton’s departure for Asia in 1968 signaled that he would henceforth speak even more expansively. His returning to live at Gethsemani, after this major extensive and major journey, was probably not in his destiny. Probably the only way he would have returned to Gethsemani, after 1968, for anything more than a brief visit, was dead in a box, which is exactly how he returned to his spiritual motherland all too soon after his departure for Asia and points beyond.

On the last day of Merton’s life, when he delivered a talk on Marxism and monasticism, Merton related for his institutionalized monastic colleagues the advice given to a Tibetan lama, going into exile after the Chinese invasion, by one of his fellow exiles: “From now on, brother, everybody stands on his own feet”. Merton then remarked how important a monastic statement this was and suggested that everyone present remember it for the future. He then said:

³¹ Thomas Merton *The Hidden Ground of Love*. Edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux): 115.

This, I think, is what Buddhism is about, what Christianity is about, what monasticism is about, if you understand it in terms of grace. It is... a statement to the effect that we can no longer rely on being supported by structures that may be destroyed at any moment by political power or a political force. You cannot rely on structures. The time for relying on structures has disappeared. They are good and they should help us, and we should do the best we can with them. But they can be taken away and, if everything is taken away, what do you do next?³²

There is a synchronicity in this final advice from Merton's talk in Asia with an observation he had made earlier in his article "A Theology of Creativity", where he had asserted that "The dignity of man is to stand before God on his own feet, alive, conscious [and] alert to the light that has been placed in him and [become] perfectly obedient to that light."³³

We cannot know where Merton, had he lived, might have journeyed after Asia or in what ways he might have expanded his vocation further so as to speak new things. Perhaps he would have written poetry privately just for his friends, passing his illuminations on to them as so much "litter". Or perhaps—whether in Asia or Latin America--he might have gotten off a bus and become silent, entering a silence that would have signaled that he had entered an emptiness in which everything and everyone he had loved could speak and he would simply listen. Having arrived at an inner geography that was deeper than all the speech of his pious books, his prophetic manifestoes, his poems, his journals and his letters, Merton might have reached the peak of his *parrhesia* in which his freedom not to speak became the last frontier of his "fearless speech". A silent,

³² Thomas Merton *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New Directions, 1973): 338

³³ Thomas Merton "A Theology of Creativity" in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*. Brother Patrick Hart, editor (New York: New Directions, 1981): 367-368.

ordinary life, somewhere other than at Gethsemani, might have been a fitting final “word” from Merton’s lived theology of what it means to become a more deeply true human being.³⁴

Paul Evdokimov, the eastern orthodox theologian, has written that “A saint is striking because of a countenance unique in the world, because of a light that is always ultimately personal. He or She has never been seen before.”³⁵ Thomas Merton’s countenance, too, has never been seen before and the light from his spiritual legacy for us is ultimately personal. He will have no successors. He wrote in his journal after a formal “Day of Recollection” on the Feast of the Guardian Angels, October 2, 1958:

My vocation and task in this world is to keep alive all that is usefully individual and personal to me, to be a ‘contemplative’ in the full sense and to share it with others, to remain as a witness to the nobility of the private person and [the private person’s] primacy over the group.³⁶

Thomas Merton’s literary vocation to love the world by speaking out to it courageously, his monastic vocation to listen intently as the world spoke back, and his whole life’s urgency to live in and for Truth, are his enduring legacy. Those who read his words with respect will honor him, now in their own time, by enacting their own vocations to “fearless speech” and by living out their own “courage for truth”. Continuing our own inner journeys toward spiritual liberty is more important than any bows we make to the dead spiritual master.³⁷ Honoring Thomas Merton’s compassionate transparency

³⁴ For the concept of the spiritual master as a “living text” see Douglas Burton-Christie’s magnificent study *The Word in the Desert*.

³⁵ Paul Evdokimov *Woman and the Salvation of the World*. Anthony P. Gytheiel, translator (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1994: 47-48).

³⁶ *A Search for Solitude*: 221.

³⁷ This is to paraphrase a sentence of Robert Cole’s in his reflections on his mentor Eric Erickson.

demands that we, who claim to hear his voice, should stand on our own feet, find the pitch of our true voices, open our lips, and sing.³⁸

Jonathan Montaldo <montaldo@monksworks.com>

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³⁸ “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. The mere repetition of consecrated formulas is not, therefore, holiness itself. But words are the only normal keys by which we can unlock, for one another, the doors of the sanctuary and direct one another into the Holy of Holies where each of us must enter the sacred darkness in love and in fear, to find the Lord alone.” Thomas Merton *The New Man*: 88