

"Unseen until words end": Rethinking language with Thomas Merton

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I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – Too?

Emily Dickinson

More than fifty years ago, Merton wrote on April 6, 1968, that the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. confirmed 'the feeling that 1968 is a beast of a year. That the things are finally, inexorably, spelling themselves out.'¹ He draws on apocalyptic imagery and language in the face of both the beauty and ugliness of the world at the edge of which, in the midst of a consuming fire, a paradise tree stands, even if 'it must remain unseen until words end.'²

The ending of words does not mean they are to be suppressed, but that they are to be taken to the furthest shores of expression and possibility, when signifiers are exhausted and we are ready for a silence pregnant with new meaning. Thomas Merton's poetical language encompasses life and love, loss and longing, as our reading of personal and historical events shifts back and forth from logic-ridden perspectives to value-laden approaches,³ from knowing as *cogito* to a contemplative grasp of reality, from coherent threads of discourse and clouds of data, to the cloud of unknowing. He regarded 'all really valid poetry' as a 'recovery of paradise', where the world and language 'gets another chance'.⁴ For Merton, the reshaping of language in general, and poetry in particular, could effect a reshaping of social and personal identities beyond the shadows of our particular cultural heritages.

Arrival

As an oblique way into thinking about Merton's paradoxical ideas about language as expression of human alienation as well as a the way to our deepest and truest self, we refer to the 2016 film, *Arrival*. The film is based on the short piece of science fiction, 'Story of Your Life', by Ted Chiang⁵ in which the protagonist struggles to decode the language of alien visitors who communicate through circular drawings, which may be likened to Merton's Zen-like ink-blots or 'ciphers of energy', of which he wrote:

In a world cluttered and programmed with an infinity of practical signs and consequential digits referring to business, law, government and war, one who makes such nondescript marks as these is conscious of a special vocation to be inconsequent, to be outside the sequence and to remain firmly alien to the program.⁶

In the film, the researcher explores different understandings of time and causality, memory, experience, freedom and language through 'xenolinguistics', which can be broadly defined as the study of non-human or alien languages. A dramatic climax is reached when the visitors' messages are misunderstood as dreadful threat rather than essential gift. The collective quandary of the human race is traced alongside the story of the linguist's relationship of love and pain with her daughter from birth to premature death. Thus the story juxtaposes two parallel 'arrivals', the birth of the language specialist's daughter, and the unexpected coming of creatures that challenge the professor's perception of herself and of her familiar world.

At one stage the language expert gets physically close to them, with only a looking glass separating them and, naively yet understandably, tries to communicate with them by first pointing to herself and saying slowly, 'Human', then pointing to her colleague and repeating 'Human'; and then pointing to the visitors, asking, 'What are you?' The choice of wording ('*what*' rather than '*who* are you?') reveals how language shapes our relationship to others, and our notions of personhood and relatedness.⁷ The question implicitly bounces back to her as she is forced to look into the abyss of her own being: 'Who am I?' In the 'special features section' accompanying its digital version, Ted Chiang admits that, as a writer, he draws 'speculative scenarios as a lens to examine the human condition.' Specifically, he adds, 'Story of Your Life' is a question

about [this]: if you knew that your child was going to die and there was nothing you could do to change that, would you still go ahead and have that child?' One of the producers of the film, Shawn Levy, says that he was personally touched by that core notion: 'Do you choose love even if it will end in your heartbreak?'⁸ In the story, the question becomes more and more pressing at both personal and universal levels, as it applies to the main character's baby and to herself, to the rest of humanity, and to all sentient beings, whatever their origin and outlook.

As the language expert's attempts to communicate proceed, she is led to somehow establish parallels between the aliens' writing system and 'mathematical equations, notations for music and dance', non-linear units of meaning that she eventually defines as 'semagrams' (in the written story), or 'logograms' (in the film). During the scrutiny of the aliens' mode of communication, she notes down:

The semagrams seemed to me to be something more than language; they were almost like mandalas. I found myself in a meditative state, contemplating the way in which premises and conclusions were interchangeable. There was no direction inherent in the way propositions were connected, no 'train of thought' moving along a particular route.⁹

A mature relationship with God

There is resonance with what Paul Pearson wrote about Merton's later work, both in poetry and in his visual art; namely, that it 'expresses his mature relationship with God, the world, and self.' But, most importantly, he added that, in the face of dilemmas that defy even our own ability to frame them, rather than providing answers, 'Merton's visual art in the 1960s is a question mark, asking us to pause and reflect on what we are seeing and on the meaning of the spiritual, not just in art but in every part of our lives.'¹⁰ Merton himself had written:

In an age of concentration camps and atomic bombs, religious and artistic sincerity will certainly exclude all 'prettiness' or shallow sentimentality. ... The art of our time, sacred art included, will necessarily be characterized by a certain poverty, grimness and roughness which correspond to the violent realities of a cruel age. Sacred art cannot be cruel, but it must know how to be compassionate with the victims of cruelty.¹¹

Amongst those who have attempted to make life a work of art as well as to craft art as a work of life, Ernesto Cardenal, inspired by Thomas Merton, his former novice master, helped build and sustain the Solentiname commune in Nicaragua, where he was:

not only a Catholic priest but a prophet, akin to a Mayan *chilán*. The part the *chilán* played in Mayan culture is the role which Cardenal assign[ed] to himself, the modern poet-priest, as both the initiator of social change and the soothsayer delivering 'tablets which predict eclipses' (the bearer of ill-tidings to the tyrants of our age).¹²

Merton's own search for a radical new language—a kind of metalinguistic mirror of our own follies and a Pentecostal fire that purifies our mindset and points towards a geography of silence where we tread on holy ground—arose from his descent into the hell of alienation, where he dared to name the Unspeakable as 'a theological point of no return, a climax of absolute finality in refusal, in equivocation, in disorder, in absurdity, which can be broken open again to truth only by miracle, by the coming of God.'¹³ Merton's poetry spiralled down through layers of convention, transgression, subversion, and self-dissolution before re-emerging afresh, transmuted and recreated, shockingly forceful, filled with flames, wounded yet healing, ready to reveal ever new facets of his elected silence.

We have referred elsewhere to Merton's professed admiration for the writings and witness of Eberhard Arnold (1883-1935), founder of the Bruderhof communities in 1920, which followed the model of sixteenth-century Anabaptists and of the early Christians, and took Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as their blueprint.¹⁴ Arnold devoted one entire chapter of his book *Innerland* to 'The Living Word'. There he wrote:

Through the eyes of the one who is alive and at work as the new word, the chaos of the old, corrupt existence is revealed. As the spirit of Jesus Christ, the living word hovers over the deep and formless void. His glance reveals the creative might of God's love, completely restoring all true life.¹⁵

New life can only be brought to human language after having been broken open to God, after having become fully vulnerable, fragile and laid bare to the extreme of meaninglessness, once it has been fully exposed

and cracked open by the very word of God. In a conference to the novice monks at Gethsemani on February 11, 1968, Merton just tells them: 'Really our job is to be God, but I can't be God if I am a limited self. ... I have to let God be Himself in me when I've vanished, that's what we are after.' Then he shares with them the following story from the *Midrash*:

When young Abraham refused to serve idols and was thrown into the fire he did not burn to death. Abraham thought: 'If I want the idols to burn into the fire, I myself must go into the fire.'

Merton asks the monks, 'What does it mean? What is your reaction to that? What does that mean to you? Anybody ... ?' And repeats the last sentence, 'If I want the idols to burn into the fire, I myself must go into the fire.' In *koan*-like fashion, a monk replies: 'He is the idol.' Merton confirms with emphasis, 'Yeah! See? If I want to be free, the basic freedom that the Bible reveals is freedom from idolatry and the real idol is me.' Then he laughs and, echoing the intervention of another monk, he says, 'It's just another way of talking about the Cross.' He adds that 'the Cross is simply the death of this self that is opposed to God. ... The real Cross in our life is the death of our self in the very depths of our being.' Merton continued exploring with his novices the malaise of contemporary society, which keeps on adopting ever-new idols.¹⁶

In his essay, 'War and the Crisis of Language', written in 1968, Merton notes that poets 'are perhaps the ones who, at the present moment, are most sensitive to the sickness of language.' This is expressed in, for example, 'official statements' which are but symptoms of 'a national—indeed worldwide—illness' while they also constitute 'an anti-language, a concrete expression of something that is uttered in fire and bullets rather than in words.' As a preamble to the essay, Merton quotes a fragment of a poem in which he reads 'an angry protest against contemporary, denatured language', which also declares 'that ordinary modes of communication have broken down into banality and deception.'¹⁷ The poem comes from an anthology by the Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelöf, coincidentally entitled *Late Arrival on Earth*:

crush the alphabet between your teeth yawn
vowels, the fire is burning in hell vomit and
spit now or never I and dizziness you or never
dizziness now or never.¹⁸

Merton had already written to Pablo Antonio Cuadra about the nightmares that flood the fabric of our mind and pervade the discourse of our world, its very text and texture:

We live in an age of bad dreams, in which the scientist and engineer possess the power to give external form to the phantasms of man's unconscious. The bright weapons that sing in the atmosphere, ready to pulverize the cities of the world, are the dreams of giants without a center One is permitted to wish their dreams had been less sordid.¹⁹

Message to Poets

Merton's poetry implies a strong criticism of prevailing trends toward global war, totalitarianism, imperialism, racism, spiritual inertia, and crass materialism. In an ardent message to poets read at a meeting of young Latin-American writers in Mexico City in February 1964, Merton tells them that they are no longer 'in tutelage to established political systems or cultural structures', for poets dare to hope and they do have the courage to react against the inherited and already dead forms of language and experience. Poets should be concerned with the revitalization of language, and open their minds to unprecedented possibilities of interpreting and understanding: 'For the poet ... there is only life in all its unpredictability and all its freedom. ... Poetry is the flowering of ordinary possibilities.'²⁰

Since freedom lies at the core of the poetic experience, good poetry is a source of social protest against any kind of imprisonment. Merton's two epic antipoems, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, are outstanding instances, with their sustained reflections on the crisis of human language and the failure of humans to communicate. At the beginning of *Cables to the Ace* we read:

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 capsule of indignation. (Some of the better informed have declared war on language).²¹

Convinced of a need 'to reshape an accurate and honest language that will permit communication between men',²² Merton not only confronts the manufactured nonsense of mass culture, mass media and advertisements,

or the tyranny of money ('For money is blood.'). but also seems to be deconstructing inherited systems of knowledge: 'Ideas, productions, answers: sand in the eye. ... Science, Politics, Theology: sandstorms.' *Cables* includes the imperative: 'Love the inevitable! Hate alone is perfectly secure in its reasons. Over the door of Hell is written: "Therefore!"'²³ This is clearly an ironic reaction against Cartesian thinking:²⁴

"I am doubted, therefore I am. Does this mean that if I insist on making everybody doubt me more, I will become more real? It is enough to doubt them back. By this mutual service we make one another complete. A metaphysic of universal suspicion!"²⁵

However, achieving a non-dualistic consciousness that transcends all divisions requires a negative and painful process of self-emptying (*kenosis*), a deep metamorphosis (*metanoia*), and a radical unlearning (*conversatio*). In a fashion which captures the spirit of John of the Cross, Merton advises his readers to '[f]ollow the ways of no man, not even your own. The way that is most yours is no way.' And in words reminiscent of Zen wisdom, he continues, cautioning us: "Abandon your body and soul into the abundance of light sent from above and give no thought to enlightenment or illusion. Only sit like a great void of fire."²⁶

Poets—ministers of silence

Merton's choosing to wear 'the most naked [mask]', although 'it is not without risk',²⁷ resonates with a scene from *The Arrival*, the film mentioned earlier, in which the protagonist decides, against the sensible advice of Intelligence officers, to risk ridding herself of a protective garment in favour of a face to face encounter with the unknown others. Without protection, she appears without animosity or offence. So it can be with poetry, with words which do not try to convince, to sell or to buy, but 'to point beyond all objects into the silence where nothing can be said.'²⁸ As Merton put it:

We [poets] are the children of the Unknown. We are the ministers of silence. ... Let us then recognize ourselves for who we are: dervishes mad with secret therapeutic love which cannot be bought or sold, and which the politician fears more than violent revolution, for violence changes nothing. But love changes everything.²⁹

Ironically, Merton's use of poetic language seemed to work for him better and better as he, consciously, playfully albeit very seriously, worked to make it more and more 'maladjusted' to conformity. And it is precisely at this point when we would like to end where we started, with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the transcription of a recently discovered recording of his speech in London at City Temple on 7 December 1964, three days before he received the Nobel Peace Prize. Towards the end of his address, King was speaking about the way in which technical academic vocabulary can become cliché. He referred to the fashion for talk about 'maladjustment' in psychology of the time. Whilst agreeing that 'we all want to live well-adjusted lives in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities,' he went on to say that there are some things to which he was proud to be maladjusted:

I must honestly say to you that I never intend to become adjusted to segregation, discrimination, colonialism and these particular forces. I must honestly say to you that I never intend to adjust myself to religious bigotry. I must honestly say to you that I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I must say to you tonight that I never intend to become adjusted to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence. ... You see, it may well be that our whole world is in need at this time for a new organization—the International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment—men and women who will be as maladjusted as the Prophet Amos, who in the midst of the injustices of his day could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.'³⁰

As we rethink with Merton the language used for self and other, the word and the world, God and ego, innocence and experience, life and death, this kind of prophetic, almost quixotic maladjustment, might well work for our journey into the crucible of our own and the Other's heart, in our encounters with neighbours near or distant. It is when we may choose to regard the utter mystery and dignity of their being, far beyond the categories of same or other, menace or blessing, that exile from those amongst whom we belong becomes more like an arrival at where and who we long to be.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 7: 1967-68, ed. Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 78.
2. From 'The Fall' in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 355. The poem was originally published in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963).
3. Daniel Candel Bormann, 'Moving Possible World Theory from Logic to Value', *Poetics Today* 34:1-2 (2013), pp. 177-231.
4. Thomas Merton, 'Louis Zukofsky: the Paradise Ear' (1967) in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1985), p. 128.
5. Ted Chiang, 'Story of your life' in *Stories of Your Life and Others* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), pp. 91-145.
6. From 'Signatures: Notes on the Author's Drawings' in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 180.
7. Fernando Beltrán Llavador, 'Thomas Merton: a Celebration of the Person' in *Universal Vision*, eds. Fiona Gardner, Keith Griffin and Peter Ellis, 2015 Centenary Edition of *The Merton Journal*, 21:2 (Advent 2014), pp. 131-144.
8. Denis Villeneuve, dir. *Arrival* (Sony Pictures DVD, 2016).
9. 'Story of your life', p. 127.
10. Paul Pearson, 'Foreword' in Roger Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton* (Boston and London: New Seeds, 2006), pp. xvii, xvii.
11. From 'Sacred Art and the Spiritual Life' in Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), p. 164.
12. Robert Pring-Mill, 'Introduction' in Ernesto Cardenal, *Apocalypse and other poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. xvii.
13. From 'Prologue' in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 4.
14. Fernando Beltrán Llavador, 'Landscapes of Redemption: Thomas Merton's vision of the world from the Mount' in *The Merton Annual: Studies in Culture, Spirituality and Social Concerns*, eds. David Joseph Belcastro and Joseph Quinn Raab, vol. 27 (2015 Centenary Edition), (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2014), pp. 133-148.
15. Eberhard Arnold, *Inner Light: A Guide into the Heart of the Spirit* (Rifton, NY: The Plough Publishing House, 2011), p. 354.
16. Thomas Merton, 'Your search for meaning' (Lecture 1 - 2/11/1968) in *Finding True Meaning and Beauty* [CD] (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2012).
17. Thomas Merton, 'War and the Crisis of Language' in *Thomas Merton, Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995), pp. 300-301.
18. Quoted in Thomas Merton, 'War and the Crisis of Language', p. 301. In the essay the source of the quote is given as: Gunnar Ekelof, *Late Arrival on Earth*, selected poems, trans. Robert Bly & Christine Paulston (London: 1967), p. 63.
19. Thomas Merton, 'A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants' in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 374. The poem was originally published in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963).
20. From 'Message to Poets' in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp. 155, 159.
21. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 397. *Cables to the Ace* was originally published in 1968.
22. From 'Camus and the Church' in Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1985), p. 272.
23. From *Cables to the Ace* in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 401, 397, 411.
24. In his years as a student at Columbia University, Merton already recognizes this need for transcending 'the total unreality and unsubstantiality of the dead, selfish rationalism which had been freezing my mind and will for the last seven years.' Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (San Diego, New York & London: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1998 fiftieth edition), p. 229.
25. From *Cables to the Ace* in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, p. 400.
26. From *Cables to the Ace* in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 421, 434. In the second extract Merton is quoting the words of the Buddhist master Dōgen.
27. From *Cables to the Ace* in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, pp. 448.
28. From 'Message to Poets' in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p. 160.
29. From 'Message to Poets' in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p. 160.
30. https://www.democracynow.org/2017/1/16/newly_discovered_1964_mlk_speech_on [Date of Access 10 January 2018]. For basic background information on Merton's deep appreciation of King, see William Oliver Paulsell, ed., *Merton and the Protestant Tradition* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2016), pp. 86-88.

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Echoes of England & Wales

Throughout his journals, Merton mentions, almost as an aside, places and events from his teenage years.

October 1, 1939:

At a football game at Twickenham I was privileged to see the ex-King Edward VII at that time Prince of Wales. ... The late King George V and Queen Mary — they went by me quite fast in a closed car in Oxford Street.

December 4, 1940:

England is being destroyed. ... Southampton was once one of my favourite towns.

August 6, 1961:

That the quarterboys of Rye never cease to ring in my ears and that I know the silence of the broad marsh between Rye and Winchelsea. ... High Street, Guildford. And St. Albans, as I passed by in the LMS.

September 5, 1961:

Fr. Illtud Evans was here last week, among many others. ... We talked together of Cambridge, of Bede Griffiths, and Caldey.

July 14, 1962:

Reading Rose MacCauley's *Personal Pleasures*—published 1935. Therefore her swim in the Cam [river in Cambridge] may well have been the same year as mine, though probably earlier.