

THOMAS MERTON AND THE TOWERS OF BABEL

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Statement of Sources

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

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List of Abbreviations

AJ	The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton
ATM	The Art of Thomas Merton
CP	The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton
CGB	Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander
Cont	A Contemplation Re-considered: The Human Way In
DQ	Disputed Questions
Encyclopedia	The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia
ES	Entering the Silence
Gandhi	Gandhi and Non-Violence
HB	Heretic Blood
IE	The Inner Experience
IM	The Intimate Merton
Lit Essays	the Literary Essays of Thomas Merton
LL	Love and Living
MB	Merton: A Biography
MS	Manuscript of “The Oratorio”
NSC	New Seeds of Contemplation
PML	The Power and the Meaning of Love
RJ	The Road to Joy
RM	Run to the Mountain
RT	Redeeming the Time
RU	Raids on the Unspeakable
SC	Seeds of Contemplation
SIL	Silence in Heaven
SMTM	The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton
SS	A Search for Solitude
SSM	The Seven Storey Mountain
SYC	The Man in the Sycamore Tree
TLB	The Living Bread

TMAP	Thomas Merton's American Prophet
TMMA	Thomas Merton: Monk and Artist
TMPJ	Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey
TTW	Turning Toward the World
VC	Vow of Conversation
WC	What is Contemplation?
Zen	Zen and the Birds of Appetite

Abstract

This thesis will examine intensively “The Tower of Babel: A Morality” a significant work of Thomas Merton, a major spiritual writer of the 20th Century, entitled. In order to explore this play three other works which impacted significantly on the development of the drama will also be examined. These three works are: A poem also called “Tower of Babel”; a second poem entitled “A Responsory” and a musical work titled “The Tower of Babel: An Oratorio”.

Even though Victor Kramer, a Merton scholar, noted the significance of the Morality, the existing literature has all but ignored the impact of “The Oratorio” and the drama. Until this author requested a copy of “The Oratorio” from the Merton Centre in Louisville, Kentucky the work had been known by name only and had never been analysed. Yet this work was a major development from the poem “A Responsory” and led to the creation of the Morality Play.

This work argues that “A Morality” was pivotal in contributing to personal and spiritual change in Merton as well as developing a greater depth of social understanding in him. It will also argue that the work contained the seeds of future Merton writings. Writing the drama moved Merton towards a contemplative maturity based on communion not simply community. While many studies have alluded to the play none of them have studied it with this particular focus. This new focus is the discovery of the ways Merton attempted to resolve the dilemma he experienced between the paths of monk and poet and how, in doing so, he created for spiritual seekers a fresh inner significance for the Babel story. This work is opening up new ground for an understanding of the importance of Merton’s insights in the contemporary world.

The methods used in this thesis are:

1. Contextualising, that is establishing the historical, social, spiritual and literary framework in which the poems and plays were written, and
2. Literary analysis.

Part A of the thesis examines the monastic, spiritual, social, literary and academic contexts which brought Merton to the moment of writing the Morality.

Part B is organised chronologically and is an intensive analysis of the poems, the Oratorio and the Morality Play.

Part C identifies the seeds of future growth contained within the Morality play and points to some of the directions in which these seeds developed in later Merton works.

Part A: The Contexts

Introduction: Thomas Merton and the Towers of Babel

This thesis, “Thomas Merton and the Towers of Babel”, examines a series of four connected works written by the Cistercian monk, poet and social critic, Thomas Merton (Father M. Louis), two poems, “Tower of Babel”, and “A Responsory”, “The Tower of Babel: An Oratorio” and “The Tower of Babel: A Morality”. In this thesis, when it is necessary to refer to the set of works, they have been grouped together under the title “The Babel Works”. In this thesis title of the musical work will be abbreviated to “TheOratorio” and the morality play will be shortened to “A Morality”.

This thesis agrees with the scholars William Shannon and Victor Kramer that the last named work, “A Morality” is a pivotal work for Thomas Merton and required further exploration as there has been only limited research done on the work to the present. The approach to the study of the play is new as it involve a chronological study of the emergence of the play and a contextual study of the various environments in which Merton matured and developed as a monk and writer.

In studying the evolution of the morality play the researcher used a copy of “The Oratorio” in manuscript from Columbia University rare books section. “The Oratorio had not been studied in any form before that time. The existence of the work was known as Dr Patrick O’Connell had referred to it in writing the entry for “The Merton Encyclopedia” (O’Connell 490). A request was sent to Dr. Paul Pearson of the Merton centre at Bellarmine University. In turn he requested Dr. O’Connell for its location and then forwarded a copy of the manuscript in response to the request. Dr. O’Connell has since produced a paper on “The Oratorio” which he has shared with the author.

The last three works in the group of poems and dramatic works cited above were written between 1953 and 1955. A request from Mrs Gertrude Hindemith, wife

of Paul Hindemith, the composer, produced the poem “A Responsory”. “The Oratorio” was written, at the request of Hindemith as an attempt to increase the dramatic content of the original work. When Hindemith decided not to use the work, Merton then used the content, and some of the format, to compose the morality play. The original poem, “Tower of Babel”, was included in various ways in the last two works.

These works then emerged out of a particular context and indicated a number of things about Merton himself at the time of writing them, that is between 1953 and 1957. This was a time of reassessing for Merton and the thesis focuses on the indications of change and the areas of occurring in his thinking present in “The Morality” particularly.

There is no doubt “The Oratorio” was also a significant work for Merton. It opened for him anew way of expressing himself and gave him the freedom to attempt a literary genre, in which he had not previously written: drama. He would not write in that genre again. The particular form of drama he chose was a twelfth century morality play. Apart from the fact this was a time in church history he loved and felt at home in, the form gave Merton the distance and the objectivity to research significant questions regarding his own life and vocation.

At the time of writing the last three of “The Babel works” Merton was still struggling with two contraries in his life: his call to be monk and poet. All Merton’s work is autobiographical and his personas in the play allowed him to examine these two conflicting aspects of himself and to come to some resolution regarding them.

“A Morality” also contains the seeds of Merton’s future writings. This thesis breaks new ground by unearthing buried indications of the directions Merton’s writing was to take in the late fifties and sixties. The world-rejecting monk was to give way to the one who knew his place in the world and who no longer had to spiritualise realities. Confronting the problem of truth and illusion in language in the above works was major step toward change.

This thesis is not concerned so much with the quality of the Merton literature but rather with the evidence it contains as to how Merton solved the problem of the two contraries in his life, with how “The Oratorio” and “The Morality” opened new areas of creative experience and exploration for him and with how “The Morality” in particular, was a pivotal piece of work significant in the spiritual and social evolution of the Thomas Merton, monk and writer.

Chapter 1: The Movement into the Web

Introduction

The opening chapter of this thesis, “Thomas Merton and the Towers of Babel”, provides a brief introduction to the life of Thomas Merton, examines the evolution of the writer/contemplative dilemma Merton experienced in the 1940s and 1950s and describes the methodology used. The chapter then illustrates how the autobiographical sub-text of the four works being researched, “Tower of Babel”, a poem; “A Responsory”, “Tower of Babel: An Oratorio” and “Tower of Babel: A Morality”, connects Merton’s personal dilemma with his creative work and his social critique of this period.

“The Babel Works”,ⁱ cited above, and particularly the morality play, are significant, then, because:

1. “A Morality” is Merton’s only published dramatic work. “The Oratorio”, a dramatic musical work, which preceded the play was a prelude to the morality but never published.
2. The works illustrate the secular and monastic world view of the monk/poet in the 1950s and his movement towards social criticism.
3. “Babel” forms a personal metaphor for Merton in his struggle to integrate his own perceived true and false self. Merton formulated a theory of spiritual development around the concept of the true/false self. The theory is integral to the Babel works as it links strongly to the theme of truth and illusion within those same works.
4. “The Tower of Babel: A Morality” is, as Victor Kramer and William Shannon state, a seminal work containing the seeds of Merton’s further development as writer, spiritual leader and social critic.

Merton, 20th Century Spiritual Writer and Poet

Thomas Merton was a major spiritual writer of the twentieth century. His autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published in 1949 and became a best seller well beyond the immediate Catholic circle expected to be its main reading audience. His writings ranged from journal writing, poetry and systematic theology, to writings on contemplative prayer and works on social justice, war and peace.

Merton was born in France on 31st January, 1915 into an artistic family. His father, Owen Merton, was a watercolourist and his mother, Ruth née Jenkins, an interior designer. Their first son, the subject of this study, was christened Tom. He had the sensitivity and imagination of an artist from his earliest years. Merton's strongest field, however, was not to be painting but literature. His mother died when he was six and he travelled extensively with his father until Owen placed him in a French Boarding school, the Lycée Montauban, where he was most unhappy. But it was here that his passion for writing revealed itself. With a group of like-minded ten year olds Merton began writing and critiquing his first novel.

Eventually Owen removed him from the French Lycée and he was then sent to prep school in England, Ripley Court. In 1929 he moved to Oakham. In that year Merton's father died. Dr. Tom Bennett, a friend of Owen's became his guardian.

At Boarding school in England his passion for writing and reading developed further. He edited the school magazine at Oakham, won a prize for an essay on modern poetry, wrote long poems himself and read Kant while a sixteen year old on a walking tour of Germany and Italy. While at Oakham he won an Exhibition to Clare College, Cambridge.

At Cambridge Merton read D. H. Lawrence and Sigmund Freud, and tried to live his life according to their principles. He decided he was sexually repressed and attempted to resolve that problem with the expected consequences. His

behaviour was wild and riotous. After a year he left Cambridge and returned to his grandparent's home in Flushing, New York, where his brother, John Paul, had lived since their mother's death. Merton then studied at Columbia University. There he came under the influence of Mark Van Doren, a winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, and Dan Walsh, a visiting lecturer in philosophy.

At Columbia he also made friendships which would endure a lifetime. Robert Lax, the poet, Ad Reinhardt, the artist, Ed Rice, who founded the Catholic *avant-garde* magazine, *Jubilee*, Peggy Wells, Nancy Flagg and Seymour Freedgood.

During that period Merton's inner world changed and he converted to Catholicism finding himself drawn to religious life that is, to the life of a monk dedicated to God through religious vows. He wasted no time after his initiation into Catholicism before attempting to enter the Franciscan Novitiate. The Franciscans did not accept him but provided him with a job. Merton taught for some time at their college in Olean, Mid Upper New York. Not long after beginning his teaching career and via Dan Walsh he came in contact with the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance. He was astounded by that contact and drawn to the order. This religious group dated from the 12th century and was known for its strict adherence to an ascetical rule of life and the resulting system of penance which included silence, fasting and the taking of the discipline. Members of the Order also took a vow of stability, committing each monk to remain in the monastery where they began their religious life, and a vow of conversion of manners, requiring them to aim at perfection in all they did.

The main work of the Order in the tradition of Benedict, was liturgy; the chanting of the seven hours of the Divine Office daily. This prayer was known as *The Opus Dei* and was seen as the monk's way to God.

Merton applied to enter the congregation at Gethsemani Monastery in Kentucky, and entered the monastery on 10th December, 1941. He was professed in 1944, ordained a priest on 26th May, 1949, became Master of Scholastics in 1951,

Master of Novices in 1955 and moved permanently to his hermitage on 20th August, 1965. He died in Thailand on 31st December, 1968, where he was attending a conference on dialogue between Eastern and Western monasticism. His death was unexpected and occurred as the result of contact with a faulty electric fan.

The Crisis

After entering the monastery in 1941 Merton suffered a number of spiritual crises. In the late 1940s and early 1950s he endured a particular dilemma relating to the two essential passions of his life: writing and contemplation. It seemed to him that writing and one specific form of writing in which he was engaged, poetry, impinged heavily on the contemplative life he had vowed to live. It will be necessary to examine separately Merton's interpretation of poetry and of contemplation in order to understand the source of his confusion.

What is said here concerning Merton's understanding of both poetry or language and contemplation applies only to the period immediately before he wrote "A Morality". Merton was an enthusiast about many things and often changed his mind, altered his perceptions, or, to use his phrase, moved his centre very often.

In the forties and fifties this complex dilemma could be expressed in simple terms, as the confrontation between language, particularly in the form of poetry, and silence, his other name for contemplation. In archetypal terms this was the conflict between poet and monk. In the late 40s and early 50s he saw these areas as two *contraries* or extremes, unable to co-exist harmoniously in the one person. By 1959, however, four years after the first publication of "The Tower of Babel: A Morality", his position regarding language and contemplation had changed somewhat:

This week I have been rewriting "What is Contemplation?" and of course it has come out three times as long and is a completely different book. A lot of water has gone under the bridge since 1948. How poor were all my oversimplified ideas – and how

mistaken I was to make contemplation only *part* of a man's life. For a contemplative his whole life is contemplation. The last part of the book is turning into a vocal protest against *vanitas monastica* [monastic pride]. I protest too much. It is a sign of weakness and bad conscience (Cunningham SS 303).ⁱⁱ

In the 1940s and 50s Merton believed that a poet needed the mystical to some extent but not that the mystical needed the poet. He only later realised that poetry was both stimulus to and the result of a contemplative life. He arrived at this idea when he realised that his union was with God and contemplation was the means to that end not an end in itself.

In later journals, Merton was to touch on the problem of poetry versus contemplation in his life indicating that he had never fully resolved the issue. The quest to correct the misnaming of experience in relation to the poet/monk dilemma was a lifetime one for Merton.

Contemplation

There were, as has been said, two areas of his life which had an almost compulsive grasp on him.ⁱⁱⁱ The first was his absolute devotion to writing and the second, after he entered Gethsemani, a profound commitment to contemplation – to the journey towards a deep intimate union with the Transcendent. In his work *The New Man* Merton gives a number of descriptive definitions of contemplation and some of these are quoted by Father James Conner OCSO in his article “The Meaning of the Contemplative Life According to Thomas Merton” (1). It is enough here to quote just one to give an example, as Merton's ideas of contemplation will be discussed in later chapters. “Contemplation is a mystery in which God reveals himself as the very centre of our inmost self (19).

There obviously could not be two centres to one circle or to one life. If two centres attempted to occupy the same circle one centre would certainly attempt to displace the second centre. If contemplation was the centre around which

Merton's life was to form what was to happen to that other centre - writing? Were these two great passions incompatible? Was it possible to integrate them? Prior to writing "A Morality" the answer for Merton was no.

Contemplation can be defined as either apophatic or kataphatic. The first named is contemplation without images. The second is a form of contemplation, such as that used in The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. The Ignatian process begins with a focus on scripture story and uses the senses and the imagination to meet Christ present within. Images are essential to the process as is the dialogue form of prayer. Both story and dialogue have the potential to open to the gift of the prayer of quiet or infused contemplation: the total gift of God.

The form of contemplation Merton practised, however, was that of imageless or apophatic contemplation. Through this means Merton opened himself, as do all contemplatives, to the action of God as "Being" within. Images in this method were only a distraction. Dialogue is not used. The aim of this form of contemplation is a silent absorption into God. Merton believed, as do most contemplatives, that the contemplative experience cannot be captured by speaking about it except, perhaps, in paradoxes. God, as Being is beyond any known intellectual or sensual imagery.

Poetry, on the other hand, required either intellectual or sensory images. It also required a complete concentration on the work being produced and Merton often used the fruits of contemplation to produce poems. Contemplation does far more, it leads to transformation and the self must leave itself completely exposed to the God of the experience. Spiritual detachment is one of the marks of contemplation but not of poetry. Contemplation leads to an habitual awareness of God, the creation of a poem seemed to lead elsewhere.

The poet is very much aware he or she is creating. In contemplation the person themselves is being created and transformed.

Merton a relatively new monk even in 1953 was torn by the impossibility of integrating the incompatible.

Poetry

There were a number of works written by Merton published in 1953. In print were a number of articles including the introduction to *Counsels of Light and Love* and a preface in *Bernard of Clairvaux*. His full length books included the journal *The Sign of Jonas*, *Disputed Questions* and *Bread in the Wilderness*. While these three works are not books of poetry *The Sign of Jonas* contains some magnificent prose passages that are intensely poetic and *Bread in the Wilderness* sings the praises of the psalms, the ancient poems of Israel – an appropriate topic for a monk in the Benedictine tradition. In some ways both books married Merton's two passions: poetry and contemplation.

Merton wrote about the psalms as poetry. In doing so he stated that the ancient Poems have meaning. No one would dispute that but Merton also believed that the poet "has no obligation to make his meaning clear to anyone who does not want to make an effort to discover it" (McDonnell 388). For Merton poems did not have a practical end in view. He was antagonistic to the Cartesian view of reality because for him, all poems, not just the psalms, are charged with meaning. He saw creation in the same way as Gerald Manley Hopkins did.^{iv} For Hopkins creation was "charged with the grandeur of God". The charge is both an order and an energy vibrating throughout creation: a powerful discharge of love. Poems speak of, and out of, a different form of consciousness than does a scientific consciousness. The artistic poetic consciousness is intuitive and imaginative. The Cartesian consciousness, put simplistically, is pragmatic and believes in only what can be measured. The scientific consciousness controls the western world today particularly in the light of the explosion of computer science and technological discoveries. Walter J. Burghardt in his article on contemplation identifies one of the foundations of twentieth century Cartesian pragmatism:

The primary villain is a 20th century law, a law that hounds us without our knowing it, has a strong ring of virtue, seems self evident for responsible living. Almost three decades ago Walter Kerr framed that Law as follows: "Only useful activity is

valuable, meaningful, moral. Activity that is not clearly, concretely useful to oneself or to others is worthless, meaningless, immoral” (*Cont* 14).

Poems and contemplation have at least this in common: in the Cartesian world they are both useless. Their power is in the meaning they bring to life. Their difference is the first enlivens the human meaning and spirit the second leads to a union of the divine and human spirit.

Hopkins uses the ambivalence of words to produce multiple meanings and connections. In a similar way Merton believed that words of poems are not merely the signs of concepts but are also rich in affective and spiritual associations. The words of a poem when read as a whole “exercise a mysterious and vital creativity among themselves and so release their secret content of associations to produce in the reader an experience that enriches the depth of the spirit in a manner quite unique” (McDonnell 388). Therefore, for Merton, each poem is unique in itself and has a life of its own.

The Poet and the Monk

Merton saw as his particular literary gifts journal writing and the writing of poetry. In *The Secular Journal*, November 20th 1939, he wrote: “I guess where we really know how to talk is in autobiography. We can’t write *Illiads* or Greek plays but we can write autobiography and poetry” (93).

When Merton entered Gethsemani he brought with him his undoubted talent as a writer. This talent was acknowledged by Dom Frederic Dunn, his first Abbott who not only allowed Merton to keep on writing but also placed him under obedience to do so. Merton writes of a conversation he had with Dom Frederic 8th December, 1948: “Had a long talk with him that afternoon. He said earnestly – wanted me to start planning a book on the spiritual life – “a book to make people love the spiritual life.” I asked if I could narrow it down to contemplative life and he was pleased (Montaldo *SS* 26). His novice master at first supported him. Merton wrote:

I brought all the instincts of a writer with me into the monastery, and I knew I was bringing them, too. It was not a case of smuggling them in. And Father Master not only approved but encouraged me when I wanted to write poems and reflections and other things that came into my head in the Novitiate already in the Christmas season (*SSM* 306).

Merton entered a long tradition of Cistercian writing on one level but on another he specialised in writing which appeared to be the antithesis of good contemplative writing because he wrote self-referentially. Instead of discarding the self he began his writing with his own observations and experiences. It was no wonder that an inner conflict ensued for him then and pursued him for many years. The dilemma began perhaps with Merton's novice master. His response to Merton's use of the prayer intervals before the dawn, following the night office is noteworthy. Poetry came easily to Merton in that period:

The dawn is breaking outside the cold windows. If it is warm, the birds are already beginning to sing. Whole blocks of imagery seem to crystallise out as it were naturally in the silence and the peace and the lines almost wrote themselves (*SSM* 306).

His novice master, however, stopped him writing poetry in the dawn period. The Cistercian Rule and Usages kept that hour sacred to the study of Scripture. Merton did as he was told but it is probable that the discipline he exerted on himself in order to suppress the flow of images and the delight of creating caused him harm. He became scrupulous over the writing of poetry and the activity seemed to drain him as the following reveals:

I got some scruples because some poetry of ours had been published and some people like it, and I thought it was wrong for attention to be drawn to any work of ours (Montaldo *ES* 15).

And again

It is not hard to see that this is a situation in which my double, my enemy, Thomas Merton, the old man of the sea has things in his favour. If he suggests books about

the Order, his suggestions are heard. If he thinks up poems to be printed and published, his thoughts are listened to. There seems to be no reason why he should not write for magazines (*SSM* 461).

The problem was not one which would disappear and it followed Merton wherever he went:

There was this shadow, this double, and this writer who had followed me into the cloister. He is still on my track. He rides on my shoulders, sometimes like the old man of the sea. I cannot lose him. He still wears the name of Thomas Merton. Is it the name of an enemy?

He is supposed to be dead.

But he stands and meets me in the doorway of all my prayers and follows me into Church. He kneels with me behind the pillar, the Judas, and talks to me all the time in my ear (*SSM* 459).

No wonder Merton was worried! His innate honesty allowed him to see the many facets of the problem but his solution was connected to the act of writing poetry:

I got permission to ask Reverend Father for permission to give up writing verse. It is a terrific nuisance and it keeps my mind on myself and on images and ideas. It is a big smokescreen and chokes the only thing that really matters which is a simple contemplation of God without useless acts (*Montaldo ES* 42).

The problem was also related to another one which would emerge in Merton's writing and which is certainly a theme in the Babel works. This was the problem of truth and illusion. Merton was aware of how easy it was to rationalise the truth:

I am going to make vows in the middle of this dilemma. To please God I must write books and writing books makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for me to be anything like a contemplative!

. . . Also there is this important consideration that this may be an artificial creation produced by my own subconscious mind, and my real aim is to get rid of the cross of

community life which is my real repugnance, and which my conscience clearly tells me is precisely the cross God wants for me (Montaldo *ES* 47).

Merton's solution in 1948 in order to allow the necessary space for contemplation was to eliminate the writing of poetry from his repertoire. In 1957 he had altered his perception:

I think that in my own life and in my own experience it has been shown that for me, the pleasure of reading and writing poetry within certain limits "helps me Godward" and refraining from doing this altogether on the pretext that it is not according the ordinary notion of what a Trappist ought to do – or a contemplative ought to do – does not "help me Godward" or help me to be a monk or a contemplative (Cunningham *SS* 119).

The struggle was an ongoing one for Merton and a growth point for him.

St. Anne's Hermitage

Another solution was offered in 1953 when Merton was given an old tool shed which he used as a kind of pseudo-hermitage where he could experience solitude/contemplation in a space other than in the community. In that first hermitage he found he was "no longer creating himself in the image of a slightly unbalanced society" (Cunningham *SS* 27). By this he meant the community as well as the world beyond the community. This solution was a temporary one and did not eliminate the poetry/contemplative dilemma. While Merton did not write very much in his 1953 journal, the problem of writing /contemplation surfaced again as a problem of his vocation within a vocation. The problem centred on the use of the hermitage:

Big fuss this week with the cellarer, Brother Clement. . . Anyway he was full of dark allusions to people who "do their own will with permission" and openly stated that we were supposed to make our living by manual labor and not by writing books. He is quite correct. And also we are supposed to live like monks, live lives of prayer, silence etc. (Cunningham *SS* 41)

Thus Merton oscillated between abandoning poetry altogether and giving in to the compulsion to write it- even if it meant writing the same poem over and over again. The letter from Paul Hindemith's wife which precipitated the writing of "A Responsory", "The Oratorio" and "A Morality" set him to writing poetry again. The common denominator of all his poems was that the sub-text of any poem, including "The Babel works" was contemplation.

Two Contraries (Poet/Monk) in Merton's Life: Summary

The two contraries did not disappear from Merton's life though they were never as deep as they were in this early monastic period. Merton could not reconcile them because at this time he believed they were two opposed realities:

1. He saw them as opposed ways of being because: Poetry demanded language, images, the ability to make connections, a sensual awareness of creation; Apophatic contemplation was imageless and demanded in its turn a total awareness and intense concentration, a letting go of the self. At this time in his spiritual life the negativity of the *Devotio Moderna* also had hold of Merton as did the *todo y nada* of John of the Cross.
2. A poet could not be detached from his work. He was immersed in the creative process and entered the depths of his subconscious to produce a poem. A contemplative required an ascetic detachment and a ruthless elimination of the self in the God/person confrontation. Such a person entered the void to discover the dark light of God.
3. Although he was given direction by his abbot, and by other superiors, to keep on writing, Merton could never satisfy himself that writing poetry was actually God's will for him. This was so even when the Superior General told him to continue to keep writing even though he did not understand Merton's poetry. In writing "A Responsory" Merton also had to face the rigidity of censors who hated modern

poetry – an added difficulty. It required energy to fight such prejudice – an energy better used for contemplation.

The outcome of all this was that Merton ceased writing poetry for a short time (1953-57) but did in fact continue to write poetry and to explore many different experimental poetic forms in the sixties.

William Shannon in his work *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey* discusses the genesis and attempted resolution of the poet/monk conflict in Merton's life intensively. Many other critics, including Victor Kramer and Michael Higgins also make reference to the dilemma. This thesis is interested in one aspect of the subject – that the conflict forms a sub-text within the *Morality Play* and that in the creative process of writing the drama Merton consciously and unconsciously worked towards a resolution of the problem.

Everything is autobiography

Babel, an image drawn from the First Testament, was both a myth and metaphor for Merton as he wrote. The myth is significant because it is a myth about language, not just the spoken word but the redemptive word of God. Merton's Babel retells Judaeo/Christian salvation history. It is a pilgrimage towards contemplation which is portrayed in the second part, scene two as the final eternal moment of adoration when the world has been judged and restored by love. The metaphor is significant because it hints at the voices which impinged on Merton's world and in spite of his usual ability to think clearly led him to the state of confusion discussed above. The contemplative journey is Merton's own and he acknowledges this by naming the persona in "A Morality" after himself. So it is Merton who moves from the place of Babel to the place of Silence.

Victor Kramer says of Merton's work:

All of his writing became a seed-bed and a testing place, a foundation for other ideas and more art, as well as a process in his own spiritual development. In a paradoxical way, therefore, it seems to have been necessary for Merton to write so that he could become more quiet, while his poems are the record of an artist-contemplative who never forgot that language was his most valuable instrument, yet unlike many literary artists, Merton also realised that writing was only a measure to an end (*TMMMA* 33).

In the same work Kramer also makes specific reference to the *Morality Play* writing of it: "The verse seems to be a pivotal work; it looks back to early themes and forward to themes which will become of increasing importance" (81).

In writing the "The Tower of Babel: A Morality" Merton was attempting to produce a kind of Pilgrim's Progress which would be a teaching tool explaining the salvation doctrine of the Catholic Church but which would also enable onlookers to observe the personal relationship of God with human beings. God's journey with humankind^v in history is made very clear and Merton searched through the questions his persona posed to understand his own journey. The morality play is the poetic expression of that journey.

It is the autobiographical aspect of all Merton's work which connects the creative Babel works to his dilemma. He himself was aware of this element in his writing.

Every book that comes out under my name is a new problem. To begin with every one brings with it an immense examination of conscience.

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 (Montaldo *ES* 287).

William H. Shannon in his work cited above theorises that all Merton's work has an autobiographical focus. This is true even of his work on systematic

theology, *Ascent to Truth*, and the works he produced on contemplation as well as his poetry.

Shannon has an excellent discussion on this notion that everything Merton wrote had an autobiographical motif to it. He quotes Emile Cailliet of Princeton University who reviewed *Seeds of Contemplation* in relation to that subject:

[Cailliet] suggests a number of texts that surely have an autobiographical twist to them. Of whom but himself is he speaking, Cailliet asks, when he describes the man who planned to do spectacular things, who could not think of himself without a halo? "And when the events of daily life keep reminding him of his own insignificance and mediocrity he is ashamed and his pride refuses to swallow a truth at which no sane man should be surprised" (*TMPJ*.49).

Merton was later to write a poem thanking God his own halo had slipped.

Shannon supports Cailliet's idea and also suggests the autobiographical theme is ubiquitous. *Seeds* is a collection of *pensées* and there are numerous indications throughout that Merton is using a personal event even though the illustrations are couched in the third person. The following example could only have arisen from Merton's such an occurrence. Merton notes that it is virtue even to give up reading John of the Cross because one's director does not understand his work (*SC*165). As an avid reader of the Spanish mystic this would have been an extremely difficult directive to follow.

Shannon gives further examples of such autobiographical referencing from Merton's work *Seeds of Contemplation*: "who but himself is he describing when he writes: 'As soon as God gets you in one monastery you want to be in another' "(49).

Merton himself in relation to the autobiographical facet of his work wrote: "Every book I write is a mirror of my own character and conscience" (*TMPJ* 50). Taking what Merton says seriously, "The Babel Works" are also autobiographical.

In writing to Louis Massignon Merton uses the Muslim term *self-referential*. This term implies that personal and social experience becomes an integral part of teaching and belief. By extension, the context in which such experience takes place is also significant.

It is Merton's own journey which adds depth and richness to what he writes. Because he has gone through the experience, the spiritual journey appears as a possibility to the reader no matter how inadequate or uncertain they feel.

"The Babel Works" have this same autobiographical dimension and for this reason they connect with the dilemma which was haunting Merton when he wrote them. A chronological analysis of the poems which span the period 1941 to 1955 will not only lead towards an understanding of the evolution of Merton's thought on the spiritual life and on his growing critique of the various worlds he inhabited but also throw light on the way in which he was resolving the writer/contemplative question for himself.

Methodology

Merton consciously and unconsciously drew on the various social, academic, historical, and spiritual contexts in which he was immersed at different times in his life when he wrote the works cited above. His artistic and cosmopolitan family background partially formed him as did the religious movement to which he belonged and which he researched conscientiously all his monastic life. He was the product of the educational and academic scene of two major universities, Cambridge and Columbia, which helped shape his values and philosophy of life. In turn these contexts inspired and underpinned his creative works. This thesis focuses at first on the contexts which impinged on Merton and which enabled him to evolve to the point where he produced his only dramatic work: "The Tower of Babel: A Morality". The work will then analyse the main texts which contributed to the drama and the drama itself.

This study will use two particular methodologies to examine the works cited and to help explore the personal dilemma and the way Merton attempted to resolve it while writing them:

- (1) An historical framework is established through a study of the contexts impinging on Merton and
- (2) Through literary analysis of the four works cited.

Part A will explore the effect of the contexts on Merton's development as a person, monk and poet.

Part B will use literary analysis to examine the thematic significance of the poems, "Tower of Babel", "A Responsory", "The Oratorio" and "The Morality". This analysis will be done chronologically so that the evolution of his thinking will emerge clearly.

Part C will reflect on the seeds of future writings, which, according to Victor Kramer (1984) and William Shannon (1981), are to be discovered in the "The Tower of Babel: A Morality."

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the four works to be analysed in this thesis, examined the source of the dilemma Merton experienced between monk and poet, introduced the idea of all Merton writing including an autobiographical element and identified the methodology to be used throughout this work. Chapter Two will examine the literature relating to the Merton canon and identify the gestation of "The Tower of Babel: A Morality" and the associated works.

Chapter 2: For the Word is Spoken

Introduction

Chapter Two examines the literature, including Merton's own writings, which make reference, overtly or otherwise, to the dilemma Merton experienced between his two callings: writing and contemplation. It will also document the most significant references to "The Babel Works". Criticism alluding to Merton's theory around the true/false self will be examined as this theory relates to the corruption of language and of truth central to the Babel works. Finally the genesis of the works as outlined by the Merton scholar Patrick F. O'Connell is discussed.

Thomas Merton has always been a controversial figure and was further established as such in 2005 when the Catholic Bishops of America decided to omit his name from a selection of influential Catholic men and women of the 20th and 21st century to be included in a new publication. The monk and writer attracted attention from the time he published his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in 1949. Since that time biographers, scholars and critics have analysed and explored his poetry and prose writings as well as examined the relationship between his personal and monastic life to his written work and spiritual development.

There are, however, areas of his work which are still open for examination because these areas reveal how entwined is the personal struggle and the spiritual growth of this spiritual master. The Journey from rebellion to peace as outlined in both "The Oratorio" and "The Morality Play" is one such area. Through these works Merton offers his readers some understanding of their own spiritual struggle and the hope that all life events can lead to full spiritual maturity. Merton's own history reveals this.

In order to understand why the writer/contemplative (poet/monk) dilemma became so significant for Merton it is necessary to understand the historical, ecclesial and spiritual environment in which Merton existed. Merton was not a

neurotic, though at times eccentric, nor did he make an error in entering Gethsemani when he did. Merton was drawn to contemplation and the only available fully contemplative order in America was the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance. The war prevented him travelling to Europe to join the Calmoldolese or the Carthusians, either of which group would have been his first choice. His vocational problem existed on at least two levels for him: the first relating to his choice of Order and the second to his vocation within a vocation – writer/contemplative. The conflict surrounding both issues pursued him for many years. The energy projected on to those issues prevented him examining other issues he repressed and which surfaced when he met Margie in the 1960s and fell in love.

There was a certain level of both world-rejection and self-rejection obvious in these vocational issues. By rejecting the world Merton could safely also reject the “sinful” Merton. The problem is that the rejected aspect of the self needs also to be reclaimed and reintegrated if the authentic self is to function. Some of this world rejection was being fed by the negativity of the great classics such as the works associated with the *Devotia Moderna*. The Imitation of Christ resounds with phrases such as “Every time I go out into the world I come back less a man.” Even the *todo y nada* of John of the Cross associated with the *via negativa* would not have been too helpful in this stage of Merton’s development.

The solution to the dichotomy was ongoing and was experienced by Merton over time. In 1953 Merton’s situation, to use Nouwen’s term, was a case of the wounded healer sharing his knowledge and offering a way of unity through contemplation to his reading audience within and outside the monastery.

Thus “A Morality” is a synthesis of Merton’s self-rejecting attitude in the 1950s. It is of course also more than this as will be seen. The solution contained in the Babel works, and especially the morality, is both idealised and spiritual, reflecting Christian teaching on the myth of Eden, the Hebrew story of the Exile and the Catholic teaching on the total paschal mystery. But its final act of redemption reflects the beginning of a different, more compassionate view for Merton of his world as the disparate voices of his monastic and other worlds in

the play, and outside it, come together in unity. Thus the play contains the seeds of a new stance and a new openness to the world which germinates in his later works and comes to fruition in his posthumously published work, *The Inner Experience*.

History as Theme

History is one of the major themes in the Babel works and is also one of Merton's consistent interests in his early poetry and prose. For Merton history is not a mere repetition of events. In his notes for a biography of Abbot Dunn, Merton writes that history must be told by anecdote as much as by date and period. To retell history accurately requires an interpretation based on integrity. The revisionist approach, used by the Leader in "A Morality" and in "The Oratorio", is condemned by Merton and, as will be seen, dealt with ironically.

Merton's own history reveals a pattern of inner division reflected in works such as "The Babel Works". The metaphors of division changed as Merton kept writing but they bore the same message of repentance and salvation as can be seen in "The Tower of Babel" both Oratorio and Morality. This motif never quite disappeared from his work though it is seen most strongly in the nineteen forties and fifties. A volume of verse written in 1946 bore the title *Man in the Divided Sea* – an image drawn from the Jewish Pentateuch. The title reflects the ongoing conflict between the inner and outer worlds Merton inhabited as well as the inner conflict he experienced regarding his vocational and other issues. The title also throws into relief the distrust Moses experienced in relation to God's command to strike the rock and let the waters flow. In this image the waters which break open the sea to allow the passage of the Jewish people are both life-giving and life-threatening. Every step through required an act of trust. Such trust was also required of Merton as he came to understand the divided sea of his own personality. Could both the monk and poet pass through these waters unscathed?

In 1953 Merton's dominant metaphor for division was Babel. Babel conjures up an image of confusion around language and around the relationship of human beings with authority, whether human or divine. The metaphor continues to reflect the complexity of Merton as a person. There is pull between the disparate aspects of Merton's personality and this pull is reflected in the variety of names he gave himself: Thomas, Tom, Merton, Uncle Louise, Thomas James, Frater Ludovicus and so on. Naomi Burton Stone mentions this same complexity in an interview with Paul Wilkes:

NS Tom was considered so *avant garde*, but, you know what he really was, was somebody who went back into the farther past for all of the innovations – I mean his innovations in the hermit life and in the monk's life. I think probably come more from the twelfth century than the twenty-first, -second, - third or –fourth.

PW There were about 15 different Thomas Mertons.

NS O yes, many, many, many Thomas Mertons . . . and I certainly wouldn't feel that I knew him very well (Wilkes 14).

Perhaps his ambivalence had its source in this identity confusion which Merton himself recognised.

Letters^{vi}

Merton's Journals were published in the 1990s and contain his continuing autobiography. Prior to these significant publications enfleshing Merton as well as the monastic community and its daily life, a series of Merton's letters was also published.

The published letters indicate the extent of Merton's correspondence and they cover a diverse range of topics: religious renewal, spiritual direction, religious experience and social concerns. They are letters to friends and acquaintances as well as letters of encouragement and gratitude. Further correspondence with friends such as Jay Laughlin, his New Direction's publisher, Robert Lax, Boris Pasternak, Czeslaw Milosz, Rosemary Radford Reuther has also been published

as have his literary essays. These works indicate Merton's interaction with a global community well beyond the monastic walls.

The letters also indicate the growth of freedom regarding his correspondence which occurred through the years. Merton's mail had always been a source of difficulty to him and with the success of his autobiography it increased dramatically. In the early period the Abbott or Prior chose what mail would be passed to Merton and some four or five monks were delegated to answer letters in "Merton's style". It was through his second journal that Mrs Hindemith decided Merton might be able to produce a work her husband could set to music. This letter was given to Merton. With that letter she set in train the creation of the Babel works.

Journals

Merton placed a restraint upon the posthumous publications of his journals. His literary executors were to ensure they were not published until twenty-five years after his death. The publication was awaited eagerly as some of Merton's most vital writing appeared in *The Secular Journal* and *The Sign of Jonas*. Merton's journals could be described as history through self-revelation. The journals not only trace Merton's spiritual and personal quest but also the monastery's religious and monastic evolution in the years following World War II, during the Cold War and during the Vietnam imbroglio.

The journals and letters reveal much of Merton's daily struggles with authority, community and himself, particularly the ongoing crisis he had with his writing. They reveal his yearnings for solitude and what was, perhaps, an Edenic dream of a hermitage where he could live out perfectly the monastic ideals of silence and solitude. It is no accident that "A Morality" and "The Oratorio" conclude with the romanticised image of a rural village where all things lost are restored.

His journals also reveal his near sabotage of some of his ideals: leaving the hermitage without permission is one such example; ringing Margie, the woman

he loved, from the Cellarer's office another. Alongside such sabotage there is also evidence of Merton's integrity in examining, owning and working through his false self in order to discover his authentic self. He constantly moves towards the *point vierge* – the place where God resides in each person and where the unity of God and the human is possible.

In his journals Merton was engaged in re-writing and reinterpreting his own life-story as honestly as he could. *The Seven Storey Mountain* was an integral part of his life quest to know himself, to know where he came from and to know the direction in which he was going. This ongoing critique coupled with his success as a writer made Merton highly suspect as a monk. He no longer fitted the stereotype the Catholic world loved. Ross Labrie gives one more reason why Merton was such a controversial figure when he writes:

The fundamental motif in *The Seven Storey Mountain* is that of a spiritual quest, and the title reflects the arduousness as well as the final success of the journey. The title refers to the interval in which Dante and Virgil had passed through hell to the sea at the foot of the seven-circled mountain of purgatory. The purgatorial theme is amplified by Merton's memory that as a young man he had been blinded by "seven layers of imperviousness," the seven deadly sins which required the refining action of fire (*ATM* 39).

One of Merton's biographers, Michael Mott, states that prior to the writing of his autobiography the idea of the morality play or a mystery play was already in his mind. Merton let the notion of the mystery play go once he was given permission to begin on the work for Hindemith. Obviously he did not let the idea go completely.

Jonathon Montaldo has produced a succinct summary of the seven journals in a work entitled *The Intimate Merton*. Montaldo describes his work as a "sustained narrative of redemption." (2). He also quotes Merton's poem referred to previously as "the lucky wind which blew away his halo." For Merton there was never to be a pseudo-sanctity but only a constant search for the authentic in life.

Ambivalence

Chapter One has already mentioned that Merton's ideas about people, places, and events were never static. His centre was constantly changing on one level but firmly fixed on another. No matter how far he travelled on emotional and intellectual pathways he was drawn to solitude, a word which became his alternative for contemplation. Merton always came back to the contemplative experience as the heart of his own, and of all spiritual seekers' spiritual life. It was also, for him, the heart of monasticism.

The titles of the volumes of poetry for 1947 to 1949, chronologically, reflect his life experience at those times: *Figures for an Apocalypse* and *The Tears of the Blind Lions*. The titles are scriptural in origin and speak, as do his other choices for titles, of an inner experience of division, judgement and sadness. In some ways they reflect a Rilkean notion of discord. For Merton there was always a level of tension in his life and ambivalence which is reflected in the dichotomies he experienced and in his works.

The locus of Merton's ambivalence was the emotional gap left in his life by the rigidity and coldness of his mother towards him. To give Ruth her due she was a sick woman when Merton was young and had always had a reputation for eccentricity. This may be the reason why her education methods were also eccentric. Her expectations of the young Merton were beyond his years. There is no doubt Merton suffered at her hands. But he also suffered as a result of Owen's instability and single-minded pursuit of his art at Merton's expense. Owen was involved in the art world, at least on the periphery of it and his love affair with Evelyn Scott did not build his son's confidence. All this simply means that Merton emerged as a complex character, difficult to grasp, no matter how much he wrote. He was complex enough to himself as much as to his biographers. The writer in the forties was not the same man who wrote in the fifties or the sixties. The past and present Babel of inner and outer voices to which he was subject constantly led him in new directions in an attempt to resolve their impact on him.

In *The Art of Thomas Merton* Ross Labrie recognises this basic ambivalence in Merton's character. At one moment it pulled him towards silence; at another towards connection. While the two are not mutually incompatible they seemed to be so to the Merton of the 1950s. In that period and later he was haunted by a wholly inner ambivalence. Labrie notes:

This ambivalence was to remain in him all his life, and while it was a source of some anxiety to Merton himself, it is one of the strongest centres of excitement in approaching his work as well as one of the clearest ways in which to see his role in twentieth century letters (*ATM* 1).

Such ambivalence gave rise to unfulfilled yearnings. The poet/monk are both archetypal expressions and reflect particular yearnings of the human spirit. A yearning occurs when the person feels something lacking in their life and living. It was so with Thomas Merton. Both archetypes fought for dominance in Merton's psyche and the confrontation, expressed in the first line of "The Oratorio" and "A Morality" point to deep issues around connection: "Words and silence standing face to face/ weigh life and death (*CP* 672). The metaphor of Babel which spoke to Merton so strongly in the forties and fifties is built around the language and reality of connection and disconnection and so was pertinent to Merton's experience of ambivalence and anxiety at that time.

How was Merton to remain connected to the wider world inviting him, through his writing, "to write his name in the heavens?" How was Merton to remain connected to the monastery through silence? Merton oscillated between affirmation of either monk or poet at each one's expense.

Labrie makes the significant point that for Merton writing actually seemed to subvert contemplation. Was it possible for the two activities to be mutually supportive?

In his more sanguine moments Merton affirmed that art opened "up new capacities and new areas in the person of the contemplative." This effect was due to the

fruitfulness of the artist's imagination that could discover "correspondences, symbols and meanings" which in turn became nuclei around which the contemplative perception could orbit. Moreover, the artist was akin to the mystic because of the "prophetic intuition" by which he saw the spiritual reality, the inner meaning of the object that he contemplated (*ATM* 8).

Merton fluctuated between the two poles of yes/no as to whether the monk or poet, that is, the contemplative or artist, could co-exist without detriment to either. He would arrive at a conclusion then find it inadequate. This process of altering his mind may have been annoying for some because it was a process he used in evaluating life. It was annoying to his novices who heard him celebrate Rilke as a great poet one day and then a week later criticise him negatively. The process of fluctuation/ambivalence was the way Merton grew as well as, in all probability, a psychological escape route from intimacy. Labrie sees the fluctuations Merton precipitated around artist/contemplative as arising from guilt. But that dilemma was also a problem of intimacy and identity. The struggle to come to terms with guilt and intimacy form part of the substratum of the Babel works.

In 1958, a year in which some of the seeds of change evident in the *Morality Play* germinated and Merton achieved some stability around the monk/poet dilemma, he wrote: "I can no longer see the ultimate meaning of a man's life in terms of either "being a poet" or "being a contemplative" (*The Art of Thomas Merton* 9). Labrie concluded, with Merton, that each person must be allowed to have his own particular desire. This conclusion is the one that emerges in Merton's "The Oratorio" and "A Morality". Persons are no longer identified only by number. It was not just the secular world Merton had in mind. Some religious orders also identified their members by number – on clothing and so on. People are not machines to be manipulated as the Nazi regime treated those it incarcerated in concentration camps. Redemption occurs when the individual is called by name. Each person is then known to the Logos by the secret name God gives them – that God whose Word is love.

History as Biography

The literature relating to Thomas Merton as a person includes a number of biographical works drawn from many different sources: friendship, Merton's writings, anecdotes, secondary material. The biographies both relate and interpret Merton's life.

His biographers are often working with the same source material but put their own slant on the same struggle. Many different facets of Merton are revealed as a result. The biographers often were not under the same constraints of censorship as Merton so they could write much more freely. In his autobiography Merton could not uncover the fact he had fathered a child at Cambridge nor write with clarity about his behaviour and turmoil. Merton thus exposed himself in his writings but was forced also to hide himself in the symbols and images of his work as he did when writing the Babel works. The unnecessary ambiguity which sometimes results was not all of his doing.

John Howard Griffin

John Howard Griffin was commissioned to write the first official Merton biography. He was well known as a writer particularly for his work *Black Like Me*. This was a seminal work which shocked America. Griffin was Merton's friend. He had confronted deep prejudice in his own life and this fact enabled him to do justice to this controversial religious figure. He spent some time in Merton's hermitage but sadly was quite ill and could not finish the work. The original title he proposed for the work, "Follow the Ecstasy", summed up Merton's life in archetypal terms – follow your bliss being a favourite expression of Joseph Campbell.

Griffin gives insight into Merton's sense of humour, his compassion and his struggle towards contemplative freedom during the last three years of his life. These were significant years in which some of the deepest yearnings Merton experienced were fulfilled but at a cost to himself, to Margie, the woman whom

he loved, and to his life as a hermit. Somewhere in that time Merton had to confront the illusion of Babel, step aside from it and make a choice between two desires, both of which he valued: a life with Margie or a life of solitude. Griffin comments on this as follows:

The situation with Margie, he felt, was an important part of the whole picture, “and shows my limitations as well as a side of me, that is – well it needs to be known, too, for it is part of me. My need for love, my inner division, the struggle in which solitude is at once a problem and a solution.” (*Hermitage* 94)

Monica Furlong.

The first full length biography of Merton was written by Monica Furlong and published in 1980. Furlong wrote before the public had access to the Merton journals. Her work revealed a flawed Merton and she herself came through as somewhat shocked by what she described as Merton’s cavalier attitude with the monastic rules especially concerning the incident with Margie (*MB* 313). It is a Merton who struggled not to rationalise in order to achieve his own desires and one who does not always succeed avoiding rationalisation. The truth/illusion element of Babel was very much present in his struggle.

Furlong, though, also presents a Merton who sustained his life-long search for the “great compassion.” He fought desperately for the things he knew were life-giving for him – the hermitage was just one example. Merton loved the hermitage and in a letter to a friend wrote: If I get cooped up in the hermitage it is usually enough if I go for a walk to one of the lakes or climb one of the knobs. This is all I need and I assume it is all right to do this (*MB* 313).

Yet in many ways Merton walked a fine line between freedom and escapism.

In a sense Merton was being less than honest both with Dom James and with himself in his postscript –much as he loved roaming the countryside, it was not enough to feed him emotionally – he needed the occasional company of Jim Wygal, Tommie, and her family, the local friends he had, and the “visiting firemen” as much as he

needed food. Visitors often gave him physical freedom from the environs of Gethsemani – Jay would come and drive him to other parts of the countryside and, Donald Allchin and a friend took him on a much enjoyed visit to Shakertown at Pleasantville. One Louisville couple close to Merton remember an urgent telephone call from him urging them to give him an evening out; they spent it in a Louisville hotel that had a black jazz band, which enthralled Merton, who struck up a long conversation with the drummer. (Furlong *MB* 313)

This was a Merton who struggled with the monastic limitations imposed on him and also with the limitations he imposed on himself through the hermitage. This was both the old reckless Merton emerging and the marginal person still struggling with the true/false self within.

Ed Rice

Ed Rice's biography, *Man in a Sycamore Tree* used the title of one of Merton's early novels. It is an appropriate title to a man who could see prophetically and who was as anxious to meet the Christ, the Word of God, walking the streets of his city as Zachariah was to see the Christ in Jerusalem. Zachariah had climbed the sycamore tree in order to see more clearly. Was Gethsemani Merton's version of that tree in Rice's mind? Zachariah, the tax collector, was also, as was Merton, poet and monk, the marginal person, the outsider who saw from the sidelines but who never really belonged. "A Morality" sustains this theme also. Thomas, and to some extent Raphael, both represent the marginal person in "A Morality".

Rice's biography of Merton is unorthodox in its approach. He described it as "an entertainment with pictures".

Rice saw Merton in different terms to his other biographers. He was Merton's close friend for many years and in his view his friend had been exploited by the monastery. This is the subtext of his biography:

He was critical of the world but not of Gethsemani. He saw the monastery as the “only real city in America” and perhaps he suspended all his critical judgements except when one could not be avoided. (*Sycamore* 53)

It is not hard to read between the lines and understand that Rice believed Merton should have been far more critical than he was. Merton did become alienated from the monastery and, even before his solemn vows, remembers a moment of great bitterness towards it which was so strong he never forgot the feeling. In relation to this Rice quotes Merton again:

He once remarked that the monk (he meant himself, of course, and not the usual timeservers in most monasteries) was among the marginal persons who lived in the presence of death, like prisoners and displaced people, in an act which calls into question the meaning of life. (125)

Rice’s own bitterness in some ways colours his story but he honoured Merton and the writing of the biography was a genuine act of friendship.

The Merton who walks through these studies resonates with the text and sub-text of the Babel poems. He emerges as a person in conflict, changeable, ambivalent, struggling with his own demons, but always with his compass pointed towards solitude, that is to say, as all his writings suggest, towards contemplation.

General Criticism

Scholarship has examined Merton and Merton’s writings from many perspectives. A number of selections of Merton’s writings have appeared beginning with Thomas P. McDonnell’s *A Thomas Merton Reader* organised in collaboration with Merton in the 1960s. Lawrence S. Cunningham’s *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* and Christine M. Bochen’s *Thomas Merton, Essential Writings* are modern compilations of his writings. *The Merton Annual* and *The Merton Seasonal* produce a consistent stream of articles on various aspects of Merton’s work.

Full length studies include that by George Kilcourse who, among his other scholarly works, has analysed Merton's Christology in his book *Ace of Freedoms*. Michael Higgins has produced an in depth study on Blake and Merton, *Heretic Blood*. Thomas M. King titled his study *Merton Mystic at the Centre of America* and Raymond Bailey writes on *Thomas Merton on Mysticism*. There are also many collections of Essays varying from that edited by Paul Wilkes as a kind of memento of Merton by his friends to the recently published *The Vision of Thomas Merton* by Patrick F. O'Connell.

The titles indicate a subtle change in the approaches being taken to Merton academia today. Recent Merton studies focus on the vision and the essential works necessary to become familiar with his ideas on the spiritual life and his social criticism.

Significant studies on Merton's poetry have also been produced. George Woodcock divided Merton's poetry into poems of the choir and desert. In examining *Babel* it contains elements of both types of poetry. Labrie and Higgins also do a holistic analysis of the poetry and Labrie places Merton in the context of mid-century American Catholicism in *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature* noting that as a Catholic writer Merton clung to the earth as the necessary route of his salvation (118). This has implications for "The Babel Works", the last two of which end with a celebration of redeemed nature.

All of the above works and many others are significant as they move the reader towards a deep understanding of Merton's work for the modern world. In light of this thesis, however, there are only a few who mention "A Morality" and, with the exception of Patrick O'Connell, none mention "The Oratorio".

The True and False Self

James Finley's recently republished classic, *The Palace of Nowhere*, elucidates two of the major themes in Merton's work: the prayer of presence and the true/false self dichotomy with which each human being has to contend. Both

these aspects of Merton's writing are themes in "The Babel Works" and are fundamental to an understanding of the spirituality that serves as the foundation of his thought.

The method of James Finley, a former novice at Gethsemani, and Anne E. Carr is typical of the way in which writers have examined the Merton opus and particularly pertinent in relation to one of the major themes of the Babel works – language. A brief examination of their work reflects much of what is written about Merton in the area of contemplation and the particular aspect of Merton's theory of contemplation reflected in his Babel poems: the true/false self. In the poems this dichotomy is expressed through the division of language into falsehood and its affiliates and truth, which stands with Silence and the Logos.

Finley notes that a metaphor Merton employs for contemplation is "the door to the palace of nowhere" – the door to God, whose centre is nowhere and whose presence is everywhere. Perhaps this door which cannot be fully explained is in direct opposition to the tower and the prideful city which is Babel.

This language indicates that even in this early period of Merton's life there were strong Zen undertones to Merton's explanation of contemplation – the process of which leads to the place where all things become one. The natural end of contemplation is unity hence the need to resolve all those elements in each one which deform rather than form us; which disunify rather than unify individuals in themselves and in their world. Finley recognises that the search for a spiritual identity is very much associated with a culture which has lost meaning.

Anne E. Carr's work *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit* explores Merton's theology of self through analysis of some of his basic texts including *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

Finley's experience of Merton as lecturer and director gives his text a personal edge while Carr's work attempts to give a theological framework to Merton's thoughts around the idea of the true/false self. Such a structured analysis was not Merton's basic strength in writing. His work *The Ascent to Truth* was an

attempt to present a synthesis of contemplation through understanding the writings of Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross on contemplation, and synthesising their work. He did what he set out to do, but most critics commented on the work as inadequate and Merton felt it was one of his weaker texts. His strength in writing on spirituality and contemplation, or for that matter on literature, lay in writing shorter texts, such as articles or essays. The strength of a work such as *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, lay, as William Shannon commented, in the fact that it was written as a series of short pensées.

Carr's work is important because it attempts to measure Merton's contribution to understanding religious experience, and his contribution to an understanding of human growth towards spiritual maturity within a rigorous framework. For Carr, the true/false self is a term with a strong Augustinian flavour. Dan Walsh, Merton's friend and mentor, commented that Merton's own conceptual manner of thought was related more to Augustine than to Aquinas. Augustine saw the natural world in negative terms and the false self as coming into existence because of the separation from the Creator at the time of the Fall. "Divided within, one is alienated from one's own truth and identity" (Carr 32). The division is experienced in all dimensions of creation and is very much a constant theme in scripture. Desire and receptivity are fundamental in restoring a true God/human relationship.

The paradox is that unity must be desired but can only be achieved by the gift of God.

The works on Babel resonate with an Augustinian understanding of the contrast between the earthly city and the city of God. One of the epigraphs of Merton's play quotes it. Carr's use of the Augustinian polemic and its scriptural underpinnings serves as a key for understanding the source of Merton's thinking regarding human beings and their call to contemplation. Carr also quotes from Merton's writings on the palace of nowhere citing Merton's words, in much the same way as Finley uses them, to illustrate Merton's understanding of mystery. Both Finley and Carr are aware of the way Merton uses metaphor to interrogate the world. Metaphor is the vehicle Merton uses most successfully to explain the

paradox of contemplation. Both writers quote Merton's metaphor of the three doors to the palace of nowhere as particularly apt. The doors described – the door of emptiness, the door without sign and the door without wish - find their contemplative fulfilment in the Christ figure who described himself as the door through which all must pass if they are to enter fully into the realm of the spiritual (*AJ* 153-5).

Babel was both a metaphor and context for Merton when he wrote “The Oratorio” and “A Morality.” The metaphor is unlike the one quoted above, that is the metaphor of the doors, which has both Christian and Zen overtones. Babel is a Jewish legend and is therefore scriptural. It is literary as well because it draws on sacred story and on myth, particularly the good/evil archetypes characterising myth. It does not have the subtle connotations of the Eastern metaphor. The “prideful city” is the place of exile, of nostalgic yearning and lends itself well to the theology of Augustine who separated the secular and the sacred in his description of the two cities – the earthly city and the city of God. The fact that Merton used Augustine's analogy and the fact that Carr draws on his Augustinian sense substantiates Walsh's belief in Merton's mind being more akin to Augustine than to Aquinas. The contemplative in Merton tended to think in polemics in the 1950s. Later he came to understand that the division of sacred and secular was simply a man-made construct. The sacred is present in all creation.

Much if not all of Merton's poetry carries within it the essence of the three essential contemplative strands described by Finley and Carr. Each of these strands is necessary for contemplation. For Merton, contemplation is beyond time and place; beyond society and culture. It is the energy which unites all humankind. It is the opposite of the Babylon/Babel experience. The latter is non-compassionate, universally destructive, driving out harmony. Contemplation respects universal silence, which is the silence of God. “No, the Word lives louder in silence” (*MS* 9). One does not have to hear God for God to be present. Merton needed to write about Babel in order to perceive and challenge the opposing forces to contemplation and to grow in his own self understanding and in understanding of his personal contemplative experience.

The Towers of Babel

“The Babel Works” are significant because in them Merton’s evolving spiritual voice is heard speaking to those who suffered the aftermath of global devastation. Similar human loss, political, social, financial and religious devastation continues today through war, oppression, and abuse on a global level.

A number of Merton critics and scholars have discussed the morality play briefly as well as the associated works. This section will limit itself to the criticism of the drama as it is discussed by Therese Lentfoehr, Michael Mott, Ross Labrie, Michael Higgins and Victor Kramer.

Thèrése Lentfoehr

Lentfoehr, a close friend of Merton and a poet in her own right lectured and gave readings on Merton’s poetry. She typed up many of his early works, retaining the holographic copies and donated them to Columbia University believing that was Merton’s desire.

Lentfoehr chose for the title of her text the two words which typified Merton for her in 1976: Words and Silence. Her critique covers the entire period of Merton’s poetic output concluding with the myth-dream of Lograire and Cables.

The quotation used at the outset of her discussion touches on the problem of intimacy which emerges in Babel:

Why are we afraid of love?
Why should we who are greater than grain
Fear to fall in the ground and die? (Lentfoehr 1)

The author also notes that Merton owes a poetic debt to the various poets he read such as Lorca, Eliot, the Metaphysical Poets, Hopkins and Auden. Lentfoehr traces the development of Merton’s poetry dealing with recurrent

themes as they occur. Images such as window, children, angels, fire, guns, war, birth, journey, the Apocalypse, stars, technology and the city are present within his early poetry. Many of these images and metaphors also occur in the Babel works.

Lentfoehr does not discuss the theme of technology in relation to the Babel works but notes the significance of technology for Merton. This theme underlies much of the premise of the morality play: technology alienated those who depend on it and live by it. It deadens their human qualities and their moral perspective (*WS* 95). This conviction is repeated by Merton in the following extract taken from an unpublished Merton manuscript:

[There is a fear] of technology becoming an end in itself and arrogating to itself all that is best and most vital in human effort: thus man comes to serve the machines instead of being served by them. This is completely irrational. One whom I have always admired as a great social critic – Charlie Chaplin – made this clear long ago in “Modern Times” and other films (Lentfoehr *WS* 2).

The place where technology ran riot and where its control was most obvious was the city. In many of his poems (“Hymn of Not Much Praise for New York City”, “How to Enter a Big City”, “Exploits of a Machine Age” and others) and certainly in “The Babel Works”, the broken remnants of a generic city reflect the trauma and destruction of which the machine is capable.

Lentfoehr also understood Merton as a religious poet. She realised his strength lay in recognising his own inner experience and facing its reality no matter what the cost to him personally. Merton strove to articulate that process in his poetry. Babel is part of that articulation.

In her text Lentfoehr notes that “A Responsory” was a prelude to “The Tower of Babel: A Morality” but does not mention “Tower of Babel: An Oratorio”. She outlines the structure of the morality and focuses on the confrontation which occurs in the play from its beginning: the confrontation between language and morality, between words and silence.^{vii}

Lentfoehr makes a major contribution to the understanding of the drama when she includes in her work as an appendix Merton's notes written to accompany the one public performance of the drama. The play was performed on television for *The Catholic Hour*, January 27th, 1957.

Ross Labrie and Michael Higgins

Ross Labrie agrees that Merton set out to write "The Tower of Babel: A Morality" as a modern morality play but suggests that it is in fact a dramatic poem. Labrie understands the tower as symbolising both the "hubris of technology and the abuse of language" (*ATM* 130). The latter is seen as inevitable in a culture where communication is mostly mechanical. As communication becomes more computerised the problem increases. Merton had a prophetic insight into what is now a global situation even in the 1950s.

For Labrie, while the drama has some powerful and dramatic imagery, for example the clenched fist rising from the desert as nature turns against the builders of the tower; it lacks the action and visual drama necessary for good television.

Michael Higgins' work, *Heretic Blood*, compares Merton with William Blake as poet and social critic. For Higgins "Blake's fire of judgement – the apocalyptic fire of the Hebrew prophets – and Blake's apocalyptic fire of cleansing are both present in Merton's poetry" (141). This is certainly true of "The Babel Works". When Merton wrote them he was reading the First testament prophets intensively. The sense of prophetic power is evident in the desert images and in the destruction of the tower as it falls.

Higgins recognises the play uses the earlier "Tower of Babel" as a source for the longer drama. For Higgins the play is an elaborate treatment of Merton's myth-dream – a term Merton used in *The Asian Journal*:

The "noble lie" in Plato's *Republic*? . . . is the myth-dream by which in fact every society lives; only some are "nobler" and more credible than others. Maybe the

“noble lie” is really the credible and workable myth. The trouble is that such myths cannot be consciously fabricated (264).

Higgins’ interpretation of the drama involves the struggle for the individual between the powers of the tower and that of the Child. This interpretation is consistent with his Blakean approach to Merton’s poetry. The dialectic is between the supporters of the Leader and the supporters of the Word. This is again an archetypal confrontation of good and evil though expressed in specific terms. This is the basis of the disunity, initiated at Babel but really an extension of the Edenic Fall. Truth and the Silence of God are betrayed and meaning manipulated. The poet has the same role as the mystic in this drama. They are there to unify the disparate elements and restore the original myth-dream: to be aware of a transcendent common myth-dream which is basic to the entire human race (Higgins *HB*151).

Higgins understands the significance of Merton’s drama but he does not relate it to the future in the sense that the drama contains the germ of future works although he sees the work as standing in the tradition of Merton’s earlier works.

Victor Kramer

It is Victor Kramer, supported by William Shannon, who realises that the morality play is pivotal to an understanding of Merton as writer and as monk and contains the seeds of future works (*TMAM* 81).

Kramer’s approach is different to that of Higgins. The emphasis in this interpretation is on technology and the political use of language and so has some relationship to Lentfoehr’s understanding of the play. Kramer recognises the significance of the original poem in relation to the play and writes of it as follows:

As man builds his tower of Babel the primary function of language is to designate the machine in which he has faith. Then the machine proceeds to destroy the very thing which it produces. The horror is that man is seemingly incorporated in such a

forward movement: what is forgotten is that he will be destroyed in the process:
“Insofar as man is more important than God . . . Words reflect this principle (*TMAM*
5).

Humanity’s false self is its mechanized, robotic self receiving information, processing it and obeying orders without thought or imaginative wonder.

Kramer understood clearly Merton’s world rejection. Merton’s early poetry reflected the strength of the institution and proportionately therefore the strength of his world rejection. It was only later that he came to realise there were aspects of the world to be celebrated. The dancers and singers of the last scene in *The Tower* are very rooted in the earth and this rootedness suggests the earth is the source of celebration.

Kramer writes of this aspect of Merton’s persona:

What he [Merton] later came to learn was that he had earlier only seen fragments, and he realised that such partial knowledge was not an accurate reflection of the world but rather his own subjective response. (*TMMA* 46)

While Kramer acknowledges the power of the theme of the distortion of language within the play he also sees that when Merton wrote the play he felt he had begun to find the heavenly city in Gethsemani. Under the influence of his world rejection and his acceptance of Gethsemani Merton’s work powerfully contrasts the city of man with the city of God.

As has been said Kramer sees the *Tower* as a pivotal work but he makes no distinction in his 1984 text between the *Oratorio* and the *Morality* believing that the draft copy Mark Van Doran had was of the *Morality* play. But Kramer did feel it significant that Merton felt a verse play an appropriate format in which he could express his concern for the contemporary world. The historical perspective was obviously important to Merton as was the integrity of the poetic voice in writing the play. The concerns which surfaced in the play for Merton

around language, technology, war and peace, materialism and contemplation were to become increasingly important in his future writings.

Genesis of the Babel Works

Central to the genesis of “The Babel Works” is “The Oratorio”. Dr. Paul Pearson of the Merton centre at Bellarmine College at the request of the author asked Dr. Patrick O’Connell to locate a copy of “Tower of Babel: An Oratorio”. Dr. O’Connell located a draft copy at Columbia University rare book section. Since then Dr O’Connell has produced a paper on “The Oratorio” which he has shared with the author of this thesis.

On 9th March, 1953 Merton recorded a request from Mrs Paul Hindemith asking if Merton had a suitable work her husband could use for a “Responsorial Chorus” he was preparing for a youth convention (Montaldo SS 37). Merton began writing immediately. By the 3rd June, 1953, Merton had completed the first draft of the “chorus” and submitted it for Hindemith for approval. In a letter to Dom Gabriel Sortais, then Father General of the Cistercian Order Merton described the work as follows: The subject is theological: The Tower of Babel – the theme is the “word” in man’s life – the word perverted by sinful pride. God’s Word that comes into the world to the world to restore the order destroyed by sin, themes of division and unity etc. (Unpublished manuscript: Bellarmine archives: 3rd June, 1953).

Merton wrote to Dom Gabriel because he was extremely anxious about the reaction of a particular internal censor (Fr. M.) to the work. He wanted to know from Dom Gabriel whether one *nihil obstat* was sufficient to ensure the publication of the chorus. Part of his anxiety arose from previous experience over the publication of his journal *The Sign of Jonas*. He also did not want to keep Hindemith waiting and knew Fr. M’s bias against modern poetry.

From 1953 there was a constant exchange of letters between Merton and Hindemith's wife. After he received Merton's first work, *A Responsory*, Mrs Hindemith assured Merton "Paul felt very close to your poetry". Hindemith, however, required something more dramatic for a performance.

Merton rewrote the poem producing a work with a different title, "The Tower of Babel: An Oratorio". On 3rd June 1954 he sent a draft of the [tower] of Babel to Mark Van Doran. This was The Oratorio – a more dramatic form of "A Responsory". Merton tried to adapt his own style to a form the musician could use easily as a basis for composition. Van Doran's version was bequeathed to Columbia University and is the draft copy used in this thesis.

This oratorio was then expanded and developed into the morality play. The drama was published in *Jubilee* by Ed Rice in 1955 and the draft copy of the morality sent to Thérèse Lentfoehr, who in essence, was Merton's first archivist. Merton was grateful Rice had forwarded her the draft saying in a letter to Lentfoehr it was what he would have liked to see happen (Daggy RJ 221).

By 1956 Hindemith^{viii} had decided not to use the Tower of Babel and gave Merton the freedom to use it elsewhere.

Jay Laughlin, of New Directions, organised the printing by The Cunningham Press of a limited edition, hand printed with woodcuts, of "The Tower of Babel: A Morality". Sadly Paul Williams of the foundry was killed in a car accident and the American press was not able to produce the copies. The production was then transferred to Germany where the limited edition was produced by Richard Von Sichowski. The woodcarvings were by Gerhard Marks.

Patrick O'Connell clarifies the production date. Although "The Tower of Babel: A Morality" bore a 1957 publication date, it wasn't released until mid 1958 due to numerous printing errors.

The journey to the finished production of The Tower was complicated. Merton eventually signed the first pages of the finished copies but even then on

returning the pages to Laughlin there were difficulties: the binder reports that the mail did not treat them too kindly on their return journey, but he thinks he will be able to fix them up by dampening and pressing them. (TMJL 128).

Conclusion

This chapter has described the manner in which Merton's journals and biography contributed to knowledge of the complexity of Merton as a person. It then discussed the ambivalence in Merton which contributed to his difficulty regarding his two vocations: monk or poet. This discussion was done in reference to "The Babel Works" as was the literature overview which focussed on the criticism of the works to be discussed. This chapter also contained an explanation of the genesis of the Babel works. The next chapter deals with the monastic context and Merton's analysis of it in his writings. Merton's involvement as a writer in the medieval world which produced the Cistercian Order suggests a mystery play or a morality was an appropriate teaching tool with which to carry out Dom Frederic's wish "to help people love the spiritual life" (Montaldo *ES* 26).

Chapter3: Words and Silence Standing Face to Face

Introduction

Chapter Three situates Merton within the monastic context. This study focuses on the period prior to Vatican II, that is, the Post-Tridentine period^{ix}. Merton wrote “The Babel Works” in this religious historical context. Together with the other Merton works referred to in this section they illustrate Merton’s strong adherence to Gethsemani as a Catholic institution and to the Catholic faith – the beliefs of which impregnate the Babel poems and drama. This chapter will also briefly relate the history of the Cistercian Order in its origins and its American development together with some comment on the daily life within the monastery. Merton’s own texts will illustrate his immersion in a world still self-consciously medieval.

Scripture

With the exception of the first poem, *Tower of Babel*, The Babel works have all a strong scriptural base and, at least the name of the original poem indicates it refers to the spirit of the Babel myth (Genesis 11:1-9).

In 1953 Merton was conscious of the need to acknowledge the respect required for the literal understanding of the scriptures. He writes from this perspective in *Bread in the Wilderness*, his work on the Psalms:

The Church urges us to seek above all the theology that is revealed to us in Scripture. The true function of scriptural interpretation is to make clear the Truths that God has revealed to us about Himself and about His action in time and history. It is this above all that the contemplative will seek. It cannot be found without a healthy respect for the literal sense of the Bible. But all the other senses will have a certain importance (*BIW* 22).

The above is a comment made by a person who was both poet and contemplative. Merton felt the need to move beyond the literal and the

allegorical interpretations of these works to the symbolic. It is the symbolic that widens the impact of the scriptures and passes beyond the barriers of space and time and of social conditioning. The Babel works may have arisen out of the challenge it was for Merton to glimpse the mythical and archetypal aspects of the scriptures and to keep probing beyond the literal sense of these ancient writings.

The sub-context of Merton's written work was always the biographical aspect that Shannon comments on in *Paradise Journey*, and Kramer reiterates in his overview of the Merton texts, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Artist*. By this is meant that Merton's personal story underpins his writings in the sense that his own experience is written into his work. This is both a strength and weakness for Merton as writer. In Parker Palmer's phrase the authentic person is "fierce with his/her own reality" (*Contemplation Reconsidered* 29). The shadow side to this is that his vision can be limited by the limitations of that same experience. This is true of Merton in spite of the profound and complex nature of his experience. As has already been said "The Babel Works" reflect Merton's eagerness to deny the world while at the same time reiterate this need for, and understanding, of the world.

The moral context of the Babel works is rebellion against God through idolatry, and self-idolatry is always a temptation for the famous. The paradox for Merton was that he was famous outside the monastery and not within it. Merton's struggle was more or less not seen by his community- unlike that of the workers of Babel, the tower which was visible to all, who externalised their rebellion by intending to invade the domain of the Sacred and force their will on God.

Vocation

For most men or women, entering a monastery implies an acceptance of what is called the contemplative life. There are many ways of defining contemplation. One way is particularly appropriate in this context. 'Contemplation is also a response to a call: a call from Him who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in

everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being: for we ourselves are words of His” (NSC 3).

Occasionally this life is identified with the monastic life and the life of the Church. In the period of re-definition of their religious identity following Vatican II, both active and contemplative Orders found themselves attempting to understand exactly why they existed if both lay and religious ways of life were of equal value. Prior to Vatican II religious men and women and the laity lived in the belief that the religious way of life was a more difficult and more blessed one than the ordinary. Put fairly crudely the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience seemed to guarantee sanctity. In his early journals Merton acknowledged this theological teaching. The epiphany mentioned previously which occurred at Fourth and Walnut where Merton recognised we “were all walking around shining like the sun” was the result of a growing awareness that the vows did not change the essential humanity of anyone: all people were of equal value in God’s sight. In the great metaphor of the 1964 Ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church, the Church was the pilgrim people of God irrespective of way of life.

This realisation of the equality of the Christian vocation gave Merton the freedom he needed to live authentically. This deposed the illusion he had previously held regarding the religious life. He did not possess this freedom in the early period under discussion – the 1940s and 50s – but he struggled towards it constantly.

Following the Second Ecumenical Council (Vatican Council) active religious in particular began to question their role in the Church and to gradually let go of the monastic accretions which made it difficult to function in the apostolate. Monastic communities began to engage in similar processes. The processes of reclaiming their roots, re-naming the heart of their vocational call, and finding modern ways of being contemplative in the world are still continuing. Merton has certainly contributed much to the reclaiming of the dominant place of true contemplation in the Cistercian monasteries of the 21st century.

The problem Merton faced in Gethsemani following the death of Abbot Dunne and the ascendancy of James Fox as Abbot, however, was the problem of activity in the form of technology, commerce and efficiency invading the monastery. Even the intervals allowed for prayer and reflection were swallowed up by work. It was a struggle to re-establish right values as Merton saw them. As Merton saw it, the liturgical hours were not sufficient in themselves to develop contemplatives, although the liturgy for Cistercians was an essential aspect of being contemplative. The context underlying his struggle was one of change and some bewilderment on the part of his fellow religious. This was a change and bewilderment on which Merton used his intellect to impose some order and rationality.

Tension

The tension between the active and contemplative poles of the Trappist monks was not something new for either the American or the European Cistercians. The problem surfaced over and over again but because of the historical situation prior to the founding of Gethsemani it was a dominant problem for the American Cistercians. Merton was experiencing the result of a long historical process. This process contributed to the enigma he experienced re contemplation and writing. Where was he to mainly direct his considerable energy? There is an understanding that the spiritual life is a life which will determine both our desires and the activity which follows from such desires. In the light of this belief this question of energy is an important one for spiritual seekers everywhere. Contemplation requires a passive energy and great discipline. The active life requires an energy of a different order. While Merton certainly possessed discipline and was highly productive, the tension he experienced regarding his writing absorbed energy which would be better used for contemplation.

The Cistercian life is both a physically and spiritually-demanding life. It is also one which requires a sublimation of the sexual and emotional life to some degree. There is still, within the limits of restricted communication, a sense of

camaraderie and affection within the house. After all, the contemplative life is a way of loving, God first and then others. In his journals, Merton recounts humorous stories of this camaraderie. The life did not deaden the humanity but disciplined it. Nevertheless it was a difficult life and required a total giving of energy. If this energy was dissipated in fruitless activity then the monastery lost its reason for existing. The context out of which Merton wrote was also one of fraternal affection and struggle. His history of the Cistercian Order reveals an admiration for the courage and simplicity of the pioneer monks who established the monastery.

To some extent Merton had already faced that dilemma but it was to reappear at various stages in his life. In one of his later journals Merton reflects on what it would be like to be on the religious lecture circuit. In the late 1960s he gave Retreats in various places including California and Alaska. Ostensibly while doing this he was also searching out an appropriate place for a hermitage which would be linked to Gethsemani. The pull toward solitude never left him, and while the larger struggle lay between the active and personal life in Merton the subtle variation of the confrontation emerged in his personal inner struggle with his *döppelgänger*; the writer hiding behind each great monastic pillar. This in turn is linked to the “inner madness” from which Rolheiser (*Seeking Spirituality* 6) states spirituality is born.

The overt nature of Merton’s struggle was expressed in *Silence in Heaven* when he writes:

The idea for this book came to us when we saw how . . . visitors . . . grew silent with reverence. God said, we said to ourselves, is not the exclusive property of any human being; why then should we not give Him to souls who, though they may not perhaps be fully aware of it, are thirsty for Him? (*SIH* 12).

Once Merton conceived an idea he was compelled to put it into action, that is, into written form. His inner tension lay between the stillness of the contemplative and the conceptual nature of ideas and symbols. The paradox is that out of the silence itself comes the thirst for action; for productivity. This is

something Merton wrote against in many of his texts. Contemplation is not “for anything” but it is transcendent. Poetry is not for anything except itself either – but poetry can divide the inner person so that the focus is also on productivity. Integration of the two is not impossible but Merton with his “all or nothing” mentality found it difficult to believe the two could co-exist within him. In the text quoted above Merton expressed the nature of silence which belongs to the contemplative and which in spite of his difficulties he consistently pursued:

The silence of God drives the hurricane, and overturns the mountains and stirs up the sea and makes it roar against the cliff. It is from the silence of God that men borrow power for their machines, and it is once again by virtue of something hidden in His silence that we uproariously plough up and dissolve even the material elements that make up our fretful universe (*SIH* 25).

Then those who remain awake – the monks and the solitaries – are able to tell by the sound of the mysterious song returning to their hearts, that all man’s noise and all his works are unsubstantial: that every new thing that can stand up and shout about life is an illusion, and that only the everlasting silence in things is real: for it is the silence of God, buried in their very substance, singing the song which He alone can hear. (*SIH* 26).

The voice of the poet is obvious in the above as is the yearning of the contemplative. This tension also helps forms the sub-text of anything Merton writes. It is the tension of Babel, between the ephemeral and the substantial, as he expresses it in “A Morality”.

Merton’s work, *The Waters of Siloe*, published in 1949, documents the historical development of the American Cistercian Order. It provides an understanding of the monastic vocation according to Benedict, Bernard, Aelred and the 17th century reformers such as De Rancé.

That all Merton’s works have a personal sub-text is true even of these historical works documenting the wanderings of the Cistercians in Europe from the time of the French revolution to their final arrival in America. The Cistercian wanderings echo Merton’s own peripatetic youth. Gethsemani seemed to offer him the permanence he needed but at the same time resented the curtailment of

freedom that was the obverse of stability. Babel and its seemingly stable tower and city offered the same promise but it was a false promise; an illusion of a new beginning. Gethsemani, for Merton was the reality.

The historical texts describe the difficulty a contemplative Order has in remaining apart and not becoming involved in the active apostolate. This theme is also apparent in Merton's other writings around Gethsemani and the monastic life: *The Silent Life* and the photo montage produced for the Jubilee celebrations. The struggle is personal to Merton as well as pertinent to the community and Order. Merton mentally generated ideas and books constantly. He had to fight his own inner urge to be famous, to write his name in the heavens, and to control his desire to be involved in activity beyond the monastery.

The Cistercian Vocation

What is the Cistercian vocation which Merton saw as his vocation?

The members of the Religious Order Merton entered, the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance, were also known as "Trappist Monks". Various groups of monks and nuns are loosely connected by the term *Cistercians*. The Cistercians of the Common Observance and the Trappistine Nuns, for example, belong to the Cistercian family. Each Congregation belongs to the monastic family who follow Christ according to the Rule of St Benedict, written at Monte Cassino in Italy in the 6th century. Each Congregation or Order has a different way of living out the Benedictine Rule called their Constitutions.

In the 12th century a broad movement of revival of Benedictine monasticism began at the monastery of Cîteaux, near Dijon in central France. The Latin word for "Cîteaux" is "Cistercium" and the monasteries following the 12th century reform were generically called Cistercians. This Order today consists of 100 houses of monks and 69 of nuns, slightly over 50% of which are in Europe.

The ecclesial reform movements of the 11th century occurred in a context of political and social change. The Gregorian reforms focussed on three aspects of change: the reclaiming of ecclesial power by the hierarchy from the laity, the extermination of simony, and the implementation of celibacy. While spiritual ideals underpinned the reforms, clerical impetus for change seemed to ensure the church grew in power, prestige and wealth:

It is impossible to appreciate the specificity of the Cistercian reform without recognising its indebtedness to the communality of western ecclesial and monastic tradition. The first books copied in the scriptorium of the New Monastery give an indication of the priorities of the Founders: liturgical texts, the Bible and Gregory the Great. This underlies the fact that many of the most cherished values of the reform were nurtured by contact with the whole tradition of life and spirituality that found expression in the Rule of St Benedict and the liturgy, and embodied in the writings of the great doctors of the western tradition in succeeding centuries. (Casey, 2)^x

The founders of Citeaux, Robert, Alberic and Stephen, sought to renew Benedictine life in the spirit of St Benedict. What was that spirit and what part did contemplation play in it? One point of the Rule of St Benedict RB 73.5 relates to these questions

The statement in RB 73:5 that indicates Benedict's acceptance of both the ascetical tradition of the desert (Cassian) and the more ecclesial orientation of cenobitism (Basil) is a pointer to a certain polarity within RB between "ascetical" values (with an emphasis on renunciation and solitude) and what might be called "affirming" values (with an emphasis on personal growth and community.) Ideally the opposites are held in creative tension by the application of the principles of discernment, moderation and the golden mean (Casey 4).

Cistercian life, as founded by the pioneers of Citeaux was an attempt to return to a literal observance of St Benedict. The Cistercians rejected all mitigations and all developments at Cluny and tried to reproduce the life exactly as it had been in St Benedict's time, indeed in various points they went beyond it in austerity. The most dominant feature in the reform was the return to manual labour.

The Cistercian monastic order was intended to be a silent, prayerful community whose life was characterised by a balance between work and labour. The “work” of the Cistercians was primarily the Divine Office and hence liturgical prayer as a means to union with God. The aspect of the Benedictine Rule quoted reveals that there is a possibility of seeing the life from two differing perspectives, but underlying each perspective is the same spiritual ideal: prayer and union with God as the end and meaning of life. Cistercian monks normally follow the cenobitic or community way of life, but the Benedictine Rule also allows the possibility of an eremetical way of life for those so called. It was the “ascetical” aspect of the life which drew Merton from the beginning of his Trappist journey but it was the contemplative aspect which kept him there.

Balance

Modern Trappists, attempting to recover the balance between work and contemplation, describe their vocation in lay terms as follows:

The post-modern world is far from being uniform or consistent, but there is in it a deep need for transcending what is visible, a thirst for both mysticism and community, a desire for divine union. The search for God appears in the different ways of going beyond oneself: social service, a sense of mystery, silent prayer as an integral part of human life. This is where Cistercian life becomes surprisingly meaningful for the world, since its spirituality emphasises union with God and with others in the transforming mystery of Christ (Casey 2005).

And again:

The Abbot General of the O.C.S.O., Dom Bernardo Olivera, recently wrote on this subject to all communities: “Our Christian mystical experience is in the last analysis, an experience of being reformed and conformed to Christ. This is the only way we can offer guidance for the dawn of a new age and provide religious witness for the secular world of today. This alone is how we can give the help that is so vitally necessary in the dialogue with other religions and in our contemplative service to the Christian Churches” (Casey 2005).

In the prologue to *Waters of Silence*, Merton quotes from the semi-official Spiritual Directory of the Cistercian Order. Dom Vital Lehodey was commissioned by the General Chapter to re-write the existing directory. Merton notes that

Since Dom Lehodey was not writing in his own name but as the mouth piece of the whole Order . . . he could not give himself a free hand to reshape the whole book to suit his own, farseeing views. On the contrary, he was bound by his position to restrict himself to the most conservative and cautious changes. (*WS* xvi)

Dom Vital was a scholar and a significant figure in bringing about cohesion within the Order itself. His work *Le Sainte Abandon* “set monks free from the obsession with pious activities as if they were ends in themselves” (*WS* xvi). Merton had some experience of such activities which took over prayer and reflection time. In the journal *The Sign of Jonas* (Merton 1950) he describes the time it took to design and to create a carpet of flowers over which the Blessed Sacrament could be carried in procession on the Feast of Corpus Christi. This pious tradition, begun to honour the Eucharist, became an end in itself and the activity destroyed the contemplative aspect of the feast-day.

The *Spiritual Directory* noted that the end of the Cistercian Order was not penance but contemplation thus changing the focus of the mindset of De Rancé and other reformers. The monks were made aware that it was God who sanctifies not the monk doing that for himself. In a statement that amounts to an official declaration the Directory declares:

Contemplation is the primary, essential and immediate end to which all our observances are subordinated. . . However, though contemplation is the chief aim of our Order we are not obliged to arrive at mystical contemplation in which the soul, united to God by a simple gaze of love, remains more or less passive under the Divine action and enjoys a repose full of delights . . . No one can enter into this kind of prayer unless God brings Him to it. (*WS* xxvii)

As Thomas Merton understood from the moment he chose to enter Gethsemani the Cistercian vocation was, and is, a contemplative vocation: this was a contemplation achieved through community, prayer, work, penance and silence.

There is no argument about the centrality of contemplation to the Cistercian ethos. The difference lay in Merton's understanding of the potential of all human beings to achieve contemplation (even passive or infused contemplation, although Merton did have certain reservations about this). This understanding contrasted with the more classical restricted view of contemplation which saw contemplation as the prerogative of a chosen few. There was also the problem that contemplation was in danger of displacement in the pragmatic world of the Cistercian monastery where a livelihood had to be earned. Babel happens when illusions replace reality. Babylonians thought it possible to measure human strength against God's strength. Their faith lay in the illusion that technological progress was everything.

By the time Merton arrived at Gethsemani, some of the illusions of modern American culture were already invading the monastery. The factory manufacturing cheese, for example, was ousting the manual labour which allowed time for reflection and contact with the earth and with the reality of existence. For Merton, monks were beginning to lose their names in a way that reduced them to numbers or to a cog in the mechanical process of production.

Abbot Dunne was Merton's mentor in many ways and together with Father Robert, Merton's mentor into religious life. But Robert disagreed with Merton's particular interpretation of contemplation and Dunne was very much a man of the Rule but one who saw De Rancé's asceticism as primary to order within the monastery. Dunne was also not a particularly good financial manager and the monastery was not paying its way nor was it capable of providing adequately for the monks who flocked to Gethsemani following World War II.

The Cistercian Reform

Merton entered a Catholic Religious Order of monks who were the American counterparts of a great European tradition.

Robert of Molesme, Alberic and Stephen Harding, and later Bernard, are the major figures responsible for the foundation of Citeaux, the monastery which influenced the direction of the Cistercian Order in the 12th century and throughout the Middle Ages. Silence, solitude, liturgical prayer, *lectio divina*, penance and community life were the keystones around which the “white monks”^{xi} built their lives.

The white monks preserved their way of life for many years but, like all successful institutions, the duty of stewardship became more important than the traditions. What this means is that the monasteries prospered as had the famous Benedictine monastery of Cluny, the reaction to whose wealth had given rise to the original reform. The monks’ accumulation of property and wealth meant a decline in spiritual vigour.

By 1250 CE the decline was noticeable enough to be visible and to be recognised by historians. The individual monk was not wealthy, but the manpower of huge abbeys operating in a far-flung system of granges and distant estates was immensely productive and the Cistercians became one of the most powerful economic forces of the Middle Ages. In such a situation there could not help but be a measure of social injustice, as the monks’ prosperity depended to some extent on their lay helpers who in turn depended on the monastery for a just living. To some extent with such a system there had to be a master/servant mentality antithetical to Benedict’s ideal. This situation repeated the development of Cluny as a commercial power and was the very reason the founders of Citeaux had left that Benedictine monastery.

Merton cites some of the activities the Cistercian monks were involved in as a result of their economic mastery. An example: they manned river boats to ship cargoes of wine from the Moselle down the Rhine to Holland. The problem arising from all this activity could be stated as follows:

When a contemplative order ceases to produce a sizeable proportion of contemplatives, its usefulness is at an end. It has no further reason for existing (*WS* 31)

Even in the Middle Ages then, the monks were constantly being drawn back into a commercial way of living. The active life they experienced did not even have the excuse that it was part of their ministry. It was a result of the wealth and responsibility accruing to the monks.

The Cistercian Order was in need of reform but those closest to the situation are often the ones most blind to their real needs. The monks' contemplative way of living was dissipating. The result was that a number of reform movements developed in various monasteries in Europe. Martin Vargas in Spain and Denis Largetier in Clairveaux instituted the development of the Strict Observance as opposed to the existing Common Observance. The Cistercian leaders of the period attempted to halt the reform but it was too powerful at grassroots and eventually the Order split forming two religious groups.

The reformation which birthed the life of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, however, began in France, prior to the French Revolution, at the dilapidated Abbey of La Grande Trappe. This Abbey was a commendatory of Armand-Jean le Bouthillier De Rancé, the godson of Cardinal Richlieu. He was destined for a career in the Church from childhood. Such a career would certainly have been a sinecure. Merton describes De Rancé as a romantic extremist who pushed any idea to the extreme. He was also brilliant, precocious and ambitious. He was an ordained priest who refused a bishopric because the position was not sufficiently significant. After a series of conversions he left his estates at Veretz in the summer of 1662 and went to live at the monastery of La Grande Trappe. He then decided to enter the monastery and completed his novitiate at Perseigne, returning to La Trappe as its constituted Abbot and an extreme supporter of the Cistercian 17th century reform. De Rancé saw the cloister as a prison "in which everybody is held as guilty [before God] whether he has lost his innocence or not". The American monks lived out of this mentality to a lesser extent. For someone like Merton, a convert and young in

the religious life, to actually recognise that this interpretation was illusion says much for the way he struggled to maintain his integrity, his true self, in the face of powerful voices, like the Cistercian religious leaders of his day, who said otherwise.

That voice was not the voice of Benedict because the emphasis was not only on the negative side of spirituality but focussed on the monks and on the penance they performed as unredeemed men, rather than on the God who redeems and loves. It was as though the cycle of redemption had not been completed. Through “The Tower of Babel: A Morality” Merton makes quite clear that redemption is an ongoing event and that the salvific act of God is completed in and with Christ.

The struggle to have the monks of the strict observance accepted and validated was a difficult one but eventually De Rancé’s reforms were embraced. As can be seen the problem with the reform was the over-emphasis on the negative, thus upsetting the balance of the spiritual life. Merton presents a colourful and succinct description of the mentality which powered the Trappist monks:

The mentality of La Trappe was the mentality of a Lost Battalion, of a “suicide squad’ of men who knew they were doomed but were determined to go out of the world in grand style, making death and destruction pay so dearly for their triumph that death had no victory left at all (*WOS* 47).

Mortification became an object in itself at La Trappe and contemplation was abortive. This was so in spite of the fact that De Rancé wrote of the love of God but in a way that was not inspirational and seemed to give only lip service to that aspect of Benedict’s rule. It was left to writers such as Merton and Dom Vital Lehodey to restore the balance necessary for the Cistercians to reintegrate asceticism and contemplation.

The American Trappists

The Cistercians, who eventually found their way to America, after the French Revolution dispossessed them of their monasteries, were marked by the customs and usages of La Grand Trappe. Dom Augustine de LeStrange who was responsible for their coming was a man of great rigour and energy. He was also by nature a missionary rather than a contemplative. The result was that the men who came to Baltimore and then to Kentucky and elsewhere in America set up their own dichotomy between the active and the contemplative life. This dichotomy, together with the culture of the American people affected Gethsemani from the early days of its foundation.

Dom Urban Guillet who led the first group was at heart a teacher. Somehow he allowed the Catholic hierarchy to view the Cistercians as a teaching Order so that monastic schools were attached to the first monasteries established in the United States. Thus the dichotomy between the Cistercians as an active Religious Order and the Cistercians as a Contemplative Order was set in motion again. Merton recognised this in his text. The effect this knowledge had on him would be experienced only somewhat later in his struggles to persuade Abbot Fox to return to some of the early Cistercian practices allowed by the Rule. Basically what was required was an act of trust in the monks that they would be able to use time well and that they hungered for contemplation. Fox believed that monks were not able to use time well.

Fox was also suspicious of Merton. De Rancé's ascetism meant the elimination of the "I". For Fox this meant a suspicion of Merton and his self-revealing journals. He even wrote to Merton's friend, Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, asking if she thought it appropriate for Merton to be writing a journal where the word "I" was used so constantly. This was typical of the Fox-Merton relationship. And in some ways it symbolised the attitudes of the Cistercian leaders to their monks. The Babel poems are not simply about the elimination of names by dictatorships and cultural anomie but they also refer to the elimination of personhood begun by de Rancé. This was partly due to the guilt he experienced for a past he did not wish to bring into his present. Merton and other monks who understood that contemplation was only possible for those who possessed a life and an awareness of themselves before they had the ability to give a self to

God would struggle all their lives to overcome the effects of the French reform persisting in their monasteries. There were, thus, many reasons for the difficulty Merton experienced as to where the focus of his spiritual and creative energy should be.

Guillet founded the first Cistercian Monastery in Pennsylvania, then, in the quest for an appropriate setting moved his group to Kentucky at the invitation of Father Theodore Badin – the first priest ordained in the United States.

Merton narrates the outcome of this first venture emphasising the struggle between the active religious life and the Cistercian contemplative life as typified by Dom Urban whose restless nature found it very difficult to settle in one place permanently and who needed activity rather than the solitude and silence demanded by his Rule. Some of this tension is also reflected in Merton's own struggle which, in the 1950s, he reduced to poetry versus contemplation. In fact, throughout his life, Merton had to contain his own extraversion in order to adapt to the more introverted Cistercian way of life. But Merton's struggle in 1953 was between one form of internalisation (poetry) which appeared to threaten a more vital form of reflection and internalisation rather than the more literal active/contemplative battle affecting Dom Urban in 1809.

The Trappists under Dom Urban eventually left their original Kentucky site. They had faced flood, fire, and penury, and lost the watchmaking business and equipment they established as well as the school run by the Trappist Third Order.^{xii} Finally in 1848 the present Abbey of Gethsemani was founded from Melleray in France at Bardstown, forty minutes outside Louisville.

Bishop Flaget of Bardstown received Father Paulinus, the forerunner of the Melleray group, and pointed him in the direction of the Loreto Sisters. Land was purchased from the Sisters of Loreto who were directing an orphanage and needed a less isolated position for their work.

Father Paulinus struck a bargain for the fourteen hundred acres of woodland with cornfields and some log cabins in bad repair, and Gethsemani was sold to the Trappists for five thousand dollars. (Merton *WS* 107).

Forty religious arrived from Melleray which was crowded with postulants and novices.

Dom Eutropius, the first Abbot of Gethsemani, built the first monastery and his successor Dom Benedict Berger saw the consecration of the Abbatial church on 15th November, 1866. Dom Benedict ruled as Abbot for 29 years, rarely leaving the monastery thus giving it the stability the foundation required in Kentucky's southern frontier state. He was an unbendingly austere man.

The Gethsemani of the nineteenth century came to represent everything that La Trappe had been standing for since De Rancé. It was a place that people at large, even Catholics, were afraid of. Many shivered when they passed it. The monks were not understood. In the first place they were foreigners. Then they led that atrocious life of penance! The belief that most of them were reformed criminals gained authority in most minds from the fact that the guest house usually had a quota of fallen priests entrusted to the monks for a period of ecclesiastical penance. . .

Finally the whole community was judged in terms of its abbot, and Dom Benedict's relations with the outside world, especially with the chancery office in Louisville – were characterised by the same unending severity, the same dictatorial attitude, that he assumed among the monks (Merton *WS* 133-134).

When Dom Benedict completed his term of office Dom Edmund Obrecht, cellarer of the Abbey of *Tre Fontane* near Rome was elected Abbot on 11th October, 1898. It was Dom Edmund who humanised the face of Gethsemani.

New World Vocations

American postulants were scarce for many years and those who came rarely stayed. If Gethsemani were to survive it was necessary that Americans enter the order and remain there. The community could not simply depend on immigrant monks but no Americans remained until 1885. The Trappists began to think that

Americans were incapable of living the contemplative life! Those who came were colourful and mostly unsuitable. When John Green Hanning entered he was the quintessential frontier American – a Texas Cowboy and seemingly another in the line of American eccentrics. He took the name of Brother Joachim and survived – albeit explosively – living and dying as a lay brother of the monastery.

Merton's first Abbot, Dom Frederic Dunne, who was responsible for encouraging Merton to keep writing, was "the first native American to persevere at Gethsemani. He was a young man of twenty who came to the Trappists from Atlanta, Georgia, in the summer of 1894, received the habit, and settled down quietly to lead the Cistercian life in all its rigour. He went on leading it for well over fifty years; for thirteen of them he was abbot of the monastery" (Merton *WOS* 140).

The first fifty years of the life of the Abbey of Gethsemani saw the community survive many difficulties, some of which involved the associated school and the relationship of the monastery with the surrounding community. Change began with Dom Edmund who, as has been said, humanised Gethsemani and established its excellent library. When the College associated with Gethsemani burned down it was never rebuilt and the monks withdrew into their real occupation of prayer and manual work; that is, the monks retired from the active life of evangelisation, preaching and teaching.

The contemplative life requires discipline and a strict way of life. The safeguard for these needs is the *horarium*, the daily timetable, which provides opportunities for liturgical prayer, private prayer, penance, and the work spaces needed to enable the community to survive. The Trappist timetable was difficult but not impossible. The young Merton was no different from any other person thinking of entering such an ascetical order; he experienced self-doubt as to whether he could survive the life or not. In his autobiography he describes one way of coping with his fears. Anxious he would not be able to survive the Cistercian's harsh penitential approach Merton sat in front of an open window in the guest-house allowing the cold to blow in on him as he waited to be received

as a postulant (SSM 415). The only result of this was a fearful cold. Perhaps the wise guest-master who closed the window thought here was another entrant in the tradition of the eccentric American applicants!

The daily life of a Cistercian monk in the 1950s followed a slightly different *horarium* for winter and summer. In his text, *Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton included the following timetable – the one he lived by when he first came to Gethsemani.

THE DAILY LIFE OF A CISTERCIAN MONK IN OUR TIME: WINTER	
a.m.	
2.00	Rise, go to choir, recite Matins and Lauds of Our Lady's Office.
2.30	Meditation
3.00	Night Office (Canonical Matins and Lauds)
4.00	Priests say their private Masses, others go to Communion. Then there is time for reading or private prayer.
5.30	Prime followed by Chapter. (After Chapter in the winter a very light breakfast (<i>frustulum</i>) may be taken by those who do not wish to fast until dinner.
6.30 –7.45	Reading, study or private prayer.
7.45	Tierce, High Mass, Sext.
9.00-10.45	Work. (The students have classes or study.)
10.45-11.07	Reading or prayer.
11.07	None (The fifth of the seven canonical hours.)
11.30	Dinner.
p.m.	
12.15-1.30	Reading, private prayer.
1.30-3.30	Work
3.30-4.30	Reading or private prayer
4.30	Vespers
5.15	Meditation
5.30	Collation (Light refreshment).
5.40-6.10	Reading, prayer
6.10	Compline – begins with about ten minutes of public reading in the Chapter Room or cloister. <i>Salve Regina</i> , examination of conscience.
7.00	All to bed

SUMMER

The summer time-table differs slightly in that breakfast (mixt) was taken at 6.30, a siesta was allowed from 12 noon to 1.00 pm and the community retired at 8.00pm. The exercises were similar allowing for time variation.

The above time-table was that of a choir monk. The horarium of a lay brother included more work, less prayer and not so much fasting.

Today there are 65 monks forming the community of the Abbey of Gethsemani. The Monks of Gethsemani perceive their life today as follows:

Liturgy of the Hours

Vigils, Lauds, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline are the seven “hours” of the liturgy Opus Dei (work of God) as St. Benedict called it in his Rule. They are the common prayer service of the Church as well as the prayer of our community. . None of these “hours” actually last an hour. All seven add up to two and a half or two and three-quarters hours. The backbone of these services is the 150 psalms, sung or recited according to a two-week cycle. At each hour there is also a hymn, readings from scripture, prayer of the day and commemoration of Our Lady. Some of the brothers recite a simple office of Our Fathers, Hail Marys and Glory Be to the Fathers in another part of the monastery. The monk and others who pray the liturgy of the hours do so on behalf of the Church, and of all humankind to praise, thank and petition God throughout the day. Guests are welcome to join us for any of the services as well as for the community Mass.

Besides the liturgy of the hours, the typical prayer of the monk or nun is lectio divina (Divine or holy reading). It consists of a reading ordered to prayer. Material will be selected on the basis of whether it is conducive to prayer. A bit of the text is read, then reflected on in order to grasp its meaning in itself and its meaning for us. This leads naturally to prayer: praise, adoration, thanksgiving, petition, repentance and resolve. At times, the monk is led to rest in God’s loving presence with few or no words. Such reading allows the brother or sister to spend time with God and builds

up the habit of doing so. It nourishes faith in such a way that they come to see and value things as God does and to live from this vision.

Work and service

We earn our living by making cheese, fruitcake and bourbon fudge. The community has to be fed, clothed and housed. The needs of the guests are cared for. Newcomers to the community must be initiated into monastic living. Those with particular talents will probably have the chance to use them. Thus we have musicians, artists, gardeners, craftsmen. According to the needs of the community and the gifts of each monk, the abbot assigns work. Work is seen as service and preference is given to work favourable to prayer.

Self-surrender

The fundamental discipline is surrendering our will to God and submitting ourselves to the guidance of another. This does not exclude

The pattern and regularity of the daily schedule can be a searching discipline. When it is time for office or other community exercise, the monk goes.

Living in a community of love with 65 other persons, year in and year out, implies a willingness to sacrifice oneself.

Bringing our best effort to prayer, whether we feel like it or not, can be costly. The relative lack of recognition for achievements that comes from being hidden in a community goes far to tone down excessive self-concern.

Friendship is encouraged. Community amounts to a network of friendships. Yet these must be balanced with the need for solitude and with our radical commitment to Christ. These are real penances, more so than fasting, abstinence from meat (actually the meals are well-balanced and well prepared) silence or vigils.

The second description of a monk's day notes changes which have occurred since Thomas Merton lived at Gethsemani. These changes include attitudinal changes to relationships and friendships, changes to rules of fasting and abstinence, openness to the sharing of prayer with the outsider who comes to the community even on a casual one-day visit. The Merton of 1953 expressed some rigidity around the relationship between the community and the secular world as well as around the sacredness of the cloister. Those elements are of secondary importance to the fundamental notion of contemplation which penetrates the monk's understanding of his day and his life. It would be to this aspect of a modern Cistercian life that Thomas Merton would relate completely.

Conclusion

The tension between old and new, active and contemplative, artist and worker, was very much part of the reformed Cistercian monastery. Any monk who explored that history, as Merton did, and who sought the radical heart of the Cistercian vocation would experience this tension for himself. Merton, for example, challenged the misuse of intervals occurring at Gethsemani. These were periods supposedly available to the monks for reading and prayer. The intervals were being swallowed up by physical work. He succeeded in having them restored to their proper purpose at least for a time. Merton also recognised that the eremetical life complemented the cenobitic and could well arise from it without denigrating the communal life.

Merton challenged Gethsemani but he also challenged himself. Was it possible to be the true contemplative, the man of complete silence and solitude, and also to write words which stretch into the silence without affecting or destroying that silence? Or were the words, the poetry and its symbolism, as destructive of this basic monastic relationship with God, at least for Merton, as Babel was destructive of the Divine-human relationship and the invitation to the true work of God?

In order to further understand the dilemma Merton experienced the next chapter will examine the spiritual context affecting Merton as monk and poet.

Chapter 4: Our Silences Bear Fruit

Introduction

The historical and monastic contexts have been discussed in previous chapters. This chapter will examine Merton's spirituality by reflecting on two expressions of that spirituality written before 1953; the Epilogue from *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Fire Watch* which serves from his journal *The Sign of Jonas* (Merton 1953).^{xiii} Merton's early writings on contemplation will also be examined in order to understand the spirituality which permeates "The Babel Works."

Desire

A simple definition of spirituality is as follows: Spirituality is our response to the touch of God in our life.^{xiv} Spirituality is not passive but before we respond to God there has to be a desire for God. All spirituality begins with desire. Babel is the image of the distortion of the desire for God that gives humanity for God thus spirituality is the expression of our deepest desires.

Merton expressed his desire for contemplation many times in his writings but there are two early expressions of that desire, outside his actual poetry, which, while written in prose, bring together his poetic and contemplative voices. The first of these pieces is the Epilogue from *The Seven Storey Mountain* and the second is *The Fire-Watch* which serves as the epilogue for his 1953 journal *The Sign of Jonas*. These pieces are meditations on Merton's journey and on his quest for God.

Epilogue: The Seven Storey Mountain

Paradox is a natural way for Merton to speak of the ineffable: "But Oh! How far have I to go to find You in Whom I have already arrived" (SSM 469). This is a very Augustine sentiment echoing faintly Augustine's famous phrase, "Too late

have I loved You, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new". The tone of Merton's autobiography is Augustinian so this is to be expected. Merton's basic desire for God is evident in the yearning the sentence expresses. He desires to overcome the gap and distance between Himself and God. Achieving this intimacy is also paradoxical. In John of the Cross's terms Merton must also let go of desire for anything apart from God. This is the poet's dilemma. Achieving means detaching oneself from the creature: "And I would live alone and out of them" (SSM 471). "Creatures" includes all that is within that might hinder that intimacy with the ineffable. This quandary is the epitome of Augustine austerity.

The epigraph begins with the voice of God promising to fill Merton with what he desires. But there is a threat also in this promise: "Therefore all things around you will be armed against you, to deny you, to hurt you, to give you pain, and therefore, to reduce you to solitude" (SSM 472). This is Merton in 1949 interpreting the voice of God as he heard it through the filter of his then spirituality. It is the voice of the perfectionist and of the self-denying voice of De Rancè, but it is also the voice of the world-rejecting Merton. It is also the voice of the traditional ascetics and of the mystics whose cry was "God alone." But it is also the voice of someone who desires to enter into the experience of contemplation fully and who is open and willing to learn what that may mean for him.

Merton experienced the burden of his gifts and the seeming barrier they were to allowing him to enter fully into the experience of contemplation. The demand on his time and on his intellectual and emotional energy was high. The void that Merton entered was often alive with images, with self-preoccupation and not with what he aspired to, the Silence that was God.

The Epilogue to *The Seven Storey Mountain* is an expression of the *Via Negativa*, that is, the negative way of detachment which is the first stage of John of The Cross's mystical way. In this dark night, which Merton will talk of symbolically in "The Fire Watch", the aspirant must empty themselves from even what would seem good to others. This includes even the pleasures and

joys of affective prayer. Merton was formed in this ascetical school and as long as he adhered to it as the spiritual way then his poetic voice was an impediment to contemplation. What he perhaps did not understand at this time was that the way of detachment was not the whole way and that he might not have to stay only in that place: that in fact, he might move backwards and forwards between this stage on his journey through the illuminative way towards the unitive experience.

The self is what moves towards God and what responds to God. The way of this epilogue is simply a way of learning how to focus on what is important. God's darkness gives way to light and Merton understood this. Insight and awareness were also part of Merton's spiritual experience and awareness an active part of his spirituality. "The Epilogue" is a study in awareness as much as in detachment and in the purification of desire.

"The Epilogue" concludes with the words: "That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men" (*SSM* 473). The burnt men are those who have been scarred by sin, whose desires have been burnt out of them, but they are also those who are touched by the fire of God's love and by the white hot fire of inspiration. Merton was one of these men. He chose Babel to tell their story and his. Babel is the story of human scarring by sin and pride. As Merton re-tells the myth it is also the story of the restoring flames of Pentecost. These flames of love heal the scarred and the sinful, purging them of arrogance and pride and touch all with new life.

The 1949 epilogue reveals a spirituality which sees life as a journey towards God. It reveals a spirituality of desire and detachment from desire. It is an austere spirituality but one which culminates in an intimacy with God in this life presaging the intimacy to come in eternity. It is the spirituality of the *Via Negativa* but is on the way to Union and communion. Because of the focus on the *Via Negativa* it is a traditional Catholic spirituality which tends to focus on suffering and death, the passion of Christ rather than the resurrection and the hope of loving fulfilment. The latter is present also but in muted tones. The Merton, whose centre was never still, reflected a similar spirituality by 1953 but

he came to understand that the perfection he thought was at Gethsemani was not truly there. Gethsemani, like the rest of the world, was a “work in progress.” With that realisation he could release some of his own drive for perfection and allow compassion for his brother monks and the world began to grow

Fire Watch, July 4th 1952.

The epilogue to *The Sign of Jonas* reveals a similar spirituality to the above –life is a pilgrimage and the journey requires desire, detachment and receptivity to Love. This epilogue, as the first epilogue, is poetry written as prose. It abounds in images and symbols. But this second epilogue is more obviously written in a time of darkness and the night is the needed prelude to freedom: “In the night all things began and in the night the end of all things has come before me” (SJ 349).

The literal basis to the epilogue is Merton making the rounds of the monastery and checking that there is no fire at any of the appointed stations. The monastery is old and a fire hazard and the law, and common sense, requires a fire-watch be kept. Merton uses the journey from station to station to remember his beginning at Gethsemani and to reflect on the direction his life is taking. His story is entwined with the monastery’s story and the journey is ultimately about where both are heading. In “The Fire Watch” the community is no longer the Augustine City of God. Merton’s view of the monastery is now ambivalent: “The Holy Monster”. The paradox, which he, too recognises, is that he is part of that holy monster. The darkness is not just of the night for the watchman but of his perception and judgement. The questions of Babel are always in the background of this night journey: What is false? What is true? Is the community holy? Is it a monster? These are questions which lurked in the background three years before but Merton has grown and he can ask them now with the asceticism trust and a deeper knowledge of monastic life.

Merton is the watchman who stands on the tower and who sees further. The watchman is required to ask these questions for the sake of safety and to ensure

life. As the Master of Scholastics Merton has a role in ensuring the future of the Order. His spirituality is being reshaped by that role and is in fact becoming prophetic. He will take on a similar persona in Babel but there the watchman will fail in his task of warning the Babylonians of the danger they are in. There also the Prophet will remind the Exiles of their story. It seems that a prophetic spirituality will remind the prophet and those to whom he is called of their common story and destiny.

The stations Merton the watchman halts at are all significant places in Merton's life story and in the story of the Monastery:

You come around the corner and find yourself face to face with your monastic past and with the mystery of your vocation . . .

You have descended upon me, with great gentleness, with most forbearing silence, in this inexplicable night, defeating all desire (SJ 352).

This is the dark night of the soul as much as Gethsemani's dark night and as Merton walks through the monastery he finds that in this city "every level of history is found in between" but "this is a different city with a different set of associations" (SJ 354). He recognises the changes which have happened in the monastery since its foundation, and, particularly, since he came to Gethsemani. For him:

Minds which are separated pretend to blend in one another's language. The marriage of souls in concepts is mostly an illusion. Thoughts which travel outwards bring back reports of You from outward things, but a dialogue with You, uttered through the world, always ends by being a dialogue with my own reflection with the stream of time (SJ 361).

"The Fire Watch" is Merton's own examen of conscience firstly and only then an examen of the monastery. His is a spirituality which is not afraid to confront itself or the other in the search for what the heart desires.

The Tower

The end of the actual journey will take Merton to the top of the monastery tower. This then becomes a symbol of the monastery and of the journey. The way Merton uses the symbol of the Tower is very similar to the way he uses the tower of Babel in “A Morality”. He writes;

Your reality, O God, speaks to my life as to an intimate, in the midst of a crowd of fictions: I mean these walls, this roof, these arches, this (overhead) ridiculously large and unsubstantial tower (*SJ* 355).

This is the language of “A Morality”:

Lord, God, the whole world tonight seems to be made out of paper. The most substantial things are ready to crumble or tear apart and blow away.

How much more so this monastery which everybody believes in and which has perhaps already ceased to exist!

O God, my God, the night has values that day has never dreamed of. All things stir by night, waking or sleeping, conscious of the nearness of their ruin. Only man makes himself illuminations he conceives to be solid and eternal. But while we ask our questions and come to our decisions, God blows our decisions out, the roofs of our houses cave in upon us, the tall towers are undermined by ants, the walls crack and cave in, and the holiest buildings burn to ashes while the watchman is composing a theory of duration (*SJ* 355-56)

The tower is as paradoxical here as everything is in relation to contemplation for Merton. It is the symbol of the false self needing to be cast aside because of the arrogance and pretensions of those who built it. But it is also the place of warning – the wall upon which the watchman walks. In the morality play the watchman’s warning comes too late. Here the warning is given with the “enormous clock” ticking away on the watchman’s belt and the flashlight in his hand and the watchman walks through layers of history to the top of the tower.

The steps the watchman takes “have a hollow ring” to them. The foundations might need closer examination.

Nevertheless Gethsemani’s tower is a place of meeting. It is the high point of the monastery it is located above the silence of the guest wing and reaches up into the darkness and into the void, the place where God is and is not; the place of contemplation. Merton, on this journey, is moving closer towards contemplation. He is beginning to realise he must take others with him if he is to meet the compassionate Christ. He must walk with the community no matter how painful that would be for him.

For Merton to move into contemplation is to move more deeply into communion with the Trinity and paradoxically to move into dispossession and emptiness: Do not lay up for yourselves ecstasies upon earth where time and space corrupt. This is the contemplative way but is it the poet’s way also? The monk has to discover where it is or it isn’t on his journey.

The last words of the epilogue to *The Sign of Jonas* are words of transformation just as the last words of the epilogue for *The Seven Storey Mountain* were also transformative but here there is a different texture to the words. It is a transformation that the people of the Babylonian tower could not understand: ‘What was fragile has become powerful. I loved what was most frail. I looked upon what was nothing. I touched what was without substance, and within what was not, I am’ (*SJ* 362). Merton talks in paradoxes. Power is not always where it appears to be. His is the language of the scriptures, particularly the beatitudes, explaining the nature of the Kingdom of God. Cultural values are inverted and vulnerability, for example, is valued not the strength of “steel words stronger than flesh or spirit” (*CP* 252) – a phrase Merton uses in “A Morality”. This inversion restores creation and is the recovery of Eden.

Sin and Idolatry

If Merton was to understand the contemplative experience he needed to explore the spiritual and moral opposites: idolatry and disobedience: in theological

terms: sin. Thus the context for the Babel works in 1953 is overtly, Merton's own moral exploration of the state of humanity and the world beyond the monastery. It was also a study, practise and experience of contemplation and as well an indirect critique of the monastery and the monastic system within the institution of the Church.

All creativity begins with destruction. This is true in each of the Scriptural understandings of the "Fall of Man." In such a theological understanding, the Spirit of God recreates the world from chaos. In Merton's poems the Spirit of God is thunderous and rises from the desert, symbol of the chaos created by the Babylonian builders. The Tower is destroyed and innocence restored by purgation. In this way the balance of spiritual power shifts from the pseudo-prophetic and astrological power of Babylon to Israel's deity where it belongs.

Merton's is a self-effacing as well as a penitential approach. Such a penitential approach would be a very Cistercian approach to the problem of sin and modern life. It was certainly one Merton seemed to resonate with in the 1950s.

But there was far more than penance to Merton's spiritual understanding of the meaning of life and of his religious vocation in particular at this time. One could say in truth, all of his writing, focussed on some aspect of contemplation and was, indeed "the struggle to become prayer." (Connors) The Cistercian Fathers were a specific area of study as were the Desert Fathers, the writings of the *Philokalia* and the works of the Spanish, Rhenish and English mystics including John of the Cross, Tauler, Ruysbroek and Eckhart. All had an influence on his thinking. Eastern writings such as *Bhagavad Gita* also influenced Merton's approach to contemplation.

Contemplation

What is contemplation? Contemplation has been defined in many ways in many religions over the centuries. Omar Khayam, the poet, for example, saw contemplation as a face to face experience with the Divine. For Saint

Bonaventure it was a passing over into God (*SSM* 467). For Merton the journey towards contemplation is an individual as well as a universal journey and is one all are called to complete in their life. James Connors quotes some of Merton's definitions of contemplation as he describes it in his text *The New Man*:

“Contemplation is the perfection of love and knowledge”

“Contemplation goes beyond concepts and apprehends God not as a separate subject but as the reality within our reality, the Being within our being, the life of our life.”
and

“Contemplation is the highest and most paradoxical form of self-realisation, attained by apparent self-annihilation” (Connors 1)

Contemplation is neither goal nor task-oriented. It certainly has no psychological end such as the integration of the whole person. A person cannot truly enter into “Being” if they are too fragmented or broken. Some healing has to take place first, however, healing of brokenness does take place on the journey. Part of being contemplative means tracing the various levels of idolatry in our life and stripping these away. God's invitation is to enter into God and in so doing to restore that which was lost through idolatry in our living. The initiative belongs to God; the response is from the person called to contemplation. The deeper a person moves into contemplation the more the process of self-integration occurs. Disintegration, violence and destruction are counter-signs to the presence of the contemplative spirit in humanity. Merton stresses, as do all the great contemplatives, that humans will only bring the gift of contemplation to fullness if they desire to receive it. These ideas form the spiritual sub-text of all Merton writes in the 1950s. Later texts show a development and expansion of these ideas around contemplation.

The contemplative journey is not one bound by space or time. The Babylonian Tower, like the Royal Road of the Hebrew Kings described by Walter Brueggemann, attempts to hold God captive in time and space. Contemplation, on the other hand, is the ultimate act of freedom. It liberates by allowing the control of the relationship between the human and the divine to remain with God

– that same God whom Merton describes in his poem as “The light who knows us from within” (*CP* 739).

Early Texts on Contemplation

As a result of his study Merton wrote a number of texts on contemplation. Three of these texts were published prior to 1953; the first text was entitled *What is Contemplation?* The manuscript of this elementary study was sent as a gift to a student of Sister Madaleva at St. Mary’s College, Notre Dame, who was interested in Merton’s poetry. The book was published by the College in 1949. This text was basically a simple compilation of Merton’s notes and was thus a summary of classical thought on the subject.

A second text entitled *Seeds of Contemplation* was published in 1949. This text was revised and re-published under the same name not long after. The work was then completely rewritten and published as a new text with the title *New Seeds of Contemplation* in 1962. The very fact of the editing and revising of the material basic to Merton’s understanding of contemplation in the 1940s reveals Merton’s own inner self-growth and the growth of his thought and understanding on this subject.

The discussion of the named texts is offered then as a way of understanding the evolution of Merton’s thought in the 1950s and as it is revealed in his works on Babel. The texts further illustrate the spiritual context out of which Merton writes.

Prior to the discussion of the texts it is necessary to reiterate a statement made in chapter 2 regarding the autobiographical content of all Merton’s writings. Referring to the 1949 text, *Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton wrote about the autobiographical content of his works in a burst of self-disgust: “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” (Merton qtd in Shannon *TMPJ* 46). The significant element in this statement is not so much his self-disgust, a very existential statement, but that Merton saw

his works as autobiographical. Shannon suggests that reading the texts, even those on contemplation, with this fact in mind enables a clearer understanding of Merton and his reflections. These works suggest that Merton is writing about what he has come to know through experience. By extrapolation this could also be applied to his poetry and in particular the poems under discussion: the Babel poems.

What is Contemplation?

The outline of the content of *What is Contemplation?* identifies it as an elementary text on the subject:

Text Headings

What is Contemplation?
The Promises of Christ
St. Thomas Aquinas
Kinds of Contemplation –active/passive
Liturgy
Union with God in activity
Infused contemplation
St. Bernard of Clairveaux
A Ray of Darkness
The Test
Peace, recollection and Desire
What to do – the Teaching of St. John of the Cross
The Danger of Quietism

Most of the text consists of traditional Catholic thought though sections such as “A Ray of Darkness” indicate Merton is beginning to put his characteristic stamp on the subject. Perhaps the essential difference between Merton’s approach to contemplation and that of other writers even at this early stage is that his answer to the question, "Who may desire contemplation?" is everybody! This with some reservation however! In 1947 Merton was still tied to the Augustinian idea of the "City of God, city of sin" dichotomy. This dichotomy postulated a division between Catholic believers and unbelievers; between the

enclosed world of religious and those outside the monastery. Catholics had a strong Ghetto mentality. Religious even more so!

The language of religion was divisive not unifying and therefore not contemplative. Language had been used for deception in the myth of Eden when the serpent exploited the human desire to possess everything or at least be denied nothing. The result was humanity no longer had the facility to speak with the Divine or understand the language of animals. The one language was distorted and limited as a result of self-idolatry. Merton expressed this as follows:

We find it difficult to give up our desires for things that can never satisfy us in order to purchase the One Good in whom is all our joy and in whom moreover, we get back everything else that we have renounced besides. (*WC* 11)

The myth of Babylon carried this theme further. Babylon was not simply a place where tongues were confused. Hearts and minds were also muddled. Babylon was also metaphor for the demands of the Leader and his coterie for absolute power in heaven and earth – the ultimate act of idolatry, the seeking out of the forbidden. The acquisition of Divine power included the elimination of God. God was replaced by the eponymous “The Leader” who was the quintessential 20th century dictator.

The section of the text under the heading St. John of the Cross is relevant to Merton’s perplexity regarding the question of language and thus of poetry and contemplation. As a fervent young religious only six or seven years into the Cistercian life Merton was beginning to deepen his understanding of the subject of contemplation. He also began to explore the rigour of the demands a lifestyle dedicated to contemplation would make on the person of the monk. He quotes from St. John of the Cross: Two contraries cannot exist in the same subject (*WIC* 9).

The contraries at Babel were ostensibly The City of God and The Earthly City. Both could not exist in infinity because they symbolise the opposites of good

and evil. The contraries were not simple rather they were extremely complex. Merton experienced some of that tension within himself and it is revealed in his writing and in his use of existential terms such as disgusting, poisonous and nauseating. Such words occur frequently in his autobiography. It is interesting to note that one of the false witnesses in the Morality Play is a professor of relativist philosophy.

In the Babel poems Merton untwists the strands of illusion forming the earthly city – language, power, history, technology, astrology, time, illusion - and juxtaposes them against the heavenly city where silence, simplicity, truth, cyclic time and the Word of God are empowered. Eden is not restored without some sacrifice. The poems suggest a doomsday scenario. One side has to be eliminated in order for the other to win. This is the approach Merton is taking with his own life at this stage. The monk or poet must go. They too are contraries and cannot exist in the same person.

Michael Higgins in his Merton study, *Heretic Blood*, approaches the subject from a Blakean perspective. In the chapter on Tharma the Rebel he draws on Merton's original thesis on Blake:

True energy and redemption . . . lie in the energy that springs from the reunion of Contraries. But the negation {Urizen, the “Abstract objecting power that Negatives everything} stands between the Contraries and prevents their “marriage”. Holding heaven and hell apart, Urizen infects them both with his own sickness and nothingness. True holiness, faith, vision, Christianity, must therefore subvert his power to Negate and “redeem the contraries” in mercy, pity, peace (Higgins 74).

Higgins reveals that Merton had already the knowledge of another approach to his problem of contraries – that of integration of the opposites to form a new whole. It would take Merton many years to return to the place he originally knew and to recognise it again for the first time. The recognition would arise when Merton recovered his original vision and possessed an integrated personhood. Merton did not need to discard any part of him in order to become the contemplative he wished to be.

The text of *What is Contemplation?* makes reference to the ideas of Thomas Aquinas for a theological base. Merton first studied Aquinas at Columbia with Dan Walsh. He continued this study with Father Irenaeus at St. Bonaventure's College in Olean, New York. The metaphysics of Aquinas is significant for a true understanding of contemplation as much as the ascetical writings of a John of the Cross. Aquinas' writings place desire at the heart of contemplation. In all of Merton's writings desire is a key factor. At Babel the deformation of desire leads to disintegration of all right relationships and to a death unredeemed by a resurrection. The clarity of the desire was always obvious to Merton. The "how", the way to achieve the desire was occasionally lost in the Babel of misdirections and mistranslations that would overtake him at times.

An unusual aspect of Merton's text is that it concludes by discussing the error of Quietism. It seems that to end with a negative indicates that Merton may not have had time to re-organise his text. Quietism was a heresy. It led to a deformation of something worthwhile and to a fear of the contemplative experience especially amongst Catholics.

The last three pages of the text are entitled "The Work of Love." These pages are a return to the subject of desire and it is this aspect which could have been extended and treated in more detail because contemplation is ultimately the call to a union with God as Love. The Oratorio and The Morality Play end in intimacy and love. Love is another of Merton's synonyms for the fullness of the contemplative experience: it is the contemplative experience.

As Merton says, and as he repeats often in his poetry and prose writings "in contemplation there is no known path and the path there is can neither be charted nor measured. The final verse of the poem *Two Desert Fathers* (Saint Jerome and Saint Anthony) speaks of contemplation as the uncharted way:

And now, old Father of the alone
Pray us into your stillness,
Into the glory.

Because our minds, lovers of map and line
Charting the way to heaven with a peck of compasses,
Plotting to catch our Christ between some numbered parallels,
Trick us with too much logic to the waters
Of the iron Nile
And draw us down to old magnetic Thebes
And to the harlot crowned in martyr- murder,
Throned on the money-coloured sea (*CP* 169).

The rational way is not the way of contemplation – Christ cannot be caught between some numbered parallels. This is an unknown way this way of the desert fathers. It is a way which each has discovered in solitude and beyond the boundaries of the modern and ancient Babylonians seeking control of the human journey.

Knowledge

This first work on contemplation is dominated by the voice of orthodoxy. In choosing to write about a subject feared and even warned against by the teachers of orthodoxy because of the mystical excesses of the 18th and 19th century Merton was taking a risk and placing himself in a different space to most Cistercians. Cistercian writers of the period such as Father Raymond Flanagan concentrated on the lives of the Cistercian saints and of the founding fathers and mothers of the Cistercian movement. Merton wrote from personal experience and knowledge. He wrote also with a pseudo-intimacy so that minute details of his life and the Cistercian life were apparently known to his readers. When Mrs Hindemith wrote to him requesting a work for a youth conference, for example, she mentioned the vault in which he wrote – a seemingly commonplace detail enough but Merton comments on the public knowledge people had of him gained through his writing. Out of her request came the Oratorio based on his work on Babel. Out of her comment came Merton's observation on the paper knowledge people had of him which was a kind of intimacy without being real knowledge at all. Such knowledge beyond the gates of the Abbey was previously unthought of until Merton's work began to be published. It would

have been shocking to some of the older Cistercians. That reaction would have extended to his work on Contemplation and led to the denial that the way Merton thought of the contemplative Cistercian way was not the way commonly held by the majority of the Cistercians. The reaction of the censors who criticised his work also validated this denial.

The Ascent to Truth

The text, *The Ascent to Truth* published in 1951 proved difficult for Merton to write. It is significant because it caused Merton to realise he could not write straight theology even ascetical theology. Yet the work helped to concentrate Merton's understanding of the works of both Aquinas and John of the Cross. The completed text concentrates on the work of John of the Cross. Shannon describes the three goals Merton set himself in writing the text but notes that the work never quite achieved this.

In *Ascent*, Merton sets for himself three main goals: (1) to define the nature of the contemplative experience; (2) to show the necessary ascetical discipline leading to that experience; and (3) to give a brief sketch of mature contemplation. (Shannon *TMPJ* 1981 69-70)

In this work contemplation is described as “an experience of God which exceeds our natural capabilities. It is union with God beyond images and concepts, realised in this life in pure faith and in heaven in the beatific vision.” (Shannon *TMPJ* 74)

Seeds of Contemplation

Seeds of Contemplation published in 1949 followed *What is Contemplation?* And *Ascent to Truth*.

There was a difficulty with *Seeds of Contemplation*. Shannon quotes a number of critics who recognise both the strengths and deficiencies of the works:

Two reviewers (one in London, the other in New York), while praising the book, point out its most serious problem: the fact that for the most part, it continues the

dualism which mars the text of *What is Contemplation?* The reviewers of *The [London] Times Literary Supplement* writes: There is so sharp a break and so deep a gulf between “natural” and “supernatural” that those who reuse the leap must be pardoned.’ In a similar critique Philip Burnham says, in *The New York Times Book Review*: “At times a normally reluctant reader may wonder if Thomas Merton . . . does not view all natural joy and pleasure as too suspect; if he does not separate nature and human nature from the supernatural” (*TMPJ* 45-46).

Bede Griffith, Benedictine and a man who sought the contemplative way all his life, seeking, like Merton, the meeting place of Eastern and Western monasticism, understood where Merton was coming from but also saw the weaknesses in his work:

The late Bede Griffiths, writing in *The Downside Review*, notes the “ease and assurance” with which the book is written and its fidelity to the great tradition of Catholic mysticism. At the same time he expresses certain disquiet. “He still gives signs of the same superficial mentality that marked *Elected Silence*. There is the same childish contempt for the world and intolerance of anything he cannot understand. “Pointing out Merton’s unusual insight into the mystical experience as oneness with God Griffith suggests that Merton might be shocked to be told that what he says about oneness with God is ‘nearer the language of the oriental mystics than of Catholic tradition (Shannon *TMPJ* 45-46)

William H. Shannon analyses and places in perspective the series of texts published under this and the work labelled *New Seeds of Contemplation*. The books grew out of the original source material in which the seed is the underlying image of contemplation. The seed is an image widely used in scripture. Merton expands the image into a metaphor in his earlier text:

The seeds of this perfect life (i.e., the life of contemplative union with God) are planted in every Christian soul at Baptism. But seeds must grow and develop before you reap the harvest. There are thousands of Christians walking about the face of the earth bearing in their bodies the infinite God of whom they know practically nothing . . .the seeds of contemplation and sanctity have been planted in those souls, but [in so many cases] they merely lie dormant (WIC 17).

Contemplation begins with recognition of man and woman's dependence on God. The failure to recognise this is, according to Merton, the failure of Babel. The power of God is understood but the Leader equates human hubris with human power and independence. The language of contemplative silence which listens and responds to the Word of God is not understood. In Christian theology this understanding began to disappear after "The Fall," that is in the loss of the communication by man with Yahweh and then with other animal species. It was further disseminated after Babel when human language diversified. Merton's poems about Babel revisit the history of those losses but they also explore the essence and nature of the language of contemplation. *Seeds of Contemplation* is Merton's first attempt to explain the contemplative language and process rather than the theology of contemplation.

The themes dealt with in the 1969 edition of *Seeds of Contemplation* are discussed by William H. Shannon, in his work *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey*. The significant themes are as follows:

- Contemplation as discovery of the true God, of the true self and of other
- Contemplation as an experience of freedom and
- Contemplation as an experience of darkness.

Merton begins his discussion of contemplation simply. For him nature spoke strongly of God and the discovery of God's presence in all things particularly in nature led to a constant awareness of the presence of God in all things. This awareness of God in nature links strongly to the Cistercian tradition. The monks established their monasteries in isolated wooded valleys – desert places – where they would sustain an actual physical solitude as much as the interior solitude Benedict thought so important. Merton constantly sought both solitudes for himself: "There is no true solitude except interior solitude. And interior solitude is not possible for anyone who does not accept his right place in relation to men. . . .solitude is not separation" (NSC 56).

The voices of Babel on the contemplative journey include the heresies of Quietism^{xv} and Jansenism^{xvi}. Such voices need to be separated from the true

contemplative voice and discarded. George Steiner writes that it is the Jewish visionary belief that “all languages would return to the fount of being.”

Religious wars and the persecution of supposed heresies arise inevitably from the Babel of tongues. Men misconstrue and pervert each other’s meanings. But there is a way out of darkness: What Böhme called: “sensualistic speech” – the speech of instinctual, untutored immediacy, the language of nature and of natural man as it was bestowed on the Apostles, themselves humble folk, at Pentecost. God’s grammar sounds through nature, if only we will listen (After Babel 62).

For Merton contemplation was, and is, the fount of being: “God utters me like a word containing a partial thought of Himself. . . .If I am true to the concepts that God utters in me, if I am true to the thought of Him I was meant to embody, I shall be full of His actuality and find Him everywhere in myself, and find myself nowhere” (*NSC* 37).

The return to the unity of Eden via Pentecost emerges as a theme in the Babel poems and thus relates the poems to the contemplative ideal of union with God albeit on a different level and in a different shape to the original mythic union before the Fall. For Merton the language capable of uniting the disparate tongues is not Cartesian rationality. The ultimate language of nature and spirituality is silence. Silence is the language of solitude, not isolation but solitude. In 1949 Merton had already begun to make that connection in his own life. Silence and solitude allowed for recognition of the dependence of the human being on God. The point of dependence where we meet God is the same point at which we meet others, then, is an aspect of discovering our own identity, because we were never intended to exist separately (Shannon *TMPJ* 55).

Merton puts it this way: “The more I become identified with God [at my centre], the more will I be identified with all the others who are identified with Him. His love will live in all of us” (Shannon *TMPJ* 47).

The language of contemplation for Merton is thus the language of love, of the desert, of solitude and of silence. The desert is anywhere God is not in Jewish thinking. It is also the place in a metaphorical sense where God is called into being by the contemplative's desire to encounter the Divine.

The experience of darkness, of desert, in the form of the wilderness, is essential for the growth of the contemplative. In the darkness everything that is not God can be stripped away from the initiate and God becomes all in all.

This aspect of renunciation of everything else in the negative phase of contemplation in order to discover God was part of the anguish Merton experienced in relation to his poetry. There was too much conscious and unconscious Merton in the poems. In his somewhat naïve search for the Absolute, Merton sought to discard all elements not strictly contemplative in his life. But poetry belonged to the depths of himself and was a vehicle for the divine as much as nature was. Closing that door was to close off an essential aspect of his personage. Here was the Babel of confusion at work again as Merton struggled with what John of the Cross called the *Via Negativa*. What was given away at that level, however, had to be reclaimed later. This reclamation included Merton's love affair with the language of poetry and with the normal ability to love others which religious life denied. The monk in pre-Vatican II understanding was required to live out of a purely abstract concept of love without any personal involvement through friendship and certainly not through any male/female relationship!

Shannon notes that the premise underlying all texts is "that spirituality directs us towards an immediate experience of God, as God is in the divine self" (*TMPJ* 47). For Shannon *Seeds* is written in the style which best suits Merton – that is, neither as a rational treatise nor theological work but as a series of pensées. This approach attempts to capture some of the immediacy of contemplation and avoids long discussions and explanations: It is a poetic reflection on

contemplation, full of intuitions and insights. It is the work of a poet creating a book, as he is at the same time being created by God as a contemplative.

Reviewers recognised themes in the text to which Merton would return to in other works: for example, the theme of Paradise regained. The final scenes of “The Oratorio” and “The Tower of Babel – A Morality” are also imbued with this theme. This theme – that contemplation is the return to the primitive Garden of Eden – is one that is important to Merton and one that he will develop in later works (Shannon *TMPJ* 41).

The Hermit

Merton’s thoughts on contemplation developed in such a way that he moved to seeing his vocation as a contemplative finding his fulfilment in the eremitic rather than the cenobitic tradition. In some way by establishing himself in a virtual world community through his prayer he envisioned an integration of his life. He had found such integration evaded him within a community: “It is not much fun to live the spiritual life with the spiritual equipment of an artist” (Montaldo *ES* 171).

The early texts mentioned draw on St. John of the Cross, St Teresa and other mystics, Merton states that contemplation is offered to all but that most Christians will not attain the degree of contemplation known as infused contemplation. In the 1940s and 50s this seemed to be the common expectation among Catholics who were interested in contemplative prayer. In later texts, however, there is a change in approach:

The book has no other end or ideal in view than what should be the ordinary fulfilment of the Christian life of grace, and therefore anything that is said here can be applied to anyone, not only in the monastery but also in the world (*NSC* xv).

In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton acknowledges that every person is potentially a contemplative and that contemplation is the expected and desirable end of life. “The Oratorio’ and “The Morality” end with the entire cast contemplating the Logos in adoration. In relation to this statement Merton appears to have taken for granted that all Cistercians would acknowledge that contemplation was also the ultimate meaning of their calling. This turned out not to be the case and Merton had to retract his original statement in *Seeds of Contemplation*. This original statement published was as follows:

These are the kind of thoughts that might have occurred to any Cistercian monk; they came to mind at odd moments and were put down on paper when there was time, without order and without any special sequence. (*NSC xv*)

The monks who read or listened to Merton’s work did not agree with him. They apparently repudiated his ideas regarding contemplation which related to them and Merton had to acknowledge this in his “completely new book”, published twelve years later: “In the twelve years since this was written not a few Cistercian have vehemently denied that these thoughts were either characteristic or worthy of a normal Cistercian, which is perhaps quite true” (*NSC xiv*).

The phrase, “normal Cistercian” can be taken two ways. Does Merton not consider himself a normal Cistercian or is it the community which considers that his ideas are not mainstream ideas around contemplation and therefore are outside the normal thrust of the monastic vocation? In some senses both interpretations are true. When Merton’s writings on contemplation are examined the surface is a discussion and exposition of contemplation as a gift of grace, but examined more closely Merton is constantly pleading for the eremetical way of life.

The hermit way of life was Merton’s ultimate calling no matter what deviations from that way he experienced in his lifetime. His final search, prior to his death, and with his Abbot’s blessing, was for the perfect hermitage. Contemplation was certainly significant for him and significant as a calling for all those who aspired to union with God but for Merton it was a calling that was to be lived

out within solitude. In fact Merton often used *solitude* interchangeably with the word *contemplation*. Even when Merton was writing his 1949 text the work was permeated with a latent plea for the eremitical life. This emerges in the light of his plea for the true self to emerge from the darkness of the false self:

But if I am true to the concept that God utters in me, if I am true to the thought of Him I was meant to embody, I shall be full of his actuality and find Him everywhere in myself, and find myself nowhere. I shall be lost in Him (NSC 41).

Only in the place he was truly meant to be in would Merton's true self emerge. For him this was the hermitage, the place of quiet he sought all his life – the rare book vault, the upper floor of the old barn, St. Anne's the converted toolshed and the cinder block building which became his final hermitage and the hermitage for so many others, monks and visitors, over the years since Merton's death. The hermitage is the centre from which the complexities of Babel, constructed in and by his past gradually unwound themselves for Merton. Here he struggled with his own call to contemplation and to the hermit way of life but also with the difficulties involved in locating the meeting place for inter-faith dialogue and in trying to pose for his time, and ours, questions and challenges around the areas of social justice, war and peace.

Conflict

The overall argument in the Church about the relative value of the contemplative and active lives lived out in various ways by the different church orders had an effect on Merton's thinking and writing and on his personal life. In fact the conflict Merton experienced between his "vocations" as poet and contemplative and discussed in this thesis could be said to be a refinement of that argument. This conflict is explicitly named in his autobiography:

There was this shadow, this double, and this writer who had followed me into the cloister. He is still on my track. He rides my shoulders, sometimes like the old man of the sea. I cannot lose him. He still wears the name of Thomas Merton. Is it the name of an enemy?

He is supposed to be dead.

But he stands and meets me in the doorway of all my prayers, and follows me into church. He kneels with me behind the pillar, the Judas, and talks to me all the time in my ear (*SSM* 459).

This difficulty took many years to resolve. In between the conflict and the resolution there were years of poetic silence – from 1953 to 1959. In that silence the issue began to re-shape itself but poetry was a discipline of which Merton was always wary.

Conclusion

The aspects of Merton's spirituality which emerge in the writings discussed in this chapter are: desire, detachment, awareness contemplation and transformation. The epilogues examined indicate Merton was enduring a dark night and one which might leave him scarred. He was becoming realistic about the monastic community to which he belonged and struggling to trust himself, the community and God more. The contemplative void was opening for him and he was beginning to understand it further. This spirituality contrasts with a spirituality viewing the world as sinful and in need of redemption. The last is an aspect of Merton's spirituality but not the central element of it. Both forms of spirituality have relevance for the Babel works and can be used to critique the secular world and the monastic world. The epilogue, "The Fire Watch", indicates the ambivalence Merton felt towards his community and even still towards himself. At the same time Merton's spirituality is contemplative and maturing with each text he produces on contemplation.

The context in which Merton wrote in the 1950s was one of monastic change. The second aspect involves the moral and contemplative dimension in which Merton lived, reflected on and wrote about. The social context, still to be discussed gave birth to many of the themes contained in the Babel works.

Chapter 5: The Word . . . Binding the Broken World

Introduction

Previous chapters have examined the wider historical context which shaped Merton's life and character in the 1940s and 1950s. This chapter will look at the more localised social context affecting Merton; family, friends and mentors. In particular it will examine the experiences of self rejection which alienated Merton from the world and, to some extent, from himself.

In the 1950s Babel became Merton's personal metaphor for the self division which he knew existed within him. For Merton, the concept of the true and false self, originating in Christian and Buddhist scriptures, was personally meaningful. He knew the necessity of confronting the illusions and wrestling with his own false self and a confrontation that is an ongoing life struggle for all serious spiritual searchers. The illusions he faced, and challenged others to face, mirrored the larger division Merton saw existing between the earthly and the heavenly cities.

A War-time Birth

The opening paragraph of Merton's autobiography established the aspects of his historical context which made sense to him on looking back as a monk and writer. In that paragraph Merton located himself historically, geographically and spiritually in the twentieth century. The Babel themes of war and rebellion, indifference to human life, and an atheism which believed in nothing it could not prove or measure are all identified:

On the last day of January 1915 under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world. Free, by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men

like myself, loving God and yet hating Him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers.

Not many hundreds of miles away from the house where I was born, they were picking up the men who rotted in the rainy ditches among the dead horses, and the ruined seventy-fives, in a forest of trees without branches along the river Marne.

My father and mother were captives in that world, knowing they did not belong with it or in it, and yet unable to get away from it. They were in the world and not of it – not because they were saints, but in a different way: because they were artists (*SSM* 3).

The context of Merton's birth was not just war but "The Great War". His birthplace is located close to the scene of the worst battles of that war: the first and second Battles of the Marne. The first battle was fought from 5th September to 10th September 1914 with a loss of approximately 250,000 lives from both sides. Saint Antonin must have still been reeling from the enormity of this clash when Merton was born. The 1914 Battle of the Marne became a symbol over time for all that was degrading and callous in society. Merton's description of the battle recognises it was an experience of hell for those involved.

Merton saw himself, and the world into which he was born, as a prisoner of evil. The first chapter in his autobiography is entitled "Prisoner's Base". Merton implies he lost whatever innocence he could have been expected to possess simply by being born into that time. He was a prisoner of his own and the world's based desires.

Merton's biography has Dantean overtones as the title suggests. The title refers to the seven storey mountain of Purgatory Dante writes of in his *Purgatorio*. The title implies the need for human beings to be purged of violence either voluntarily now or by compulsion in Purgatory^{xvii}. For Merton the war began in the individual human being – the place where all evil originates. He saw this evil clearly in himself, and as a result of his religious conversion, acknowledged the need to expurgate that evil. It was partly this desire which led him to the radically austere and penitential life of the Cistercians.

Merton uses words such as *selfishness*, *violence*, *self-contradictory* to describe the state of the earthly city. In his Babel works Merton applies these words to the secular city outside the monastery but they also contain a subtle critique of the monastery itself as manual labour gave way to mechanised processes and monastic silence was threatened in Merton's view. The words convey the need for redemption of that city. There is a religious narrowness in Merton when he condemns the world so totally. Shannon describes his attitude as one of world rejection.

This view of humanity is contained in the epigraph to the "Tower of Babel: A Morality". The epigraph refers to Augustine's image of the City of God and the contrasting image of the earthly city. These two cities are seen in constant war with each other:

A more mature understanding of humanity enabled Merton to believe in the potential of human goodness. He writes to Thérèse Lentfoehr on July 4th 1959 as follows:

It is all very unsatisfactory to me; in fact a lot of it disgusts me. I was much too superficial and too cerebral at the time. I seem to have ignored the wholeness and integrity of life, and concentrated on a kind of angelism in contemplation. That was when I was a rip-roaring Trappist, I guess. Now that I am a little less perfect I seem to have a saner perspective. And that too seems to be not according to the manuals, doesn't it? (*RJ* 113)^{xviii}

Rejection

An artistic nature cannot be divorced from the emotional life and development of the individual. This was certainly true of Merton as his poetry and journals reveal. The world-rejecting nature of his autobiography is also the emotional result of much of Merton's personal youth and childhood experiences. These in turn are linked, as has been shown, to the historical nature of the time into which he was born. Merton's world rejection is intrinsic to "The Babel Works" and a sign of his 1950s struggle to understand who he was and where he belonged.

Merton experienced rejection early in his life. At one point in his biographical work, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Michael Mott, does a photo-analysis of a family photo showing Thomas, John Paul, Merton's grandmother and his father, Owen Merton. Mott notes that the child Merton is looking in the other direction and is aloof from the family group: "At that moment, only the person taking the photograph could have observed and recorded that Tom was a figure on his own" (18-19).

To Mott this stance was revelatory of Merton's position within the family group. Ruth's expectations of her eldest child contributed to this distance he experienced within the family circle.

The photograph is not the only evidence that Thomas Merton experienced at this difficult time within the family and particularly from his mother. Ruth was interested in her child's development and gave him the sense that whatever he said and did was worthwhile. She encouraged in him independence and creativity but at the same time her expectations of him were far too high.

The fact that Ruth wrote to him of her impending death when Merton was six years old indicates her failure to understand a child's mind. Merton was left to read the letter by himself and to work out the meaning of its contents on his own. He waited by himself in the car not allowed into the hospital where his mother lay dying. Ironically Merton's first indication that Owen Merton might be dying came through a written message; a telegram that made no sense; *Entering New York Harbour. All well.* As Owen was in Middlesex Hospital in England at that time and Merton isolated in an unfriendly household Scotland the sixteen year old boy had to struggle to decipher the message and face its truth once again on his own (*SSM* 79). Merton was alone in every sense of the word during the most difficult moments of his childhood and adolescence.

It is true to say that the experience of isolation never left him. His mother's coldness and the ostracism he experienced led to a sense of himself as a solitary. The experience was both gift and curse for the young Merton and revealed itself

in his later life in Gethsemani and elsewhere as such. There was a division in him which never healed and found expression in various ways during his life. The poet/monk reflected the maternal/creative/spiritual split which began when he was only a child. “The Babel Works” reflect the same split in Merton’s life. To some extent the dramatic works and the poems are also the story of the reunion of that split told in terms of the salvation story of the Christian experience. Language as language and as used in scripture is the central theme of “The Babel Works.” Sadly, in his early years it was the language of rejection that spoke most strongly to him.

Language and word were always important to Merton. He was born on the edge of the French world where they spoke French with a Catalan accent- and was rejected because of his accent later when he attended the Lycee.

This experience of rejection was both subtle and blatant during his life. The experiences also contained both gift and curse as said before. His stay with the Privats in the Midi in France led him to an awareness of what faith meant to the strongly catholic peasantry of France. At the same time the experience was one of separation from his father without an explanation. As an adult Merton came to the realisation that he had been placed there for his health but the child had no such understanding.. The doctors thought there was some danger of Tuberculosis. But this was a later understanding what the child thought is not clear. He at least revelled in the Privat’s love and in his own freedom to roam the woods and hills in the area.

In his autobiography Merton speaks of his hatred of the Montauban Lycée and the suffering he endured there together with Owen Merton’s refusal to take the young boy with him or to remove him from a place where he was so obviously unhappy must have simply added to his experience of rejection at least at an unconscious level. His “rescue” from the Lycée arose not because of Merton’s unhappiness but because his father chose to move elsewhere and to take the child with him.

A similar experience occurred when his father began the affair with Evelyn Scott, the novelist: When he was ten, Evelyn Scott had thought him “a morbid small boy, but she was hardly an unbiased critic” (Mott 108). In her letters Evelyn also notes that Owen Merton was careful of the boy because of the experience Merton had had with his mother Ruth.

Merton was to state later that cold mothers made solitaries. He also apparently experienced Evelyn’s coldness and it would be many years before he could respect and really love the women who entered his life. Part of his ongoing personal conversion was to come to terms with his failure to recognise genuine love from a woman and to return it without wariness.

Whether Owen was careful or not in relation to his son he handled the child as a piece of luggage to be picked up and put down when it suited him. Merton was taken to the Bahamas, dropped at the Privats, placed in the Lycée, taken to England, and deposited with relatives whenever it suited Owen Merton. After Owen’s death Iris and Tom Bennett rejected him because of his behaviour. Later in life after the death of Bonnemaman and Pop his cousin Harold made it difficult for him to stay at the house which had been his and John Paul’s home. Merton wrote of the Douglaston household:

. . .our family had been one of those curious modern households in which everybody was continually arguing and fighting, and in which there had been for years an obscure and complicated network of contentious and suppressed jealousies (*SSM* 179).

Rejection, and the undercurrents associated with rejection, was a place Merton knew well. It was the context out of which he forged his work. He translated it into symbol and story in his work but it was the emotional environment out of which he lived without being fully aware of it. The physical loss of his mother added to that environment as he was never able to resolve the relationship he had with her.

Matthew Kelty,^{xix} Merton's confessor, noted in a speech made while the author visited Gethsemani, that Merton had once gone to James Fox, his Abbott, in tears because he recognised he had never known a mother's love.

Michael Higgins, in his work, *Heretic Blood* quotes Merton speaking about his life-long experience of rejection as follows:

I happen to be able to understand something of the rejection and frustration of black people because I am first of all an orphan and second a Trappist. As an orphan, I went through the business of being passed around from family to family, and being a "ward," and an "object of charitable concern," etc. etc. I know how inhuman and frustrating that can be – being treated as a thing and not as a person. And reacting against with dreams that were sometimes shattered in a most inhuman way, through nobody's fault, just because they were dreams. As a Trappist I can say that I lived for twenty-five years in a situation in which I had no human and civil rights whatsoever (Merton qtd in Higgins 179).^{xx}

Higgins reflects that Merton wrote the above with his usual dramatic flair. This is true but Merton makes no attempt to say he understands fully what the black American was experiencing. Merton simply acknowledges he understands some of the frustration and rejection of their experience. This understanding was enough though to help him realise what it meant to be reduced to a number and a thing, the experience of the concentration camps and the refugees and political and social outcasts of the 20th century.

The experience of the outsider, then, was a real one that Merton lived with most of his life. It was certainly still a very active experience when he wrote "The Babel Works" in the 1950s.

While Merton coped with life adequately both within and without the monastery there always carried with him a sense of loss and the desire for restoration of a perfect world. "The Babel Works" illustrate this desire as they are about that need and that restoration on a spiritual and universal level which transcends time and space. The fact that they are situated at the universal level, however, makes them somewhat abstract and impersonal. In 1953 distance was one way in which

he preserved the integrity of his self, enabling him to keep his emotional and intellectual life separate.

A Water Traveller

The stars play a significant role in “The Babel Works” ostensibly because Babylon of the Chaldees, where the tower was constructed, was the founder of astrology. Merton mentions the sign of Aquarius in the account he gives of his birth. This was the sign under which he was born: the sign of the water – bearer – a sign associated with fluidity and change. Just as he was interested in astrology Merton was also interested in the *I Ching* – the book of changes and mentions it in his journals. In that lore water is the symbol of the whole person. The one who is able to understand the secrets and lore of the book of changes is the person who recognises they travel by way of the water. This person is open to change. So, too, was Merton.

Merton was, indeed a water traveller. His autobiography mentions the number of times he crossed the channel from England to France. Passing from one continent to another reflects a change in Merton each time he crosses over from one side to the other.

There is poignancy about his final separation from England. The events which led to his exile, (or his return home depending on the perspective from which he tells the story), include his guardian’s dissatisfaction with him around financial issues and his behaviour at Cambridge:

We were the ones who made all the noise when there was a “bump supper”.
We lived in the Lion Inn. We fought our way in and out of the “Red Cow”
(SSM 134).

Merton’s lack of responsibility led to his fathering a child. This alone ensured his return to New York and into the care of his grandfather.

The Merton who stood on the deck of the steamer leaving England found, for the first time in his life, he was concerned about someone other than himself. In all probability this was the girl who was carrying his illegitimate child. Perhaps

this was the birth of a true moral sense for Merton. The core of selfishness which Merton acknowledged in himself was at last shaken.

Merton finally travelled by “the waters of innocence”, that is, by Baptism from atheism to Catholicism. Merton’s conversion to Catholicism when it occurred was thorough. It moved him from an irresponsible freedom to a rigidity which whole-heartedly adopted Catholic dogma and its moral strictures. He began to shape himself to the pattern expected of a “good” catholic. Such shaping meant the unconditional acceptance of Catholic dogma. It also meant accepting a Catholic reading of life as sinful and in need of redemption. This understanding was accentuated by the Cistercian focus on the evil nature of humanity.

The very fluidity of his ability to change opened Merton to the accusation of instability but the movement was ultimately always towards the true self as he envisioned it. The life-long search for the integration of the poet/monk illustrates his integrity.

The Artist

In referring to himself as a poet Merton placed himself firmly on the same plane as his parents. His artistic temperament spoke often to him. It revealed itself not just in his writings but in his choice of statues, pictures, his talent for calligraphy and photography. He recounts looking at a holy picture with Father Alberic when a young monk and seeing the image as terrible and at the same time not wanting to hurt the old man’s feelings. The statues Merton chose for the novitiate chapel as well as the altar and tabernacle design were not to many people’s taste. As a result he had to survive criticism and repression though many would also look to him for artistic guidance. He was on the building committee for the monastery after all.

Always Merton recognised when an artist was producing original and creative works containing within them a depth of spirituality. He appreciated the fine craftsmanship of Victor Hammer who produced limited editions of some of Merton’s works including *Hagia Sophia*. He was drawn to the simplicity and

poverty of the work of the Shakers and also to the radical poetry of Ernesto Cardinal, once his novice.

Living the community life with the temperament and equipment of the artist was the most difficult aspect of life for Merton. If anything the disharmony he experienced here was the source of the Babel voices impinging on his inner world from the beginning of his conversion to Catholicism. The artist was drawn to solitude and silence. Part of his attraction to solitude was his genuine love of contemplation and the belief this was his fundamental call in life:

It seems to me that what I am made for is not speculation but silence and emptiness, to wait in darkness and receive the Word of God entirely in His Oneness and not broken up into all His shadows (Montaldo *ES* 281).

Mark Van Doren, Dan Walsh and other friends

In 1934 Columbia University offered Merton a new beginning. His studies there were eclectic to say the least but introduced him to many new worlds and included a course on contemporary civilisation pertinent to his social critique. Merton often fell into a particular course without much thought or due to an enrolment error. The latter was the reason for his presence in Walsh's and, later, Van Doren's class.

Columbia provided Merton with a group of friends who were to be his until he died. They included Robert Lax, the minimalist poet, Ed Rice, who founded and edited the radical Catholic magazine, *Jubilee* and Seymour Freedgood. In their own way each was confused and seeking something more than their University experience suggested was all there was to life.

In that group, too, Merton met Bramachari, the Eastern Hindu monk, whom he would try unsuccessfully to reconnect with when he went to India. It was Bramachari who introduced Merton to the classical Christian spiritual writers of the western tradition such as Thomas Á Kempis.

These men and friends such as Peggy Wells, Nancy Flagg and Ginny Burton were to have a lasting influence on Merton. Bramachari may even have been the catalyst which allowed Merton to become a pioneer in “interfaith dialogue with other Christian traditions and with Theravada, Tibetan and Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, Judaism, Taoism, Confucianism [and] Eastern Orthodoxy” (Paguio 7).

It was, however, Mark Van Doren who offered Merton a new way of looking and thinking which was to be reflected in his life and in his poems. In his autobiography he comments on the influence Van Doren, a Pulitzer prize-winning poet, had on his thinking and writing. Although he was at Columbia in 1934 and the autobiography was not published until 1949 he writes of Mark with clarity and appreciation:

All that year we were, in fact, talking about the deepest springs of human desire and hope and fear; we were considering all the most important realities, not indeed in terms of something alien to Shakespeare and to poetry, but precisely in his own terms, with occasional intuition of another order. . . . Mark’s balanced and sensitive and clear way of seeing things, at once simple and capable of subtlety, being fundamentally scholastic, though not necessarily and explicitly Christian, presented these things in ways that made them live within us, and with a life that was healthy and permanent and productive. This class was one of the few things that could persuade me to get on the train and go to Columbia at all. It was that year, my only health, until I came across and read the Gilson book (*SSM200*).

The course he took was one on Shakespeare and for Merton, Van Doren was the teacher par excellence. He taught what he said he was there to teach without veering into “more interesting” sidetracks. It is obvious that Van Doren influenced Merton’s approach to teaching English literature. The tapes of Merton’s lectures on poets are very focussed on their subject. Merton Taught English literature, at a number of places – in the Extension school at Columbia and at Bonaventure College in Olean (with some interesting variations there into associated subjects such as “Bibliography”) and also at Gethsemani.

Tapes of Merton's lectures to the novices and scholastics mirror some of the approach Van Doren used but the lectures are also uniquely Merton. His powerful discussion of Rilke's work – *The Merry-Go-Round* and *The Panther* illustrate Merton's skill in bringing out the innate power of the poems and the drama Merton saw was an essential aspect of the moral strength of the poem. In 1953 he was teaching literature to the young men at Gethsemani and challenging them to examine their own lives in the light of such writings as well as through the writings of the Fathers of the Cistercian Order.

The original Babel poem, "Tower of Babel", interprets society and aspects of modern thought and life which form that society. But Merton's other Babel works explore different poetic forms in order to dramatise more effectively the morality of the human acts he is questioning.

A second mentor who affected Merton's life and work at this point and whose influence lasted long after he had graduated was that of Dan Walsh. Walsh admired and loved the Cistercians and was the person who suggested that Merton make an Easter Retreat at Gethsemani. It was Walsh who thus brought Merton into initial contact with the religious order which seized his imagination and his intellect so powerfully. Walsh was later to move to Louisville and to teach at Bellarmine College, Louisville, and, at the instigation of the local Bishop, to be ordained to the priesthood.

Walsh was not on the staff at Columbia but was a visiting lecturer. His subject was philosophy and through him Merton was introduced to the works of Thomas Aquinas and the Schoolmen. It was through him also that Merton came to know the philosophy and theology of Duns Scotus. It was Walsh who at one time said that Merton's mind was Augustinian in its bent.

. . . One of the things he sensed at once was something that I was far from being able to realise: but it was that the bent of my mind was essentially "Augustinian." I had not yet followed Bramachari's advice to read St. Augustine and I did not take Dan's evaluation of my ideas as having all the directive force that was potentially in it – for it did not even come clothed in suggestion or advice (SSM 244).

Hence the Augustinian epigraph is used at the beginning of the morality play and will be discussed in detail in a later chapter.

Dan Walsh had a personal influence on Merton but also knew Gilson and Maritain personally. It was through Walsh that Merton was to make his initial contact with Maritain and be open to the influence of that powerful Catholic philosopher.

Conclusion

Merton experienced rejection early in life. On converting to Catholicism he adopted its attitudes enthusiastically and in spite of his artistic abilities and natural tendency to freedom and solitude he entered a rigid penitential order. This led to inner difficulties expressed as either/or choices – Cistercians or Calmoldolese; hermit or not; monk or poet.

As an enthusiastic convert he came to hold the rigid view that the world was evil. He gradually outgrew this perspective but it is his view of life when he wrote “The Babel Works”. These works resonate with the Augustinian sense of dichotomies: city of sin, city of God.

It was out of this difficult context but with the powerful academic and friendship influences of those he met at Columbia that Merton’s poetic work developed. His understanding of art and of poetry though was to be deeply influenced by Maritain and his work on *Art and Scholasticism*. This and other major literary influences will be dealt with in the following chapter.

Chapter 6: Stones in the Wall of that City

Introduction

In previous chapters it has been shown that Merton's personal history entwined with the monastic history and that this correspondence is revealed in his writings. A significant part of Merton's history is his unremitting drive toward solitude. The monk and the poet moved towards this end in tension. The tension Merton experienced was both heightened and released by the books he read before and after his arrival at Gethsemani. This chapter discusses the major literary influences acting on him when he wrote the Babel works. This discussion is followed by a reflection on Merton's view of poetry in 1947 – the period prior to writing the Babel works.

Preparation

There were a number of significant influences on Merton which led to his conversion to Catholicism. When he converted he took the spiritual life seriously. While there was still a gap between theory and practice – he talks about getting drunk and so on at the same time he is speaking about restructuring his life. In this period he was praying consistently and taking himself through the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius.

Merton arrived at the place of Catholicism with the help of his friends and mentors as has been discussed, but past events, mystical experiences and his reading also opened new intellectual avenues for him as well.

Rome

At sixteen years of age he arrived in Rome at the end of a walking tour. There he purchased a Vulgate text of the First Testament and began reading it. The adolescent Merton was not consciously concerned with religion or spirituality at this point in his development. Merton thought reading the scripture was an

appropriate thing to do while in Rome. At the same time he found himself visiting churches and being fascinated by some Byzantine churches in particular.

During this stay in Rome he had an experience of deep power which startled him:

It was night. The light was on. Suddenly it seemed to me that Father, who had now been dead more than a year, was there with me. The sense of his presence was as vivid and as startling as if he had touched my arm or spoken to me. The whole thing passed in a flash, but in that flash, instantly, I was overwhelmed with a sudden insight into the misery of my own soul, and I was pierced deeply with a light that made me realise something of the condition I was, and I was filled with horror at what I saw and my whole being rose up in revolt against what was within me, and my soul desired liberation from all this with an intensity and an urgency unlike anything I had ever known. And now I think for the first time in my whole life I really began to pray – praying not with my own lips and intellect and my imagination, but praying out of the very roots of my being, and praying to the God I had never known, to reach down towards me out of his darkness and to help me get free of the thousand terrible things that held my will in their slavery (*SSM* 124)

This was a true mystical experience. The experience lifted Merton out of himself and it remained clearly in his memory. Merton found himself in a liminal state created by his cultural isolation and the religious atmosphere in which he was immersed while in Rome. Merton, however, recognised that the experience came from within him and not from external sources. He later recognised he was in the poisonous world of Babel. The effect of the incident faded when Merton returned home to Britain but the memory persisted. In the tradition of Augustine Merton remembered the experience with guilt but also with gratitude as gift from a merciful God.

Gilson

Merton's journey moved him from being a disillusioned, egocentric non-believer to that of a Catholic monk and mystic. A second and different mystical experience shaped that ongoing journey. As Merton knew: "To seek God is to seek reality. And this must be something more than a flight from images to ideas. The interior life is not merely what is *not* exterior" (Cunningham SS 67). That surrender was required of him from the earliest time of his spiritual odyssey. The book that hastened that journey was written by Etienne Gilson. The first experience described above involved all of Merton and was accompanied by tears and emotion. The second experience was an intellectual one but in its way just as powerful:

One day in the month of February 1973, I happened to have five or ten loose dollars burning a hole in my pocket. . .

Now in Scribner's window, I saw a book called *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*. . . I bought it, then together with one other book that I have completely forgotten, and on my way home in the Long Island train, I unwrapped the package to gloat over my acquisitions. It was only then that I saw on the first page. . . the small print which said "Nihil Obstat . . . Imprimatur."

The feeling of disgust and deception struck me like a knife in the pit of my stomach. I felt as if I had been cheated! They should have warned me it was a Catholic book. .

And the one big concept which I got out of its pages was something that was to revolutionise my whole life. It is all contained in one of those dry outlandish technical compounds that the scholastic philosophers were so prone to use: the word *aseitas*.^{xxi} In that one word which can be applied to God alone and which expresses his most characteristic attribute, I discovered an entirely new concept of God (SSM 191).

Merton discovered God as Being not as a being in the same way a man or woman is a being. This understanding of God permeated his understanding of contemplation. God was so different from humanity that there was simply no comparison to be made. God was Silence and yet the one spoken Word of God, the Logos, was God. It was to that Word everyone was called to listen. Babel began its rebellion with the complete failure to understand that God was in

essence beyond human comprehension. While human beings are made in the image of God they were only a dim reflection as in a mirror. The people of Babel, who imagined God was only a little stronger than they were, would suffer a great shock when even nature raised its burly fist to destroy them. They were shown that even inanimate things, the dust and sand of the desert, had more power within them in relation to humanity than humanity had in relation to God.

Aldous Huxley

Gilson was not the only unexpected force to turn Merton towards Catholicism and to contemplation. Another influence was Aldous Huxley.

Firstly Huxley reorganised Merton's political thinking when he read *Ends and Means* in 1941 (Mott 192). This political reorganisation obviously had some influence on the way Merton approached his 1941 poem, *Tower of Babel*. The opening quatrain to this poem is entitled "The Political Speech".

Secondly Huxley's work gave meaning to the word *Mystic* for Merton, a word which was not in favour with the students at Columbia.

Mott points out that Merton had given Huxley's work, *After Many a Summer*, a dismissive review and regretted it writing to Huxley to apologise. When Huxley's work *The Grey Eminence* appeared Merton also read it avidly and although he did not fully agree with the premise it also made him think about the relationship of politics with the Church. As a new and enthusiastic convert Merton was nevertheless aware that politics, such as that involving Catholic Action, did not always make comfortable bedfellows with religion:

If a Catholic gets into a position of power in a country where the political atmosphere is made up of struggles between a lot of irreligious and frankly selfish minorities, how can he ever do anything at all except by compromising with religious principles, or worse than that, fooling himself that he is leading a crusade, and then turning the country upside down in the name of religion, the way Franco did, or the way the third and fourth Crusades did to Europe. I think the reformation was a Divine punishment for the Fourth Crusade, in which the business men of Venice inveigled the whole

army of Crusaders (recruited with promises of plenary indulgences if they died in battle) to conquer, for Venetian business, the Christian Empire of Constantinople (Mott 193).^{xxii}

Perhaps Huxley's was a prophetic voice when he spoke of Father Joseph (The Grey Eminence) who "made advanced graces of mysticism fit in with rigid forms of dogma beyond [the] point where dogma had any real meaning." (Mott 193).

In his autobiography Merton discusses the effect Huxley's text *Ends and Means* had on him. Merton's own narrowness of thought is apparent in this discussion as it was in the previous one. The image he has of God is of a punitive God drawn from some areas of the First Testament. The fact that Merton moved to a far more tolerant, ecumenical and compassionate place indicates the strength of his integrity and his own ruthless honesty. In 1949 there was a black and white mentality though which dichotomised persons, places, things and events in an Augustinian manner. What was not the City of God had to be the city of sin. But mysticism moved Merton beyond such thinking and not just the mysticism of the Christian west but the mysticism of the ancient Asian religions. Huxley "had read widely and deeply and intelligently in all kinds of Christian and Oriental mystical literature, and had come out with the astonishing truth that all this, far from being a mixture of dreams and charlatanism, was very real and very serious" (SSM 205).

Huxley's work, *Ends and Means*, had two further important effects on Merton:

1. He came to understand the need for a spiritual life, an interior life with some kind of mortification essential to it and to see this as an antidote for war. This is essentially one of the major themes of the *Morality Play*:

The point of his title was this: we cannot use evil means to attain a good end. Huxley's chief argument was that we were using the means that precisely made good ends impossible to attain: war, violence, reprisals, rapacity. And he traced our impossibility to use the proper means to the fact that men were immersed in the

material and animal urges of an element in their nature which was blind and crude and unspiritual (SSM 205).

2. The second effect dealt with mysticism itself: “But the most important effect of the book on me was to make me start ransacking the university library for books on oriental mysticism” (SSM 207).

Through his quite compulsive reading Merton came to a peculiar understanding of Oriental spirituality which was later rectified by further reflective and deeper reading. His original study left him with the impression

That mysticism was something very esoteric and complex and that we were all inside some huge Being in whom we were involved and out of whom we evolved, and the thing to do was to involve ourselves back in to him again by a system of elaborate disciplines and subject more or less to the control of our own will. The Absolute Being was an infinite timeless, peaceful, impersonal Nothing (SSM208).

This was the ironic Merton at his worst, making fun of what he does not understand. In the light of his own personal mystical experiences he should have realised thousands of years of tradition could not be reduced to an experience of Nothing. His own final and most powerful experience was to occur when he came into living contact with the Eastern tradition. Of Polonnaruwa he writes:

I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise (AJ 236).

At Polonnaruwa he entered into a place of brokenness and emptiness and yet evidence.

Understanding

Gilson's work gave Merton a profound intellectual understanding of God. This insight was to have a profound impact on his future work.

The solitary, then, has a mysterious and apparently absurd vocation to supernatural unity. He seeks a spiritual and simple oneness in himself, which, when it is found, paradoxically becomes the oneness of all men – a oneness beyond separation, conflict and schism. For it is only when each man is one that mankind will again become “One”. But the solitary realises that the images and myths of a particular group – projections of the interests, ideals and sins of that group – can take possession of him and divide him against himself (*DQ* 182).

Having been in the place of division many times Merton could use the Tower of Babel as a concrete image of his own and of the world's situation.

The illusions of the tower included a failure to understand the relationship of Humanity to God and the confusion caused by a deliberate confusion of language and meaning. The latter in particular led to a confusion of identity. Merton experienced that perplexity in relation to his identity and his vocation but, for him, his intellectual acumen and his broadening faith perspective gave some counterbalance to the misunderstanding of Babel. He knew the danger to religious life and to the individual monk in building an ivory tower in which they felt safe from the world and from each other. For many years theology taught an elitist theory of religious life. The illusion that the tower could protect against the world had to be destroyed. “I have rejected the absurd and formalistic pose of “the monks” which is in favour here: that we have “left the world” and have nothing more to do with it; its pomps and its politics” ((Kramer *TTW*34).

Merton came to realise he was evading the twentieth century and that, in fact, his evasion was a moral problem. It is the problem embedded in the first question Thomas asks in the *Morality Play*: Should we join these people? There

was a need to make an active commitment to his world. In another sense Merton was already part of that world as was the monastery. The dichotomy of earthly city/ heavenly city was non-existent.

The Huxley solution, as much as the contemplative solution, was to view the dilemma as a spiritual problem, to separate out the false from the true – a complex task requiring both language to explain the solution and silence to experience it.

Blake and Maritain

Another strong influence on Merton was the work of the poet William Blake. Owen Merton introduced his son to Blake and Merton read the poet's works while at Oakham. Eventually Blake became the subject of Merton's Master's Thesis: *Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in interpretation (The Literary essays of Thomas Merton 385-453)*.

Merton presented his thesis in "partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English and Comparative Literature, faculty of Philosophy, Columbia University" in February, 1939. In the preface to the thesis he states:

This essay aims towards a clearer understanding of Blake's ideas about art: no more. To this end I have compared him with the aestheticians I think he most resembles. More than that, I have used the aesthetics ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas (as presented by one of the greatest of living philosophers, Jacques Maritain) as a touchstone by which to test Blake's thought without meaning to insinuate that Blake and St. Thomas are exactly like each other, or worse still, that Blake ever read a line of St. Thomas (Hart *Lit. Essays* 391).

Merton's theory on Blake was not on his poetry as such but on the aesthetics of poetry and on Blake as a religious poet. Merton examined the symbolism inherent in the poet's work and its implication for an understanding of modern life. For Merton Blake was "the poet who had least to do with his age and was

most in opposition to everything it stood for” (SSM 210). Merton identified with Blake through his own “evasion and disaffection from XXth century life.” (Kramer *TTW*34). Merton’s own evasion became a moral problem which had to be faced. In turn it was linked to the “absurd and formalistic pose of “the monks” described in the previous section. (Kramer *TTW* 34). Merton wrote the above in 1960 but he had been moving towards that position for a while. The Babel works were most certainly political statements and ones that challenged the political clichés and prejudices within the monastery. Merton, like Blake, challenged his time and place. The first question Thomas asks in “A Morality” reflects Merton’s political and moral dilemma: Ought we, Raphael, to join the builders of this city?” (*CP* 248).

Blake was not an educated person in the ordinary way. For example, Merton comments on his poor spelling. He was a person who because of his indifference to the ordinary mores and the members of eighteenth century society suffered for his lack of conventionality in the artistic world. This rejection often meant the cold and heartless disparagement of all that was vital and real to Blake in art and faith. Merton’s own early experiences of rejection allowed him an understanding of Blake’s experience. Blake glorified “the transfiguration of man’s natural love, his natural powers in the refining fires of mystical experience and that in itself implied an arduous and total purification, by faith and love and desire, from all the petty materialistic and commonplace and earthly ideals of his rationalistic friends” (SSM 225). Rejection can involve that kind of purification. It seemed to Merton that God’s providence in leading him to Blake awakened some faith and love in his soul that eventually led him to seek Christ and be converted to the Catholic faith (O’Connell 204).

Both Blake and Merton saw that art appealed firstly to the intellect where it originated. There was a process of thought and visualisation the artist had to engage in before they produce their work. This agrees with Jacques Maritain’s theory of art as well and which Merton used as the touchstone of aesthetics in his thesis. For Maritain art is a work of the practical intellect. Merton was extremely good at visualisation as some of his poetry indicates but he was not so good at the dynamics of dramatic interaction because in some ways his dialogue

reduces itself to intellectual discussion. The marginal person, whether monk or poet, symbolised by some of his characters in the play, remains an intellectual idea rather than a developing participant in the drama.. Merton's practical intellect created the situation but could not dramatise it adequately.

Art and Scholasticism

Maritain's work, *Art and Scholasticism*, was a touchstone for testing Merton's theories in his thesis. In it Maritain analyses and develops the Schoolmen's theory firstly by defining art, and then by analysing its purpose and the qualities it possessed. The philosopher uses the notion, as has been said, that art is a virtue of the practical intellect. He develops this idea within a Catholic paradigm and within the realm of the existential. Both were significant to Merton. He needed an anchor such as that provided by the Schoolmen but still yearned for the flexibility and freedom which existentialism offered.

Maritain contrasts the practical intellect with the speculative intellect. The virtue Maritain extols as the virtue of the speculative intellect is the virtue of wisdom: the essential virtue which predisposes the individual to contemplation. Wisdom is the virtue by which one contemplates first causes. Its sole end is knowledge – knowledge of God. But contemplation also requires an experiential knowledge of God. This knowledge requires the slate of the mind to be cleaned deeply, to enter into silence, so that God can exist there as God. The implication in relation to this virtue, however, seems to be that the mind is actively contemplative. The mind embraces “all things in the superior unity of a single glance.” (Maritain 12) In this scenario the mind does the work: not God.

Maritain says of virtues such as wisdom: “The speculative order is therefore [the mind's] peculiar order; it finds its ease therein . . . its needs or conveniences are alike indifferent to it; it takes its joy in being and has eyes only for being” (Maritain 12).

Merton's understanding of God is that God is Being – not a being. There is all the difference in the world in this statement. The essence of God is Being and cannot be defined otherwise. In Maritain's statement "being" refers to the power the mind has to delight in its own existence. Art flows out of that delight and power, celebrating not just the individual but the created mind and creative activity. Poetry is a form of art produced in this way. Maritain writes that:

Poetry, (like metaphysics) is spiritual nourishment, but the savour of it is created and insufficient. There is only one eternal nourishment. Unhappy you who think yourself ambitious, if you whet your appetite for anything less than the three divine Persons and humanity of Christ.

It is deadly error to expect poetry to provide the supersubstantial nourishment of man (Maritain 79).

Merton obviously did not expect contemplation to flow from poetry (though that is not to say it cannot do so) but he appreciated the Scholastic stance and this made it difficult for him to obtain a clear perspective in relation to poetry and contemplation. Could Merton still write poetry if it did not supply him with the "supersubstantial nourishment": a term which can certainly be translated as contemplation?

Claritas

Maritain uses the scholastic term *claritas* to denote another important aspect of art. For Aquinas the sun and gold, to which a "glorified" body is commonly compared and the transfiguration are both examples of *claritas*. The language which denotes contemplation must also possess this attribute – "shining like one who knows God" (O'Connell 207).

The creation of an Edenic world which occurs out of the destruction of Babel in the Oratorio and the Morality Play is the creation of a world in which the *claritas* of God is vividly present. The Morality concludes with an imaginative experience of the clarity and beauty of the one voice of the Logos. The image is

prophetic of Merton's own experience at Polonnaruwa. There he entered into "a space of barrenness and openness and evidence" (*AJ* 236).

Silence illuminates *claritas*. For Merton "contemplation is essentially a listening in silence, an expectancy . . . It is by his silence itself, suddenly inexplicably revealing itself to him as a word of great power, full of the voice of God" (*CMP* 122-123). This is the antithesis of Babel where there is no opportunity to listen in this sense. At the tower there is only the voice of the Leader haranguing his people and brainwashing them to their detriment. Silence is the voice of God which makes all things new. As Merton collapses the demands of the artistic and spiritual vocation he realises that far from being opposed to each other, interior contemplation (Mysticism, the voice of the archetypal monk), and external activity (making art, the voice of the poet), are two aspects of the same love of God. The experience at Polonnaruwa revealed this to Merton before he died even if he maintained ambivalence towards his own art for much of his life.

Vision

Michael Higgins notes the affinity between Blake's vision of art and Merton's vision. For Higgins, Merton is Blake's heir and, like Blake, his efforts were always towards an enlarging vision:

I am aware of the need for constant self-revision and growth, leaving behind the renunciations of yesterday and yet in continuity with all my yesterdays. For to cling to the past is to lose one's continuity with the past, since this means clinging to what is no longer there.

My ideas are always changing, always moving around one center, and I am always seeing that center from somewhere else.

Hence, I will always be accused of inconsistency. But I will no longer be there to hear the accusation (*VC* 19).

Higgins saw that Merton's poetic and spiritual vision consisted of his own myth-dream^{xxiii} – a term Merton borrowed from the Greek philosophers and used in *The Asian Journal*. There was an obligation to bring this myth-dream into being

rather than to allow the myth of Babel still be active in the substratum of the world. This dream entailed understanding and facing:

The disunity of the word/world and its reparation by the poet; the role of silence in this life-long act of reparation; the tyranny of intellection and its dethronement by archaic wisdom; the ultimate realisation of that Four-fold vision which is imaginative and spiritual integration (Higgins 71).

Higgins's words are a concise summary of the Merton Blake interface in the 1950's and later.

Imagination

Paul Ricoeur states that imagination "is no longer the faculty of describing images from our sensory experience but the capacity for letting new worlds shape our understanding" (Kearney 34). Imagination for Blake is even more. It is an entity which unifies the contraries Blake sees as existing in creation and which are in effect essential for mankind's development. Merton was aware of these contraries in himself but in the 1940s and early 1950s unable to resolve the issues around his poet/monk dilemma. He was gradually moving to "new worlds" shaped by his understanding as the last section of Babel reveals. In the 1950s his adherence to the catholic institution almost dictated the shape the new world would have so that the recreated Edenic world of the last scene is somewhat trite and traditionally Christian. It is a world of unity but not of revelation. All Christians were taught the doctrine of the last judgement which controls the scene. Polonnaruwa's "clean illumination" provided the missing aspect of revelation for Merton.

Merton had much to contend with in his writing. Not the least of his difficulties was the fact that imagination was suspect in Catholic theological circles. When coupled with emotion it was seen as the enemy of dogma and thus of faith. A common directive for religious in the early fifties was to ignore feeling. On one level the warning was needed. An undeveloped imagination can deteriorate into a world of fantasy. Yet imagination is the faculty which breaks through

boundaries and creates other worlds. Both Coomeraswamy and Maritain were very strong on art maintaining boundaries. Imaginative art creates its own new boundaries so does a strong imaginative spirituality within its own faith paradigm. In his poet/monk dilemma imagination is the faculty Merton feared because it gave life to the images which teemed in his mind. He needed the Blakean and the mystical perspective to lead him to freedom.

Like Blake when Merton used his imaginative faculty his work was original and transformative. He did not simply have to rely on poetic technique or new tricks. Imagination required he call on all aspects of his experience and listen to them in stillness. His poetry reflects that quality of inner stillness and originality when he does that:

“ . . . The whole
World is secretly on fire. The stones
Burn, even the stones
They burn me. How can a man be still or
Listen to all things burning? How can he dare
To sit with them when
All their silence
Is on fire?” (CP 281).

Merton’s imaginative use of the myth of Babel opens a new door to the understanding of that myth. In the moment of annihilation redemption hides. Babel is found to contain within itself a New Jerusalem that is a new power of the imagination; one that can re-imagine the kingdom of God existing in the mess of the old realities. This new power can visualise a unified world, complete and whole, because the Word, the Silence of God is present and active in it.

The 1947 Article.

On 4th July 1947 *The Commonweal* published Merton’s article on poetry entitled *Poetry and the Contemplative Life*. The article was republished in 1958 with a

many differences. It is the 1947 edition which is significant here in relation to Merton's personal dilemma and the Babel works. The article used Maritain's ideas as well as ideas Merton developed through his own poetry and writing. The 1947 article was really a plea for all artists to consider the contemplative life as essential to their art. Fundamentally the article made the following points:

1. God experienced through faith/revelation/personal experience is the only subject worthy of the Christian poet.
2. Inspiration is present for creative expression in the liturgy, scripture, Middle Ages and so on.
3. Poetry has a dramatic simplicity but also must bring out every possible nuance of meaning.
4. "Christ on the Cross is the fount of all art because he is the Word, the fount of all grace and wisdom . . . splendour of eternal light – mirror of the Godhead without stain" (*Commonweal* 281)
5. All Christian poets are contemplative to some degree but must also develop their poetic technique and not simply rely on natural gifts.

Merton obeyed his own rules when constructing the last three of the Babel works. He chose a scriptural theme and used a technique from the Middle Ages. The works use the ancient Christian metaphor of pilgrimage and the journey theme refers to Merton's political and religious worlds. Each symbol carries nuances of meaning which apply not just to one world but to all the contexts Merton inhabited. The symbol of the Tower is just one example. It is a scriptural image but also has concrete shape in the monastery tower at Gethsemani and refers to the symbolic towers people construct against each other as well as the political towers and political-speak which imprison people morally and unjustly.

Merton then asks himself a crucial question: It is obvious that contemplation has much to offer poetry, but can poetry offer anything in return to contemplation? Can the poetic sense help us towards infused contemplation and if so how far along the way? (*Commonweal* 282).

Merton answered his own question in the following way:

1. The poetic sense may be a remote preparation for mystical prayer.
2. It can transcend the sensible order and is a supra-rational intuition of the latent perfection of things.
3. It is an analogue of mystical experience (Maritain quoted in the article).
4. Blake saw the two forms of contemplation (aesthetic and mystical) as the same but for Merton, at this stage, there is an abyss between them.

The difference Merton saw between the two forms of contemplation was based on the Thomist principle that “only the superior soul is strictly the image of God within.” (*Commonweal* 283). The artist works from the inferior soul. Grace is necessary to shape the image of God. This means that the centre of the soul must be purified of images and attachments to sensible things in order to receive God in its centre. Mystical contemplation is a pure gift of God.

Perhaps the heart of Merton’s quandary lay in the fact he believed attachment to human reasoning, analysis and discourse was the major obstacle to infused contemplation; the solitude to which the monk yearns. In some ways Merton’s God was a fragile God lost by any human intellectual activity. And yet he said there can be no contemplation without intelligence. The difference is expressed as follows:

Now it is precisely here that the aesthetic instinct changes its colors, and from being a precious gift becomes a fatal handicap. If the intuition of the poet naturally leads him into the inner sanctuary of his soul, it is for a special purpose in the natural order; when the poet enters into himself, it is in order to reflect upon his inspiration and to clothe it with a special and splendid form and then return to display it to those outside. . . .The artist enters into himself in order to work. For him the “superior” soul is a forge where inspiration kindles a fire of white heat, a crucible for the transformation of natural images into new created forms. But the mystic enters into himself, not in order to work but to pass through the centre of his own soul and lose himself in the mystery and secrecy and infinite transcendent reality of God living and working within him. (*Commonweal* 284)^{xxiv}

Merton, the artist understood well the Promethean tendency to exploit every aspect of his experience for his art. This was joy for Merton the poet, but tragedy for Merton the monk.

Merton's conclusion was: "Poetry can indeed; help to bring us rapidly through that part of the journey to contemplation that is called active; but when we are entering the realm of true contemplation, where eternal happiness begins it may turn around and bar our way" (*Commonweal* 285). If that was so, there was only one choice: "In such an event there is only one course for the poet to take for his own individual sanctification: the ruthless and complete sacrifice of his art" (*Commonweal* 285).

This was indeed the "backward-forward movement into the web" affecting Merton when he wrote the Babel works. It seemed to him that the sacrifice of his poetry was necessary for his contemplative life yet he could not bring himself to completely let his poetic life go. The question did not concern the quality of his poetry but did concern the vital need he had to express his life experience through that particular art form. He knew "that the poet, is of all men, the one who is least at a loss for a means to express what is essentially inexpressible" (*Commonweal* 286).

Conclusion

This chapter has dealt with the literary influences affecting Merton's development as monk and poet. By referring to Merton's own understanding of poetry in 1947 it has also looked more closely at the way Merton experienced the poet/monk dilemma in his life prior to writing the Babel works. The Chapter has noted how Merton's understanding of literature and contemplation affected the writing of the Babel poems.

The next chapter of this thesis will introduce the four works which constitute the Babel works.

Chapter 7: There are no actions only Explanations

Summary: Part A.

Introduction

The contexts discussed in Part A of this thesis produced a person who was disturbed by questions concerning his spiritual and monastic life. These questions were varied but directly related to his vocation as monk and writer. Firstly, Merton questioned his vocation to the Cistercians when he was naturally drawn to the Calmoldolese or the Carthusians. Secondly, fearing that by being ordained a priest he would simply be joining an elite class within the church, he questioned his call to the Catholic priesthood. The third question which endured throughout his life in varying degrees of uncertainty concerned his writing. Should he continue writing, particularly writing poetry, if he was called to contemplation? Merton saw words and silence as antithetical. While poetry seemed to be the focus of his quandary it is true that much of his prose writing has a metaphorical quality akin to poetry so the question had a wider application than just poetry itself.

Dualism

Merton's work has been described as "shockingly autobiographical." This statement was not a condemnation but implied that his work and his honesty in combating the false self in his own life and in the cultural, social and religious worlds he inhabited was a shocking experience for Merton's readers. It demanded an honesty of the readers themselves. If Merton was to be true to his own journey he was obliged to write in such a way that his readers were forced to confront their own limitations and gifts.

Merton's life overall was a struggle to integrate the various dualities which came to consciousness in him. When talking to the sisters at Redwoods Monastery in 1968 he makes the following comment, highlighting his own difficulties:

You have to experience duality for a long time until you see it is not there . . . don't consider dualistic prayer on a lower level. The lower is higher. There are no levels. At any moment you can break through to the underlying unity which is God's gift in Christ. In the end prayer praises. . . Thanksgiving gives thanks . . . Openness is all (Hart *MM* 89).

The struggle against dualism in some form or other was experienced by Merton for most of his life. But integration of the dualities was also experienced in moments of revelation such as that which occurred at Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville. There Merton saw his oneness with all people and the hidden greatness of men and women. This greatness was hidden not only from each other but also from themselves. The man who wrote "The Babel Works" saw division everywhere, in himself, in his work, in his monastery. The one who experienced the epiphany in Louisville saw not division but presence and potential in each person. Merton could only be present to such experiences as his vision was enlarging, to use Blake's term.

That experience resolved the false dichotomy between monk and laity for Merton. This was an illusion that the 1940 theology of religious life had taught at least implicitly.

Questioning continued

Although Kramer suggests he resolved it in the last five years of his life, there was a specific question which pursued Merton. This concerned the conflict he experienced within himself between monk and poet/writer. Should he continue as a writer when his primary focus was contemplation? Writing required a certain level of egoism and self focus. The visualisation required of a writer also seemed to impede apophatic contemplation.

There were, of course, precedents in the Cistercian Order. Other monks had been writers and their writing had enhanced their calling. Saint Bernard of Clairveaux and William of St. Thierry were both writers and contemplatives. The two vocations were not incompatible in theory. They were incompatible, however, for Merton in the period of his monastic life prior to 1953. Perhaps

the dilemma reached its climax in 1947/48 but it did not disappear from his journals and surfaced again at regular intervals.

There are many comments in the 1941-1952 journals, *Entering the Silence*, regarding the dilemma. The following examples give some indication of the extent to which the question endured and the ambivalence Merton experienced in relation to it:

1947

I got some scruples because poetry of ours had been published, and some people liked it, and I thought it was wrong for attention to be drawn to any work of ours (Montaldo ES 15).

I got permission to ask Reverend Father for permission to give up writing verse (Ibid 43).

Sometimes I have a great desire to drop all writing, but today I can see that my way to sanctification lies in learning how to write under all the strange conditions imposed by Cistercian life and in writing carefully and well for the glory of God, denying myself and checking my haste to get into print (Ibid 63).

The conflict see-saws for Merton and he is conscious of the conflicting motivations present in that conflict. 1948 and 1949 saw the same dynamism in place:

1948

Yet the business of being poisoned in spite of yourself by the pleasures you take in your own work! You say you don't want the dish but the smell of it goes to you head and corrupts you. You get drunk by sniffing the cork of the bottle (Ibid 218).

1952

He (Msgr. Larraona, the Secretary of the Sacred Congregation of Religious) told me, also authoritatively, that it was most desirable for me to go on writing. I gather this seems to be the general opinion in Rome (Cunningham SS 11).

The other side of the dynamism was present: in Merton's Journals:

1949

I know now that all my own poems about the world's suffering have been inadequate: they have not solved anything, they have only camouflaged the problem. And it seems to me the urge to write a real poem about suffering is only another temptation because, after all, I do not really understand (Ibid 365)

1949

But when I tell myself "I am no writer, I am finished," instead of being upset I am filled with a sense of peace and of relief (Ibid 304).

1951

How weary I am of being a writer. How necessary it is for monks to work in the fields, in the sun, in the mud, in the clay, in the wind, these are our spiritual directors and our novice masters. They form our contemplation. They instil into us virtue. They make us as stable as the land we live in. You do not get that out of a typewriter (Ibid 450).

The Cistercian reform emphasised manual labour. The fact that Merton did not actively take part in that because of his writing only added to the confusion around the issue of writing. Knowing he was to be Master of Scholastics and was expected to model the Cistercian way to the young Cistercians was a further complication.

The asceticism of the Order to which Merton belonged requires a self-emptying of everything that spoke of an attachment to self. This *asceticism* was seen as the will of God and the will of God, for Merton, was the foundation of his spiritual life. This was a life from which in fact poetry could not be separated, hence the dilemma.

Writing and contemplation were as intrinsic to Merton as a person that he could not detach from either without suffering some psychological damage. At first he used violence to dissolve the tensions between the two vocations. This meant he simply stopped writing poetry and even his journal entries are discontinued for a time (1953-56).

By 1953 the problem of writing versus contemplation had become entwined with Merton's growing need for solitude. Merton had written an article in the late 1940's on contemplation and the relationship of contemplation to poetry. At that stage he could not imagine the artist entering fully into the apophatic contemplative experience because an artist relied so heavily on images to give expression to his work. The 1950's allowed Merton to develop his ideas around these issues and in a revised paper entitled "On Poetry and Contemplation: a reappraisal", published in 1958 Merton wrote the following:

[Contemplation] is not only compatible with poetic creation, but is stimulated by it, and it, in its turn, inspires poetry.(Hart, LETM, 341-2).

At the time of writing the Babel works this was not so clear cut a solution of the poet/contemplative dilemma.

The gift of the old tool shed as "hermitage" was a gift of health for Merton. Once he found himself in solitude some of the questions disturbing him faded into the background but these questions were not fully resolved. They were simply neutralised or replaced by another form of the same deep question: Who am I? What am I called to be?

1953

One of the things that every monk needs to feel, for his own peace of heart, is that he is working for a living, and even making a living by the work of his hands. However, there are vocations within our vocation: it can always be a higher call to feel one to be, and actually to be, useless (Cunningham SS 41).

More significantly Merton had reached a stasis point in his self-reflection and change was needed.

Change

The Strange Islands is an important work because Merton through it realises that the duality he experienced was not a barrier to the contemplative integration of his life. "The Tower of Babel: A Morality", is a link between Merton's

contemplative longing and his growing need to write about the cultural disintegration filtering through to him. Other poems in the collection such as “How to Enter a Big City” reflect similar themes:

. . .curve behind the sun again
Towers full office
. . .wheat in towers . . .
Centred in its own incurable
Discontent, the City
Consents to be recognised. (Strange Islands 3-4)

Merton is the city, as is Gethsemani. The poem reflects some of his discontent and the bitterness he was later to express in the poem “Am I not allowed to be as the rest of Men?”

James Thomas Baker comments on this aspect of Merton’s self and the persona he projected in writing:

[Merton] was running away from a world which he saw as tragically fragmented and hopelessly at odds with itself. Having been a sensitive citizen of that world, he shared the fragmentation and his own inner disunity . . .either mirrored or helped create this corporate fragmentation (47).

Merton’s world-rejection was a rejection of all that he perceived was evil in it. His going to Gethsemani was not quite a running away though it may have had some elements of escapism in it. He went there to find his place in the world and he did just that, but at a cost. The cost was a rebirth into his true self: his original face, to use the Zen term. It meant the elimination of all roles and loving self-acceptance which would lead to the acceptance of a world in need of compassion. Merton reflects:

There is an instinct for newness, for liberation of creative power. We seek to awaken in ourselves a force which really changes and lives from within. And yet the same instinct tells us that this change is a recovery of that which is deepest, most original, most personal in ourselves. To be born again is not to become somebody else, but to become ourselves (Hart *LL196*).

Merton's direction, in spite of the dualities he experienced, was always in the direction of the Divine: this direction served as the compass point of his life. The Lodestone lying beneath the dualities was solitude. Anything that distracted Merton from that calling, no matter how enticing, involved a deep conscious and subconscious struggle. When he fell in love with Margie the struggle for solitude was made even more difficult because it then involved another person.

Merton was not a solitary for his own amusement. He carried the world with him as his poetry indicates. He discovered that a monk could not be divorced from what was happening beyond the monastic walls. Prayer, on its own, was not enough. A moral and ethical response was also required.

Because of his convictions Merton at times found himself on a collision course with the men in his Order who saw a vocation as a private affair. Merton himself had to be careful. In his history of the Order, *Waters of Silence*, he consistently pointed out the difference between the active and contemplative life. Were his desires to write, and later to form discussion groups, simply a way of being drawn into activity himself? This would mean an evasion of contemplation.

Each time Merton sought to build a "tower" for himself, either in a hermitage or as a hermit in some remote mission area, he found it very soon destroyed. But by 1960 Merton was incapable of perceiving religious life in any other form except involvement with the "world". He had to learn to turn and face the world and still maintain his contemplative stance. Through that lens he could be part of society with integrity. "A Morality" is an exercise in doing just that, in spite of the fact that the ending is too pat a resolution. That ending is true to the Christian story but glosses over the suffering endemic in that story. Nevertheless the play is a response and the beginning of a deeper involvement in the human story.

Merton believed that poetry and journal writing were his special gifts. Letting go of poetry was anguish even when he could speak most rationally of why he should no longer write it. Poetry was the symbol for Merton of his ambition and of his need for status in his world. He desired the recognition it brought him and at the same time was ashamed of his ambition. He attempted to hand the problem over to his superiors but inevitably it came back to him. There was ambivalence consistently about the situation: what was really being asked of him? In a convoluted way he asks: "What does God want me to ask him? He will tell me and when I find out he will also give me what I ask" (Montaldo *ES* 305).

The themes which emerged strongly in the first poem, "Tower of Babel", the seed poem, (language, identity, history, and technology,) were also fundamental to the other Babel works. They openly address the social and personal issues confronting Merton as he moves more deeply into contemplation.

Apophatic contemplation, that is imageless contemplation, in which one enters the experience of Being, was Merton's deepest desire. Victor Kramer makes the comment before one can let go of images, one must possess images. When Merton first entered Gethsemani images flooded him as he gave himself enthusiastically to the times of silent prayer. The asceticism and silence captured him and initiated his conscious movement towards contemplation. The poems he sent to Robert Lax and others reveal the fervour of the neophyte:

St Paul ACTS IX 1-22

When I was Saul, and walked among the blazing rocks,
My road was quiet as a trap
I feared what Word would split high noon with light;
And lock my sight and drive me mad:

And thus I saw the Voice that struck me dead!

...

O Jesus, show me Easter in a dream!
O Cross Damascus, where poor Ananias in some other room,
(Who knows my locks, to let me out!)

Waits for Your word to take his keys and come! (Montaldo *ES* 6-7).

Merton's joy is palpable as is his longing for the Damascus experience and for the liberation from the past which redeemed Saul. Merton is Saul and Saul Merton in the poem. There is a self-consciousness of sin in the poem, appropriate for one who enters the Trappist monastery. Everything in Merton's existence is seen in God terms. When the awakening comes from this sleep of first ecstasy it will require courage to face the world where Merton has conveniently situated evil. In the meantime he delights in an ordered world: ". . . Falling starlight feeds, as bright as manna, All our rough earth with wakeful grace" (Montaldo *ES* 1).

Autobiography

The core of this thesis argues that "The Babel Works" are a précis of the place Merton had reached on his spiritual and writer's journey in the mid-fifties and are indicators of where that journey was to take him. These works are consciously and unconsciously autobiographical and mirror the questions and difficulties Merton experienced while he wrote. The works also relate to the world beyond the monastery, a world beginning to impinge on the monastic tower in which Merton was ensconced. Merton stood at the point where history for him "moved backwards and forwards". This was a moment of change; a moment of looking backwards at where he had been and of looking forward to where he was going and in discovering how he was to get there.

The final work in the group, "The Tower of Babel: A Morality", is a summation of his faith. It is also prophetic. Sandra Schneider, an American Biblical scholar, defined the prophetic as the ability to envisage a new reality (Schneider 81). In an article for *The Merton Seasonal*, a response to Bishop Robert Morneau, Schneider summarises Merton's approach to the world in which he discovered himself: "Merton's distinctive mode of cultural criticism . . . was rooted in a prophetic capacity for imagining an alternative reality that was itself

deeply rooted in the contemplative vocation and best expressed in his writing, perhaps at least as effectively in his poetry as in his prose” (Schneider 81).

Another significant aspect of Merton’s work needs to be reiterated here. William Shannon suggested all of Merton’s work is biographical and this thesis agrees with that statement. Shannon’s comment on the autobiographical content of Merton’s work is made in relation to Merton’s text *Seeds of Contemplation* (PJ 49-50). The theme that Shannon mentions via the reviewers is also pertinent to the theme of the last three Babel works. Because of this it is accepted that “The Babel Works” contain elements of autobiography. Shannon is supported in his view by Jonathon Montaldo and, of course, by Merton himself:

Interestingly, three reviewers suggest the autobiographical content in *Seeds*. Gerald G. Walsh of Fordham University writes: “In the present work the Trappist poet continues his autobiography.” To him it represents Merton’s arrival at the terrestrial paradise at the top of Purgatory: “It is a prose song full of the magic that makes the last cantos of Dante’s *Purgatorio* so beautiful and bafflingly mysterious . . . In a similar vein, A. F. Wolfe writes that “Merton’s devotional prism has caught reflections from Dante’s Beatific Vision.” This theme, that contemplation is a return to the primeval Garden of Eden – is one that is important to Merton and one that he will develop more explicitly in later works. (73)

Walsh is not the only critic to comment on Merton’s contemplative writings as autobiographical. Shannon continues with further examples:

Emile Cailliet of Princeton University in his review picks up the autobiography motif, but in a different way. Describing *Seeds* as “an heroic book,” he remarks that while Merton hardly ever speaks of himself, directly, whole sections of the book are autobiographical. He suggests a number of texts that surely have an autobiographical twist to them. Of whom but himself is he speaking, Cailliet asks, when he describes the man who planned to do spectacular things, who could not think of himself without a halo? And when the events of daily life keep reminding him of his own insignificance and mediocrity he is ashamed, and his pride refuses to swallow a truth at which no sane man should be surprised.” Cailliet cites other passages, for example, by referring to a section where Merton

describes solitude at some length, he asks, “By what price those striking definitions of solitude?” (74)

Shannon adds his own favourite piece of autobiography from the same text: “Who but himself is he describing when he writes: ‘As soon as God gets you in one monastery you want to be in another.’” (74) Jonathon Montaldo, admittedly writing about the Merton journals which are certainly autobiographical, also recognises this trend in Merton’s opus and in so doing recognises the one motivation for writing which permeates all Merton’s work:

To open a reader’s heart by revealing his own heart so that heart could speak directly to heart was the primary motivation behind all of Merton’s expressive autobiographical writing. Early in his writing career, failing to have his fiction accepted for publication, Merton realised that his major literary asset was in writing about what he personally experienced and about what he loved in that experience. Writing in his journal in December of 1939, while living on Perry Street in Greenwich Village, Merton acknowledged: *I have tremendous preoccupations of my own, personal preoccupations with whatever is going on inside my own heart, and I simply cannot write about anything else. Anything I create is only a symbol for some completely interior preoccupation of my own. . . I only know I am writing well [when I am writing] about the things I love: ideas, places, certain people: all very definite, individual, identifiable objects of love, all of them (RM 118).*

“Anything I create is only a symbol for some completely interior preoccupation of my own”, is certainly a truth which can be applied to “The Babel Works.”

Conclusion.

Victor Kramer also writes that the raw journals contain a continual re-examination of what it means to be called to a dual vocation: *silence* and *speaking* during a particular historical era (O’Connell 81). This examination continues at many different levels in ‘The Tower of Babel: A Morality’.

The next section introduces the four works which make up the set described as “The Babel Works” and begins the analysis of the first poem written, *The Tower of Babel*.

Part B Analysis of the Babel Works

Chapter 8: Words Create Reality

The four works presented for analysis and discussion in this section of the thesis have in common the metaphor of the Tower of Babel used openly or by inference. This metaphor is taken from the myth narrated in the book of Genesis in the Hebraic-Christian scripture: The First Testament. The myth reads as follows:

Throughout the earth men spoke the same language, with the same vocabulary. Now as they moved eastwards they found a plain in the land of Shinai where they settled. They said to one another, “Come let us make bricks and bake them in the fire” – for stone they used bricks, and for mortar they used bitumen. “Come”, they said, “Let us build ourselves a tower and a tower with its top reaching heaven. Let us make a name for ourselves, so that we may not be scattered about the whole earth.”

Now Yahweh came down to see the town and the tower the sons of man had built. “So they are all a single people with a single language,” said Yahweh. “This is but the start of their undertakings! There will be nothing too hard for them to do. Come let us go down and confuse their language on the spot so that they can no longer understand one another.” Yahweh scattered them thence over the whole face of the earth, and they stopped building the tower. It was named Babel, therefore, because there, Yahweh confused the language of the whole earth. It was from there that Yahweh scattered them over the whole face of the earth (Genesis 11:1-9)(JB).

The four works vary in form and structure. The seed poem, “Tower of Babel”, is in free verse form. “A Responsory” is also a poem but is much longer and was originally envisioned as a choral piece and so includes a chorus and singers as well as recitative sections. The third work developed from “A Responsory” and is an Oratorio with the title “Tower of Babel”. The fourth and longest work is based on the genre of the Morality Play of the Middle Ages and is entitled: “Tower of Babel: A Morality.”^{xxv}

“Tower of Babel” is part of a selection of Merton’s very early poetry and is included in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (21-22). The poems in this section were all written in 1941-42. These early poems precede *Thirty Poems* a work published by *New Directions* as part of a series entitled “Poets of the Year.” James Laughlin, who headed *New Directions*, continued to publish Merton’s works until the poet’s death. *Thirty Poems* marked the beginning of Merton’s poetic career. Thus the story of Babel and the associated metaphor appealed to Thomas Merton in the early 1940s –before he entered Gethsemani.

When Merton left St. Bonaventure’s College, Olean (now a University) to enter the Cistercian monastery in Kentucky he forwarded some of his manuscripts to Mark Van Doran, one of his mentors from Columbia. Mark recognised Merton’s literary potential while Merton was one of his students. Mark was also responsible for the publishing of Merton’s early works. It was Van Doran who made the selection of poems that appeared in that first volume of poetry.

According to Victor Kramer “The Tower of Babel: A Morality” became a “seed bed and a testing place, a foundation for other ideas and more art, as well as a process in his own spiritual development” (*MA* 33).

Ross Labrie sees the early poems as rather undistinguished, uneven and derivative but he also notes that there is something distinctive and fresh about them (*ATM* 110). Of particular interest is the fact the poems are an indication of the maturing spiritual insight of Merton the contemplative and writer. Labrie supports Kramer’s view of this aspect of the poetry recognising “Merton’s ability to integrate his spirituality and his religious observances with his poetic

perceptions” (*ATM* 123). Overall in this early poetry there is little sense of a larger global community but the beginning of such a sense is revealed in the morality play.

These early poems are witty and intelligent because they deal with Merton’s dissatisfaction with the contemporary world and he often uses an ironic voice to show this unease with the contemporary world. They emphasise the negative, however, and revolve around such themes as death, confusion, emptiness and the poet’s problem with language as much as the problem of language itself. So Merton sings in one of his early works:

Here is the man of the islands,
Proud as a king of congas,
Sharp as fighting cocks’ swords
And bitter as their blood.

Shaking his coat, of feathers as black as rum,
He comes to the edge of the sea,
And challenges the crested sun.

And studies, with his eyes of grains of corn,
The jealous strut
Of Sunjazz on the burning Caribbean. .
And there he stands
With his back to where the tropics drum the country,
And threatens, face to face, his oracle
The nameless mask of noon (*CP* 5-6).

The bird and the country are one. There is a sense of voodoo in Merton’s description and at the same time a sense of loneliness. Yet the bird has frightened off all rivals to take pride of place and to gain the right to challenge the sun – an impossible task! Yet in some ways this is Merton’s own task to discover the language of challenge and of acquiescence before the sun/Son of God.

The second poem to be included in “The Babel Works”, ‘A Responsory’, was the first attempt Merton made to respond to Hindemith’s request to write a responsory for a youth convention. This text had no reference to Babel but the themes are very similar and a short time later Merton wrote a longer text titled “Tower of Babel: Oratorio”. This was a six part work which incorporated material from the early poem into Part 2 and much of the responsory (in revised form) into Parts 3-5 (O’Connell, *Encyclopedia*, 400).

Chapter 9: Fire can Quench Water

Introduction

The first poem, chronologically, in the group titled “The Babel Works” is “Tower of Babel”. This chapter analyses the poem and identifies the themes common to all four pieces in the group.

The Poem’s Significance

The poem, “Tower of Babel,” was published in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*. The anthology was published in 1980 but the poem was written in the 1941-42 period. The poem is significant because sections of it were integrated into works Merton wrote twelve or thirteen years later: “The Oratorio” and “A Morality.” For a work to be used after such a long period of time implies that Merton thought the content and approach of poem was still relevant.

Kramer said that the 1942 poem “develops the idea that mankind seems to be stupefied by [its] own creation especially by contorted language. As humankind builds its tower of Babel the primary function of language is only to designate the machine in which [it] has faith (*MA* 37-38). This is a fairly pessimistic view of humanity. Perhaps a reasonable one given that Merton was a young man who had undergone a profound conversion experience, receiving a new understanding of God and of spirituality certainly, but a young man conscious of his own sinfulness and who had not yet arrived at the realisation of the integrity of all creation. At the time of writing Merton was also aware of the political machinations and mutilation of language used in the propaganda prior to America entering the Second World War and also of the Nazi propaganda machine.

Title

The title of the poem is taken directly from the Biblical myth describing a world in which originally there was only one language. In this world human pride

envisioned humanity as equal to God and able to speak to God on equal terms. The First Testament contains many warnings against the blasphemy of pride resulting from an idolatry of self and a false vision of the individual and collective self. The tower is a metaphor for such human pride. This pride overreaches itself. In doing so it releases the wrath of God and thus contains the seeds of its own destruction. The builders thought that when God saw the magnificence of their construction they would be able to control God and the deity would be forced to bow to their superiority and power. When humanity confronted God in arrogance the resulting punishment was swift. The poison deep in the foundations of the tower, however, spread and infected the present and future world as happens in myths. God did the unexpected. Yahweh proliferated language instead of destroying it. The result was that language was no longer available for its essential function, communication, because, again in mythic terms, the communication between God and humanity had been abused. Rather, language became the vehicle of confusion, disorientation and destruction. The people were unified only because they thought they were more powerful than Yahweh and now saw Yahweh as their common enemy. The following lines of the poem connect directly to the myth because a struggle for power is always a political struggle:

The forgotten principle is that the machine
Should always destroy the maker of the machine
Being more important than the maker
In so far as man is more important than God (*CP* 21).

It is questionable whether humanity knew, let alone understood, the “forgotten principle.” To remember requires a certain humility if human limitation is to be recognised. With this in mind the third and fourth lines emerge as strongly ironical. The only ones who believed man/woman is more important than God are those who fail to recognise their vulnerability and the omnipotence of God whose activity they mimic with such disastrous results.

The Poem's Structure

The poem commences with a title: "The Political Speech", followed by a quatrain. The remainder of the poem consists of three verse –one of ten lines, and two of seven lines. Politics and history are inextricably linked:

History is a dialogue between
Forward and backward
Going inevitably forward
By the misuse of words.

The whole poem is unrhymed and could be described as free verse held together by the hard rhythm of the machine. There is tautness about the poem which echoes the machine and is created by the use of abstract words with either negative or neutral connections. Lines in the second stanza have such dominant words: *function, designate, destroys, provoke, produces, incorporate, doing, making, and destroying*. These words reveal the violence which underlies the manipulation of language and of people. It is the violence which also belongs to the machine and to the age of the machine. In hindsight the words could even be prophetic of the violence of the atomic bomb which was still to come. The tension and threat of the great slaughter of the machine is innate in the description of the destructive effect of the misuse of power which is the essence of politics and political domination. The machine reduces man to nothing.

Themes

As a whole the 1942 poem examines the fundamental flawing of language which arises from the political understanding that the tower is more important than the essence of language, which is surely to convey as far as possible truth to each other: "so words now have no essential meaning" (CP 21).

When meaning is gone or cannot be trusted then the traits making people truly human also disappear. Merton may also be referring back to the idea that God is

Being. With the loss of the essence of language true humanness is also lost. Human beings can no longer trust that communication is genuine. This also affects the human-Divine communication. This implies the inability to hear the Logos, the Word of God. The ability to listen to God is necessary for true human awareness of God within creation.

Language, when linked to the machine it describes, becomes itself mechanical: “Each word becomes an instrument of war. Steel words stronger than flesh or spirit” (*CP* 252). They can only describe accurately the machine in whose image they are formed. This is true whether the machine is the political machine invested in war and the supremacy of the state or the industrial machine which enslaves those who make it their God.

Merton was a great fan of Charlie Chaplin movies. There are definite overtones of Chaplin’s “Modern Times” and “The Great Dictator” in this work. The small man, lost, inadequate, destructive in the presence of the massive machine is everyman or woman subjected to the mechanistic principle draining the natural life force for its own needs. This is Merton’s Cartesian nightmare.

Cartesian Consciousness

“Tower of Babel” is also an attack on the philosophy of Descartes which was particularly abhorrent to Merton. To him the Cartesian world view prevented the integration of all aspects of life and turned what was measurable into a God. Anything that oscillated, pulsed, moved – particularly in a linear fashion, was of supreme importance. History – (his story), that is the human story, – was reduced to the same forward and backward movement and caught in the web of broken language.

Merton, too, was caught in this dichotomy and a victim of it. In the forties and fifties he saw the world on two levels, the sacred and the profane. He saw those worlds repeating within himself – the poet and the contemplative; the saint and the sinner; the monk and the lay person and so on. He was the victim of the Cartesian consciousness. It was to take many years before he recognised the

solution and the possibility of another consciousness affirming a holistic spirituality for the individual and for the world.

“Tower of Babel”, like Merton’s biography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, while decrying the mechanistic world-view is still, in a sense, written out of such a view. Merton’s original perspective as expressed in his autobiography separated the monastic from the secular world. As a young man of 26 he entered a world of silence. In some ways in this formally silent world language became an enemy but it still exercised a powerful pull over him as writer and poet. It was understandable given Merton’s fascination with language that being denied the spoken word he turned to the written word as an outlet. This fascination comes through in many of his poems. In the first work in *The Collected Poems* there is an argument between two mandrakes “in their frozen graves” (CP 3). The two argue underground about the future and the violence of war. Perhaps this is Merton’s own subconscious at work. In folklore the mandrakes are supposed to give a scream when they are pulled from the ground. Here they are buried and their scream is underground. They cannot decide on the meaning of words and conclude that “truth is beauty, beauty, truth.” Maritain would agree from the scholastic viewpoint but these two are frozen and so are the words they use. Given what was available to Merton as reference material and to his immersion in scripture once he went to the enclosed community of Gethsemani it is understandable that he took with him his thoughts about language – he was an avid lover of Joyce – and that themes around language emerged in his work. The myth of Babel was a ready made source to continue his analysis of speech and language.

The focus of Merton’s poem then becomes a particular form of speech: political speech. This is language which is not merely prudent or judicious but language which is crafty, distorting and scheming. The poet homes in on the negative aspects of a political system derived from the Cartesian world-view. This system taken to extremes reduces human beings to cogs in a machine, or as happens today, to mere units of value to be manipulated according to the rationalistic theory of the need of the state or to the demands of the market

economy. Language in such a soulless system is enslaved and serves the needs of the system not the person.

Within the political, military and industrial systems there is an essential and deliberate manipulation of language. Such manipulation destroys real communication between peoples because there is no common meaning available between those attempting to communicate. It is true to say that if Merton was writing in this century it would not be just military and political power but also corporate/mass media power that would be subject to his critique.

Time

The introductory quatrain, “The political speech”, reflects a linear understanding of history.

Eliot in *Four Quartets* hypothesises about the one moment which is time:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable (Eliot 1).

The linear concept of history knows no present but shuffles backwards and forwards and is equally unredeemable. The concept of the redemptive cycle is present in the other Babel works. In those works Merton mirrors the circular movement in the heavens with the movement of the seasons on earth and the cycle of redemption put into place at the creation of the world. This circular notion of time (*Kairos*: God’s time) is absent here. Language here is destructive perhaps because it is not seen as sacred. It is used to initiate and support the power structures of the state machine. Words in the context of state propaganda suffer “misuse”.

The idea of history then expressed in the poem knows only past and future. There is no present only the eternal “backward and forward along/ An infinitely

horizontal plane.” Here “Words have no essential meaning” (*CP* 22). The backward/forward movement of history is an oscillation imitating the mechanical action of the machine. Time, in spite of this notion, however, goes inevitably forward. In 1962 after coming into contact with the theatre of the absurd Merton was to take this idea even further: “To return is not to “go back” in time, but a going forward, a going beyond to retrace one’s steps is nothing on top of nothing, vanity of vanities, a renewal of the same absurdity twice over, in reverse” (Kramer *TTW* 101). Once the machine is set in motion it must carry out its function until that function is complete. Language functions, in its turn, to ensure the machine is not stopped and thus language provides the force which gives energy to the process and justifies the machine’s existence.

The use of the idea of the political voice at the commencement of the work indicates that the machine is the State, on whatever scale the reader wants to interpret the state, but it is probably an abstraction of all states, including the religious “political” state, that is the governing body of a church or monastery. Merton was thinking of all the dictatorships coming into being in his time.

He had learnt firsthand a little of the violence hidden by Nazi propaganda and understood the force of the political lie. While he was walking in Germany as a boy of sixteen Merton had been nearly run over by a group of Nazi youth who had driven at him deliberately trying to kill him. He leapt into a ditch and recognised their violence was against him as the stranger in the system. Propaganda had done its work well. It had surfaced the latent violence in the individual and in society and sanctioned for the group the right to kill its enemies. Propaganda will be further discussed in the next chapters.

The heart of politics is power. Merton, the poet, saw that the machine, whether at the literal or metaphorical level, provided the power. The function of the machine is to do its job and it is programmed to do so by the operator who then controls it. The most powerful person is the one who controls the system. He/she is the designer and oversees the construction of the “tower.” In the Biblical myth Yahweh recognises the latent evil in the mechanical activity and prevents it from reaching its obvious conclusion: a supremacy that would be

ethically and morally corrupt and uncontrollable. The myth, as is the poem, is both prophecy and warning.

Now

Merton begins the first verse of the work with the word “*now*” almost in defiance of the fact that the view of history he is decrying avoids recognising that the present exists, let alone contains the redemption of both past and future. It is a challenging word because it demands the reader pause and examines the relationship between the way the machine functions and the way language has been manipulated to act mechanically today. In the non-reflective system decried by the poet, language is simply received, not understood. It is used without thought, except the thought the receiver is told it contains. Language describes objects and actions, not to provide meaning but to hide meaning and to provoke the destruction inherent in any tool misused. Eventually such a tool will break and recoil on the user:

Words show us these things not only in order to mean them
But in order to provoke them
And to incorporate us in their forward movement
Doing, making, destroying or rather
Being done, being made, being destroyed (*CP* 21).

If the true function of Language is to convey meaning then meaning is lost in this way of being. That is, language becomes meaningless. The only value is the product not the act of communication itself. We lose the past because the machine destroys everything except the product. Everything else is waste. Merton says blatantly we are incorporated into this movement.

The question of responsibility, of the individual conscience, of existing outside the power structure, does not come into play in a world governed by a Cartesian consciousness. Everyone but the Leader is responsible and yet this is force and complicity here because there is no freedom in such a society for people to assume responsibility for themselves and others. Merton was to speak many

times in his journals and writings of the individual's responsibility to think for themselves. Free will and free speech are essentially lost when there is no true human exchange of ideas. When there is only the political voice language only exists to describe not as a tool for thinking and acting and developing ideas or growing spiritually.

Naming, not designating a word which contains the idea of appointment to an office, is an act of creation: Adam named the animals in the Eden myth and hence took ownership of, and responsibility for, them. The act of "designating" places individuals/society/races etc in a category and refuses to see the uniqueness of each so treated. In such a system history is a series of designated acts which *do, make, and destroy*. Such acts ensure the categories are acted *on* rather than *with*. Those placed in categories, that is, those numbered in some way, have no say of their own about what happens to them. History is the story of "wars and rumours of wars." Language provokes the actions of history when it is a vehicle for everything except meaning.

Merton knew the philosophy of Aquinas well having studied the Dominican's works at Columbia. He was thus well versed in Scholasticism. It seems reasonable that he would apply some of this understanding to his poetry, especially in a poem examining the political redefining of language. The second verse of the poem harkens back to Aquinas and parodies the proof of the existence of God:

The forgotten principle is that the machine
Should always destroy the maker of the machine
Being more important than the maker
Insofar as man is more important than God
Words also reflect this principle. (CP 21)

If this premise is true then language as machine must always destroy the formulator of it in the same way a revisionist view of history opens the way for the mistakes of the past to recur and to be as destructive as they were in the past. Both types of construct are dealing in lies. Meaning is irrelevant. They are also perverting the essential nature of reality by altering experience to suit some idea

or philosophical understanding the revisionists have of the perfect state. The state becomes the Godhead in many political systems. A mechanical system is therefore not a moral system underpinned by an awareness of a spiritual destiny for humanity. The system belongs to the state and only the state, or corporation, determines destiny as it rewrites history.

The machine itself may be neutral but the human manipulation of it can be immoral. Merton's poem *Chant to be used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces* gives a prime example of that. The Guard who prided himself on his obedience and used the machine to murder any "Enemy of the State" is a prime example of that:

I was the commander I made improvements and installed a guaranteed
system taking account of human weakness I purified and remained decent

How I commanded (*CP* 345).

The spirit of Babel and its poison is at work here. An inner destructive spiritual power destroyed Babel. The vision the Babylonians had of human history, of God and of their relationship with God was flawed. What should have been creative became destructive. Humanity's understanding of itself was based on a misconception of both its own power and the power of God. Their language reflects this and it is this spirit which Merton brings from his first Babel poem into his other works.

In Merton's apocalyptic poem the propagandists have misinterpreted the nature of language. They failed to recognise that language had the power to turn back on them and to force them into the vacuum of self-centred meaninglessness. Language, as machine, is not God. And God is not a kind of supreme machine – or [a] supreme mechanic – as if his essence were not only knowable to the scientist but relevant to physics" (Merton *RT* 46). Machines, however, given the status of God may be used as if they were God: to separate and to destroy. As Merton writes words "have no essential meaning" they are "created by history which they themselves destroy." But words reflect the principle described at the

beginning of the third verse: “The forgotten principle is that the machine/
Should always destroy the maker of the machine” (CP 21).

Images

A dominant image in this poem is conversation – the dialogue between the past and the future. History is divided and the two aspects of history which take part in the dialogue move “along an infinitely horizontal plane” (CP22)... This description gives a sense of continuity to history but also conveys a sense of boredom and repetition. There is no variation as humanity and its creations are propelled forward. Out of this movement comes a form of language which enables the dialogue to appear rational and thus make it acceptable to the hearer.

The final image in the poem is the image of the web: a web formed from and by words which

. . .are the makers of our only reality
The backward-forward movement of the web
The movement into the web (CP 22).

The phrase “backward-forward” links with the quatrain and with the history makers. This linkage is heightened by the words “the makers of our only reality.” This phrase gives to language an enormous and frightening power when placed in the mouths of manipulators and revisionists: those who could control history and tell us what is happening, why it is happening and what should happen.

This is a dark image and climaxes the warning in the poem. The image conjures up a spider sitting at the centre of the structure, a machine that looks attractive but is a trap luring the unsuspecting. The language of the machine is such a web. The political speech is not about a reality it is about a construct, a product such as that produced by the machine:

Words show us these things not only in order to mean them
But in order to provoke them (CP 21).

When this happens the world becomes a machine and is used in the service of the machine.

The idea of the web formed by the loom is also implicit in this image. A loom moves backward and forward to create the material – the warp and weft, a grid like web – which once given its shape cannot be changed without devastation. Is history in the political context a little like this as well? If so, this particular web of life is formed by mechanical action as much as by political speech. The only solution is to break the machine and allow the organic unity of the world to emerge. Merton does not really postulate a wrath of God solution even in this youthful phase of his poetic and pre-monastic career. He is, though, in the process of teaching himself that God is incomprehensible and far more important than humanity even though the inhabited world sometimes seems to act out of a universal narcissism, failing to understand the innate truth that:

Words also reflect this principle

Though they are meant to conceal it

From the ones who are too young to know (*CP* 21-22)

Merton was to face a similar accusation himself from Gregory Zyboorg, a psychiatrist, who saw the monk as narcissistic, analysing him from his writings only.

In 1942 this poem is a song of innocence, in spite of its condemnation of the world. It was as though Merton believed by facing the truth of the evil implicit in the political and mechanical use of language he could bring about transformation. In this poem he is still learning to manipulate words and images and there is a strong teaching element as well as a warning to the reader that the world they inhabit with the poet is futile and empty. Merton's struggle to save the world through contemplation will also be futile until he comes to realise, that the life we have is the only one we will ever have. It is that life, no matter what shape it takes and wherever it is lived out, that is the place of contemplation.

Conclusion

Many of the ideas in this poem were to resurface again and again as Merton struggled to find his truth – somewhere between silence and the gift that language was for him. The three works still to be examined gather together many of these early themes as well as expanding on them. These themes include: poetry, writing, the monastery, technology, contemplation, history, silence, language and identity. For Merton the basic question was always “Who am I?” and this in turn was linked to his search for meaning and his desire to be lost in the face of God.

The next chapter is an introduction the second poem in “The Babel Works”: “A Responsory.”

Chapter 10: The Builders of the Tower

Form and Structure in “A Responsory” and “The Tower of Babel: An Oratorio”.

Introduction

The previous chapter analysed the first poem in “The Babel Works.” Merton recalled this poem thirteen years after it was written and incorporated into The Oratorio and The Morality Play. All works have at their heart the problem of language.

The Problem of Language

Merton asserts that the problem of language is the problem of sin as sin is understood in Christian teaching. This is why Babel, the place of sin and confusion, was an excellent vehicle for dealing with the problem as Merton perceived it. In Catholic theology sin always has a deliberate component, for example, when something is deliberately abused or misused and the intention is to harm or hurt ourselves, another or creation. It is the deliberate abuse of language for power, manipulation, abuse of the other which equates the problem of sin and language. The one language of Babel is abused as the builders attempt to overturn their relationship with God to put them in the driving seat, as it were.

Merton’ personal dilemma was not a problem of sin but rather of the perfectionism that dogs religious living. Contemplation or poetry? Were the two so incompatible? “Perfectionism” in turn is related to the vow of “Conversion of Manners” taken by the Cistercians which urges them to seek the most perfect way of acting in their lives. This is the call to holiness which belongs to all Christians but which religious life imposes on its members in a particular way through the Community Rule and the Usages. The crises for Merton came out of his own desire for sanctity seemingly in conflict with his

other desire for the burning vision of the poet – a vision such as Merton believed Blake possessed. For Merton, Blake was “essentially mystical and supernatural” (*SSM* 264). But Merton, saw that in his Baptism he had taken on an awesome responsibility: I went downstairs and out into the street to go to my happy execution and rebirth (*SSM* 247) and it was this understanding of commitment, heightened by his religious vows that skewed him somewhat in relation to the poet/monk dichotomy.

Form: “A Responsory”

The poem is irregular in form. It is possible that Merton uses this irregularity with intention, to mirror the way language is abused in the modern world.

The poetic form reflects the world it describes and that world is reflected in the form of the poem. “A Responsory” is both controlled and anarchic in its verse form. The work images a world of illusion, a trick mankind has played on itself. The false gods of humanity’s creation turn away from their maker. They are created by the rebellious, and in turn, these mechanical gods, whether they represent the machinery of language, history or technology, rebel, in their turn, against their makers

There are three sections to “A Responsory”. They are not acts strictly speaking but each section indicates a tonal change in the verse. The sections move the listener from threat through fear and finally to hope. Yet there is no dramatic confrontation in the work rather a verbal exposition of the existing situation in the created universe. This situation is established in the opening line: Words and silence standing face to face/ weigh life and death (*CP* 672).

In this way Merton opens the conflict between grace and sin. For Merton “words” are the equivalent of sin and “silence” of grace. Words are opposed to silence as Merton’s own poetic words often seem to him to be opposed to the deep silence he desires. (If his words are not actually sinful they are, in Cistercian language, less than perfect). Babel invades Merton’s world.

The structure of the work is one of opposition. “Language” and “Silence” are in opposition as is God and man. The Tower is built in opposition to God’s desire and human beings, fighting against their dependence on God, oppose God’s will for them.

The presentation of section one indicates “A Responsory” was not finished. Merton had not yet decided which speech belonged to which performer. There is a question mark alongside one of the verses – All or soloist? The structure and the content of the poem would be incorporated into “The Oratorio” and “The Morality .“

Section One involves a chorus, perhaps a soloist and includes the designation “All the people”. Whether Merton means by this last all those on stage, that is chorus and soloists, or because, after all this is a responsory, all the audience, is not clear at this point.

There are distinct echoes of the original poem in this work. Merton does not begin with a quatrain but the sentiments expressed are similar and the phrases part of the original “Tower of Babel”:

Lord, when the skies fall down to hell
Who will break the giant wheel?
Who will stop the strict machine?
Who will save us from the mill? (CP 672-73).

The need for redemption in a lost world oppressed by the mechanics of power and industry is presenting the words of the chorus. There is also a sense of life oppressing because human beings have chosen to flaunt God and God’s desires. God desired to give freedom but oppression has been chosen instead. Redemption of the mind and heart is needed. The wheel of life here has, too, the sense of heaviness and of threat. The old adage “The mills of God grind slowly but grind they do” comes to mind. The basic structure is dialectic between the chorus and the soloist or between the chorus and “all”. The singers alternate

their cry for help emphasising the plea of the world reverberating in the void. .
The chorus begins and concludes the performance. I

In Section 1 the Chorus is given three speaking parts which are each interspersed by the Soloist (or all!). The chorus asks the questions and the soloists do not reply with an answer but rather with the lament of a suffering people. In the soloist's response there is at the same time a sense of the Old Testament prophecies of doom and exile and an apocalyptic threat. This threat contains the destruction implicit in a world in collision with itself.

Section 2 is the middle section and is the longest segment of the work. The urgency of the questioning in Section 1 slows down. The circular movement of the planets, of the seasons and thus of time is emphasised. The chorus is aware that the movement of the planets is to self-destruction, to war both in the heavens and on earth. The celestial wheel, the wheeling of the planets and the mill wheel of oppression conspire to act on a "dis-graced" humanity. Humanity struggles for survival, not resurrection or transformation at this stage:

Our lives heave homeward on the wheel
That bears the stubborn stars,
Light and darkness know our poverty
They plan our death and mock our scars. (CP 675)

The poetic structure moves the audience in Sections 1 and 2 through fear, despair, through death to Section 3. In this section the Christ-promise is seen breaking through the pattern in the stars. Whereas despair and hopelessness led only to death now faith and hope are the catalysts which together change the reality portrayed in the earlier sections.

Now is the time of waiting. The soloist invites the audience to a new way of thinking and the chorus leads the audience to acknowledge the Mystery within their midst, and therefore ours, which brings healing. The final verse of the Chorus celebrates humanity's participation in this new cycle of time –Kairos –
"Old truths out of a time reborn."

As stated, the work is obviously not completed but the ideas in it become part of the foundation stones of the two longer works which make specific reference To Babel – “The Oratorio” and “The Morality”.

The Tower of Babel: The Oratorio

An Oratorio is an extended musical setting of a sacred, usually non-liturgical text. Except for a greater emphasis on the chorus the forms and styles of oratorio can be likened to those of opera. An oratorio is normally performed without scenery, costume or props.

Merton’s draft copy of “The Oratorio” was given to Mark Van Doran who, in turn, presented it to Columbia University, New York. It is available in the Special Manuscripts Collection for public reading. The record of gift and accession is as follows:

[Merton], Thomas Trappist Ky, 9 June, 1954 To Mark [Van Doran] t.l.s., 2p [Merton, Thomas] “Tower of Babel” Trappist, Ky. Ca, 1954 t. ms. 10p. Oratorio (Draft) Gift of Mark Van Doran.
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The above draft is the manuscript used throughout this thesis.

Merton used sacred dialogue as the mode of expression in his work. Sacred dialogue is a form of prayer in it the deity is addressed directly. This is in keeping with traditional oratorios. He does not, however, adhere to the classical form of the musical opus. Classical oratorios are written in two sections. Each section lasts 90-120 minutes.

The librettos of these works use the Bible, hagiography and moral allegory. They originated in Italy at The Oratory founded by Philip Neri hence the name, oratorio. Outside Italy the tendency was to use an oratorio as a Lenten substitute for Opera. German composers used their Oratorios as settings for major feasts such as Christmas, the Passiontide and Easter.

Handel established the English tradition which normally contained three acts. Merton's work contains six sections and is more akin to the traditional five act play in format if not in plot and action. In this respect "The Tower of Babel" is outside the classical tradition whether Italian, German or English. Oratorios are staged at massed performances at music festivals. Together with Hindemith's request Merton may have been urged to experiment with various forms of verse drama. It is ironic that during this period of searching for a resolution of the quandary he experienced regarding poetry and contemplation he nevertheless experimented with new forms of writing poetry.

As in all Oratorios, the chorus plays a significant role in Merton's work. The chorus is the proclaimer of the situation existing and impinging on the world throughout time. While the scene is Babylon in the beginning, the subject is really human action throughout history. Babylon is the metaphor for the action and the motivation of that action. In turn the chorus, bass, baritone and contralto comment on the events happening at the real and the mythical level. The movements they observe occurring in the cosmos, in history, in nature relate ultimately to the divine action of God in all of the above.

The key behaviour which impels the cosmological movement is the rebellion within Babylon against God. Such rebellion contains within itself the root of division. Language reflects the rebellion in so far as the division of language into separate tongues divides truth and separates man and woman, races and nations, God and creation so that there can be no real form of communication between any of these elements. Again Babel becomes the metaphor for this division: the root of evil.

Overview of “The Oratorio”

Part 1 of “The Oratorio” establishes the atmosphere of violence initiated by the builders of the Babylonian Tower. The rise of the machine presages the rise and fall of Babylon the destruction of which is set in motion by the builders. The direction for the music for the first words of the Chorus reads as “violent and brightly coloured music.” Sound heightens the sense of violence as the power of that city and its ambitions is destroyed by the language of its sinfulness: “Scatter the seeds of war to the world’s end” (*MS 3*).

In Part 2 the military machine dominates. The distorted act of creation, the construction of a tower making them God’s equal, at least in their minds, is really the construction of a shrine and temple to the Babylonians themselves. By their act evil is released into the world. This is the second fall of humanity. By this act Jerusalem is swallowed by Babylon.

Part Two includes the words of the original poem with a one word difference which emphasises the violence released by Babylon:

History is a dialogue going forward and backward
Going inexorably forward
By the murder of words (*MS 4*).

The word “murder” relates to the ultimate sin of taking the life of another and looks forward to where the Logos, the Word of God will suffer that same death. The image of “language” as sin is changing as words begin to be shaped prophetically to allow the domination of the Word who will come, as the Christian and Hebrew Scriptures narrate, in silence.

The machinery of death is set in motion by rebellion. Does Merton in some way see himself “murdering” the gift of poetry within him or is poetry his unconscious act of rebellion against the silence of Gethsemani – a silence he has taken on and wishes to do so further through solitude, but with a high cost to his

creativity? The power of the “winds of war” whether in oneself or in the larger world are difficult to halt once set in motion:

Let there never again be any silence,
For silence gives the traitor words their meaning.
Let the machine never again be silent,
Or words will cease to resemble the machine,
And there will be no more production
Forwards and backwards,
Destroying history as fast as it is made (*MS 5*).

The enemy is silence. Silence provides a space for reflection and for understanding the meaning of what is said. Silence also allows a space for God’s voice to be heard. A moment of silence can be a moment of unity or of reflection; a moment when illusion gives way to truth. The war-mongers cannot allow their true motives to be uncovered so they must do away with silence. The section ends with the defeat of silence. The musical direction is for an all-out – crucifixion of silence. This crucifixion will be echoed in The Trial scene from “A Morality.” Words are on trial against silence. Merton’s own dilemma is given dramatic expression.

The exile is fundamental to the Jewish and Christian story. The exile of a nation from its homeland, of a people from their God and creation from its creator are all remembered in Part Three of “The Oratorio”. It is a desert time; a time in the wilderness. The wilderness is a place where God is not, but a place into which God must be invited if humanity is to be redeemed from its sinfulness. Part 3 is a cry for a redeemer; for one who will be more than a false Babylonian king rising in golden armour and seeking total power over life and death which is not his by right. The gold is the illusion of goodness. In this section time runs out as the tide and sands move away quickly and “pour down to hell.” The scene ends dramatically with a cry for a saviour who is not yet named.

Part 4 offers a global and universal view of the created universe across time and space. All things move in progression but the passing of the stars and the

passing of time remind humanity all is not safe: everything is passing. Man and woman are moving towards a death from which there is no escape.

In this phase the Babylonian astrological symbols dominate the heavens but new signs are appearing. The twelve signs of the astrologists are replaced by the words of the twelve apostles who have in turn replaced the twelve tribes of Israel. The words these Apostles speak are graced and will do away with the “Beast” – the scorpion of Babylon; the one who still has a sting in his tail. Yet these are the last days of the old time: of false judgement. This is the time of true judgement. War is being replaced by the Word who is “Wise without omen, Strong without armies” (*MS 8*).

Part 5 uses paradox to emphasise the gift of God and the power of God which is beyond understanding. Here the mercy of God is evident. This is the moment of passion and crucifixion; the moment when silence triumphs:

He who was wounded
When he did not speak
He who was silent
Was killed for what his silence said. . .[will return]
Binding the broken world with wounded hands (*MS 8*).

Passion, Easter, Pentecost meets as one in the triumph of the Christian story.

Part 6 is the conclusion to the epic confrontation of word and language. It is Genesis retold. The Babylonian king used Latin in Part One for his own evil purposes; here, Latin, timeless and universal, is used to adore the one who “made heaven in the midst of us, Jerusalem in Babylon.” The paradox is understood and resolved.

Conclusion

“The Oratorio” is a preliminary and unfinished work. Merton was disappointed that it was never used but used it as the foundation for the far more complex

work, “A Morality”, which expanded the ideas and themes contained in “The Oratorio”. The next chapter will examine specific problems of language which relate to the world of “The Oratorio” and “A Morality”.

Chapter 11: Words Are Poured Over Us Like Water

Introduction

This chapter will firstly examine the problem of language in the 20th century. What Merton implies as true of language in the 20th century can certainly be extrapolated to the 21st century. Propaganda today is used in the corporate world, by the military, the political and advertising worlds. Language has become the victim of fragmentation and of intentional distortion for purposes of control in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its separation from its purpose of communicating shared meanings continues.

Preliminary: Ambition

Even before entering the monastery Merton was conscious of the false voices acting on him with the same power as propaganda. The most powerful lure was ambition. It revealed itself in an obsession to have his work published. The original tension within was between was poet and ambition. A very early poem explores that theme:

Money and fame break in the room
And find the poet all alone.
They lock the door, so he won't run,
And turn the radio full-on
And beat the poor dope like a drum. .

Better sing your snatch of song
Before that ostrich voice is dumb;
Better whack your share of gong
Before the sounding brass is mum:
Tomorrow, tomorrow Death will come
And find your epics unbegun:
There'll be no statues on your tomb,
And other bards will occupy
Your seven-fifty sitting room!" (CP 12)

The dilemma confronting Merton at Gethsemani regarding his poetry and his monastic vocation was therefore not completely new to him. He had examined why he chose to write before he arrived at the monastery. The form the dilemma took, however, was new. Before entering the monastery the question was: Could the poet be drowned in the voice of ambition? After entering it was rephrased: Could the monk be drowned by the lure of poetry? .

“The Babel Works” were created out of a particular context and, Merton looks, on a personal and universal level, forward and backwards in his thinking and writing in *The Morality*. *The Morality*, as the final work in the group, allows Merton to refine his ideas and further synthesise his 1950s world view. By dealing with the universal misuse of language in these works Merton can also confront his own personal demons around the issue of language, specifically the issue of causing him most anguish at the time of writing: the poetry versus contemplation quandary.

This anguish expressed the tension in Merton between the two vocations of monk and writer vying for dominion within him. The question whether he should give up writing poetry emerges, subsides and re-emerges at various times in his life. This question assumes particular significance in the 1940s and 1950s as Merton’s workload increased and his understanding of the contemplative vocation of the monk deepened. Alongside this there was a deepening understanding of the true nature of his poetic vocation.

Merton was extremely ambitious to see himself in print. The wealth and the pursuit of fame before he dies is not so significant to Merton as a monk. But he still took delight the way he was known by so many outside the monastery. Part of the poet/monk difficulty for Merton lies in the guilt he feels at his secret satisfaction at being a published writer. Ambition was an inappropriate attitude for a monk. Detachment lay at the heart of the monk’s vocation particularly a monk who followed in the steps of De Rancé, who refounded the Cistercian Order in the seventeenth century.

Political Speech

One of Merton's major interests throughout his life, as befits a writer with his history, was language. As an artist his values were somewhat different to the norm. For example, he lists as one of the year's major events in 1939 the release of *Finnegan's Wake*, Joyce's major opus. Merton's 1939 list is as follows:

Sunday, November 19, 1939

Now look you: there have been three important things that have happened this year.

The publication of *Finnegan's Wake*.

The war in Europe and the Russian German pact.

The Picasso Exhibition.

Compared with these three things everything else has been trivial

Each one of these things proves something different - in its own way. . . In the same way *Finnegan's Wake* proves Joyce is the greatest writer of our time, and that the writing of our time is not poor, but very good and rich and exciting and fine. (Hart RM 88).

Literature was a bench mark for Merton of the health of society. Writing and language were key aspects of that benchmark. In his list writing that was free of the propaganda associated with war was healthy. But language and war were deeply connected by those who abused the writing process and used it not for itself but for political purposes.

Merton's own writing was at times, joyful, ironic, mocking, serious, reverent, and irreverent. While he could celebrate the excellence of writing Merton could still recognise the corruption of language that was taking place in circles outside the literary and artistic world.

A War of Words

Merton's writings on peace implicitly and explicitly state that World War II was fought with words as much as weapons. The re-naming of military processes, the arguments for and against the use of the Atomic Bomb, the seeming innocuous naming of a mass weapon capable of wiping out entire cities as a "nuclear cloud", the visual as well as the verbal propaganda used by the Allies

as well as by the Nazis and their confederates all contributed to the distortion of language and hence of truth. Language could no longer be trusted as a vehicle for conveying objective truth. Institutions, including the church, betrayed humanity and humanity as a victim of propaganda could no longer trust the spoken or written word and by extension could no longer trust the Word of God. The death of the Divine Hierarchy of the Middle Ages appeared to have taken place. Yet Merton ironically chose the medieval morality as the vehicle for both the exposition of this death and the restoration of Truth in the person of Christ as incarnate Word.

In 1939 Merton's political consciousness emerged significantly stronger than before. This consciousness was apparent in his early poems. In his younger days it was often linked to his world-rejecting view; this was a negative view of the social and cultural attitudes/mores controlling American and European culture. Early poems (1940-42) had titles such as "Hymn to Commerce"; "The Strife between Poetry and Ambition", and "Dirge for the World Joyce Died in" reflect his condemnation of that world. On entering Gethsemani the first poems he wrote had a different texture. In them Merton celebrated the new and different world he encountered in religious life. The irony and sarcasm were not apparent in these first monastic poems published in *The Secular Journal*. He is conscious of the gift he is receiving and wants to share it with his friends. Of course part of that celebration has its other side. The world outside the monastery is the city of sin; the world within is the city of God. A fairly simplistic view of creation!

One of the friends for whom Merton wrote the poems published at the beginning of his first monastic journal was Robert Lax, the minimalist poet. *The Merton Seasonal* published a poem of Lax's which went for four or more pages and consisted simply of the words black/white. Both Merton and Lax shared a love of language and a reverence for Joyce's experiments with language. Some of the correspondence between Lax and Merton is written in a proto-Joycean language which is part fun, part exasperation at the world and part of the disguise Merton needed to express himself clearly to his friend when he wrote to him from the monastery where all Merton's correspondence was read before being sent or received. All of the above suggest the continuing interest Merton

had in language and his respect for it. He was greatly disturbed by the corruption of language for political purposes.

Orwell and the Politics of Language

In examining the theme of language in “The Babel Works” and the associated manipulation of truth which results in the fragmenting of language a strong Orwellian influence is evident. Merton does not include Orwell in his list of readings but he was familiar with the writer and uses his name as an adjective in his first journal.

In 1946 George Orwell produced a paper entitled “Politics and the English Language.” Orwell’s concern was with the debasement of English language through pomposity, staleness, repetition of familiar phrases and mechanical responses to serious questions. At one point in the article Orwell suggests that man has become some kind of mechanical dummy. He proposes that a person who uses political dialect only “has gone some distance to turn himself into a machine”. Merton, when speaking similarly in *The Morality* uses the word “zombie”.

Both Orwell and Merton knew ”Political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British Rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan can be defended only by arguments too brutal for most people to face” (Orwell 6).

What does political speech consist of for Orwell? Euphemism, question-begging, cloudy vagueness and an inflated style substitute for clear English. For Merton these elements form the basis of propaganda. In turn they lead to a corruption of language which arises from a corruption of thought.

Orwell’s paper was written after World War II. Merton’s first work under discussion, “Tower of Babel,” was written during that war. In 1940 Merton had to face the possibility of being drafted into the military as were some of his friends. Even when these friends asked for non-combatant duty they found

themselves in very active military service. A similar fate would have met Merton's plea for non-combatant service as well.

In that year Merton would have been aware of the arguments and against the war and the propaganda, surrounding the effort to draw The United States into the conflict. Pearl Harbour was a gruesome attack on American military installations but it was an attack the Americans could have been prepared for if the information intelligence was released. The prelude to the attack and the attack itself became part of the secret political speech of the day. That political speech affected America's Merton's future. The poem which emerged spoke of his own trauma in being subject to falsehood as much as the universal abuse of language issuing from military and political headquarters throughout the world. These towers of Babel taught the populace a distrust of authority which the sociological debunking of authority occurring in the 1950s and 60s exacerbated.

Words and History

Words, Merton says, cannot be separated from history. (History . . . {moves] inevitably forward by the misuse of words (CP 21). Words can be made to speak in such a way that historical truth is lost or disguised. For Merton the revisionist theory of history as practised by the propagandists, works against political and social truth. The revisionists falsify history for their own ends; telling the story for their own gain – what ought to have happened not what has happened.

Although the Christian story is not the matrix of this early work the poem reflects man's relationship with God. The spirit of Babel is obvious in it and this spirit is responsible for the corruption of truth. Merton later says in *The Morality*, "Man's pride remakes the world on a foundation of pure falsity." (Lentfoehr 154) But this is true also of the personas who inhabit the *Tower of Babel*.

Politically, words are used both openly and latently to instil in the hearers the illusion the hearers are greater than God. Such words work on human fear and pride until those subjected to political speech buy into the illusion and displace truth. Merton does not see truth as relative but even if he did he is speaking here

not of absolute truth but of the deliberate undermining of the effort to convey reality to people through miscommunication. The principle “man is more important than God” overrides earlier morality and whatever supports that principle is seen as permissible.

Words in the political context have no essential meaning. They are simply the vehicle which moves humanity forward and backward along a one-dimensional pathway made by history. On such a journey there is no possibility of depth or reflection and this is why political speech is successful. There is no criterion against which to judge its authenticity.

Ironically Merton himself uses a form of political speech in the poem. The rhythm of the poem tends to the bombastic and his youthful vision of a corrupt world allows no argument against it. The later Merton will not take such a simplistic dualistic approach to his subject although he will always write with confidence and with what he describes as “punch.” The abuse of language and associated manipulation of peoples will always be of concern to him whether he is speaking of the church, the monastery or the world beyond the monastery. In the other Babel works he will carry the above ideas forward even incorporating the words of the original poem into his longer works. He came to be aware that “words are not the makers of our only reality” but they certainly interpret reality and as such have great power.

Propaganda

“Propaganda” is a word which had its origins in the Catholic Church. The Congregation for the Propaganda of the Faith was established in 1622 and the word simply meant the disseminating of knowledge. The specific knowledge was information regarding the Church. The Congregation, however, became the power behind the Spanish Inquisition and the attacks on those who were considered heretical by the Church. The word propaganda took on negative overtones for some countries in the western world. The word became associated with “a specific type of message presentation directly aimed at influencing the opinions of people.” Some propaganda, such as that used by the Babylonian king, consists of deliberate falsehoods.

Propaganda as a weapon of war was made notorious by the Nazi Party. Merton experienced the fanaticism of the Nazi Youth on a walking tour in Germany when a group tried to run him into a ditch and he realised they were prepared to leave him there to die if he had been hit by their car. Speeches made by high level Nazi leaders such as Rudolph Hess reveal the power of propaganda over the German people and particularly the young. On 25th February, 1934 about a million Nazi officials gathered at various places in Germany to swear an oath to Hitler. Hess's words, quoted at the [Calvin education](#) web site are a powerful example of how propaganda techniques are used. An example is taken from his speech and is reminiscent of the manner the Babylonian king coerces his subjects:

Your oath is not a mere formality; you do not swear this oath to someone unknown to you. You do swear in hope, but with certainty. Fate has made it easy for you to take this oath without condition or reservation. Never in history has a people taken an oath to a leader with such absolute confidence as German people have in Adolph Hitler. You have the enormous joy of taking an oath to a man who is the embodiment of a leader. You take an oath to the fighter who demonstrated his leadership over a decade; who always acts correctly and who always chose the right way, even when at times the larger part of his movement failed to understand why.

The speech depends on emotion as does all propaganda of the Babylonian king's decree. The rational sense of the words is lost. Hope, for example, cannot exist where there is certainty. The Leader in *A Morality Play* assumes the role of the Godhead, a role Hess attributes to Hitler "who always chose the right way". A propaganda poster of Hitler at this time showed the dictator as a Christ-like figure rising up, illuminated by a ray of light with a dove hovering over his head. The messiah implications are obvious. The allies' propaganda in opposition to that poster portrayed a gauntlet clad Nazi officer plunging a dagger through a Bible. The emotional impact of propaganda is the ingredient behind its success or failure. There is no rational discourse. Silence, simply as silence not as symbolic of the Godhead, allows for independent thought and reflection and is the true enemy of propaganda.

While Merton had no idea of the extent propaganda would be used in the 21st century his works are prophetic in that they imply it will be a powerful tool of the future used not just in physical wars but as a means of winning the commercial wars run by advertising and those who want to gain control by extinguishing the individual mind. Noam Chomsky writes of this mind in many of his works including *"Manufacturing Consent: The Political economy of the Mass media."* Chomsky's theory is that the market mind and its form of governance has replaced democracy. The use of propaganda through advertising and various political campaigns and control of institutions through threat of financial withdrawal is rampant. Merton will discuss this aspect of propaganda in his essay on "Rain and the Rhinoceros" and the absurdity the human condition in a world governed by propaganda. The Babylonian king certainly works towards the establishment of such a mass mind.

Techniques of propaganda.

Merton's archetypal protagonist uses many of the techniques of propaganda to corrupt the language and thought of the people he oppresses. The most obvious of these techniques is the appeal to fear but there is also the fact he sells himself as their protector and the one who will care for them. Through Babylonian King, Falsehood dominates. Other techniques also emerge in Part 2 of the drama including; direct orders, bandwaggoning, disapproval, generalities, rationalisation, the address to the common man, oversimplification, stereotyping, scapegoating, the use of 'virtue words', slogans and unstated assumptions.

George W. Bush's use of the media is an excellent modern example of propaganda. The presentation of biased news reports and discussions without acknowledging the source and documentation of the material allowing viewers to believe the program was compiled by unbiased news structure illustrates the modern manipulation and corruption of language – perhaps foreseen by Merton

The Revisionist Mode of History

The understanding of history implicit which Merton critiques in the works is the revisionist mode of rewriting history so that, as Merton says, using the voice of relativism, what **should have happened** appears as the truth, not what actually did happen.

Words create history. But, they in turn
Must be destroyed by the history they have created.
The word supersedes the event, as light emerges from darkness,
Transforming the event into something it was not.
But the event, in turn, supersedes its interpretation as darkness
Replaces light, and in the end it is darkness that wins.
And the words of the historian are forgotten (CP 256).

Propaganda re-writes history to support its cause and to give power to those who through the ages sought world domination. This includes the religious as much as the secular powers.

One of the forces Merton envisions acting against such revisionism is the power and spirit of tradition inbred in the minds and hearts of people. This is true particularly of those who live in villages; the village signifies for Merton the archetypal community imaging the city of God. Such a community implies the inhabitants are present to each other and that in this presence the truth of each person is revealed. As has been stated, Merton probably drew his image of such a village from his experience in San Antonin and from the time he spent in the Midi in France. Such places, for him, are the resting places of the Word of God. As he said in a lecture given in 1967:

Our being is silent but our existence is noisy. Our actions tend to be noisy but when they stop, there is a ground of silence which is always there.
We listen to the depth of our own being and out of this listening comes a rich silence, the silence of God, which just says "God" or "I am"
(Richardson 25).

The village is the place where it is possible to locate the ground of being. Perhaps drawing on the simple faith of the Privats, Catholics with a strong peasant faith whom he wrote of in his autobiography, Merton introduces here the theme of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is a sacred word symbolising unity. The Eucharist is called into existence by the spoken word which exists in the silence of the moment calling people to deeper unity. The Eucharist is the antithesis of the propaganda word machine representing as it does, at least for Catholics and certainly for the poet/monk.

The Paschal Mystery, the name given to the cycle of redemption in the Christian tradition has incorporated Babel. This means that the themes of suffering death and resurrection as well as rebirth at Pentecost will also become part of “The Oratorio” as it will be part of the drama of “The Morality.”

For Merton, the ultimate re-writing of history will be done by God who, through, the Logos, the sacred Word of God, will restore all things to their rightful place.

Conclusion.

This chapter has dealt with two vital elements of language which are essential for understanding the language theme in “The Babel Works”: Propaganda and the revisionist mode of history.

The following chapter will examine the theme of language in “A Responsory”.

Chapter 12: The Destroyer of the Tower.

A Responsory

Introduction

On November 19, 1950 Merton wrote:

Babel. Silence not a virtue, noise not a sin. True. But the turmoil and confusion of modern society are the expressions of the ambiance of its greatest sins – its godlessness, its despair. A world of propaganda, of endless argument, vituperation, criticism, or simply chatter, is a world of atheism ... Catholics who associate themselves with that kind of noise, who enter into the Babel of tongues become to some extent exiles from the City of God (Montaldo *ES* 440).

The above is a summary of the language theme permeating the Babel works and seen clearly in *A Responsory*. The language in which Merton expresses himself in the work just quoted has about it something of the zeal of the early convert and of the first fervour of the young monk. The language of contemplation is all important to him and that language is the language of the city of God. While the tone is dogmatic Merton has nevertheless touched prophetically on the pain and despair in modern society. This pain arises from the lack of meaning, the manipulation of people, the corruption of language, the violence and manner in which human life is wasted and the individual human being is of no value to leaders whose political agenda is power and little else. While the separation of modern life into city of sin/city of God appears simplistic the dualism allows Merton to define his terms and to struggle towards an understanding of what is essential for life and for his own personal integration: speech versus silence; poetry versus contemplation; Black and white will gradually merge into tones of grey in Merton's future writings as he comes to understand his own and other's motivation. But he will never deviate from believing in the absolute necessity for contemplation and detachment from pride, possession and prestige as the way of salvation for humanity.

Part 1

The theme of language is embedded in “A Responsory” in a different way to that of “Tower of Babel”. The latter uses words in the way a pile driver inserts piles. The language is driven and strong. In the former Merton reverts to a universal abstract expression of the conflict involving language. The battle is to be fought outside history and in the opening lines is situated in the cosmic arena.

“Words and silence standing face to face/ Weigh life and death” (*CP* 672) place the battle in the heavens, initially distancing the struggle and the problem of language so that it can be seen more clearly. It also allows the enormity of the battle to be recognised by the onlookers. The poet knows that of themselves silence and speech are innocuous. Their value comes from the symbolism they are given in this context. Here one or the other will be given the power of judgement over humanity, that is, over life and death. The word “weigh” suggests the ancient Egyptian judgement occurring after death when the soul is weighed against a feather to test its quality. The false prophets, the astrologers who use the heavens to prophesy life or death are also present in the background of the opening verse: “The hunters in the sky/seem to control our season” (*CP* 672). The apocalyptic moment of the “Last Judgement” hovers there as well.

The other aspect, already mentioned, is that these opening lines place the battle outside history. The confrontation, it is implied, must take place in this timeless world, in order for the Word to enter history and redeem time. The Word of God is eternal, beyond time and yet enters it. The speech mentioned then, is more than political speech rather it is distorted speech that corrupts silence. All the facets of propaganda which Merton lists in the paragraph and which limit humanity’s ability to be present to the silence of God are included in the speech (Montaldo *ES* 440).

Merton obviously had a grand plan when he began writing this poem but in the end time and other constraints forced him to reduce his ideas to a much simpler concept. The poem is divided into three sections and each section is sung by a

chorus (or soloists) and contains a recitative section. The various themes, including language, are developed as the poem progresses probably in a more curtailed fashion than that promised by the opening lines. The fact that the confrontations are between abstractions tends to weaken the poem as well. The autobiographical element is present in so far as the language theme deals with the crisis Merton was handling in the fifties. The strength of the poem lies in the ideas Merton expresses around language and the prophetic quality of those ideas which still have relevance for the 21st century.

Merton's own language in this poem tends to be more mystical and lyrical than in the original work, "Tower of Babel." Some of the clarity is lost here because of this but the images are still strong and vivid. For Merton who thought that the reader should work at the meaning of a poem the loss of clarity would not be a problem.

Confusion

The initial confrontation described in the poem between speech and silence gives way to the bewilderment of those on earth who have lost their way. Speech is no longer to be trusted. The words of the poem become a plea for salvation from this situation. The confrontation has bred fear because what is happening at the cosmic level is mirrored on earth. The oppressed have been manipulated and used by the ubiquitous "they":

Life and death are one
They said. Good and evil.
Both are to be feared.
Life and death are terrible (CP 673)

With these lines Merton has achieved a sense of horror. The repetition and short phrases, the simplicity of the statements imply, there is no escape. The words simply state facts yet behind them there is a corruption of language implying a corruption of thought. Events are reduced to the basic choice facing each person—life or death? Both are terrible but how can one differentiate between them when meaning is lost?

In order to survive such a moment the speakers have disassociated themselves from responsibility for the situation: “They said.” These speakers then are also playing games with words and the result for them is:

Everything is dusk; they said
Not light, not dark:
Nothing is defined (*CP* 673).

This is a twilight world where good and evil can no longer be distinguished. The laws, directions, names humanity relied on to be able to make choices for life can no longer be differentiated. In some ways this is a suicidal world where explanations are given, not for clarity but as excuses and to prevent life-giving actions taking place. Perhaps such a world could also be described as a morbid world. On one level the atmosphere recalls the world of the ten year old Merton whose mother had died and whose father was entangled with another woman. Evelyn Scott-Keyes, who described the boy as a morbid child.

The word drawn from humanity at the apocalyptic moment mirrored by the poem is a plea for salvation. The pleas are for a leader who will re-define life and death for the suffering and lost. The Chorus cries out for help in response to the soloist who can sing only of the terror of the experience where opposites mean the same. In this place nothing can be known and everything is uncertain:

Truth and lies are food of fear
Things have lost their names (*CP* 673).

The language of naming is significant. Human beings were given the right to name all creatures in Eden. But names are now lost. Identity is gone. More significantly the secret name by which God knows and recognises each person is no longer known by anyone.

The Babel of confusion and corruption touches even these deep and hidden places. For Merton, “The problem of language is the problem of sin. The problem of silence is also a problem of love” (Montaldo ES 430). Part one of *A*

Responsory establishes this problem clearly. The world described is a Cartesian world where numbers, not names take precedence. Because of this the experience of human beings is valueless because experience is on the whole not measurable. Experience implies relationship and relationship is needed for love. The other must be recognisable. In a twilight world this is not possible. Only shadows are seen. The cosmic figures at war with each other overshadow truth and relationship. The one word that gives dictators control is active – *fear*. Active at all levels of existence fear destroys the ability to communicate:

Words run down our necks
Like sand. Sand and water
All are one. They only touch
Our skins.
No one tells us what words are for.
They give us numbers (*CP* 674).

Merton uses the scriptural stories as the basis for “The Babel Works” and the words quoted above recall the Israelites and their forty years of exile in the Sinai Desert. Merton is writing, not of a literal desert only but of a spiritual, psychological and emotional dying world. This exile from each other, from themselves and from God is not a temporary one. It will not be reversed without some divine intervention. It is all-embracing and destroys even the false unity of totalitarianism which will be imaged in “A Morality”. Words enslave because no one can or will interpret them accurately. The fear of not knowing, of not understanding is overwhelming. Creation is seen to be at enmity with humanity not in partnership with it: “Old lights, new darkness weigh us in their scales” (*CP* 675).

Because humanity does not know where true power belongs it is attributed to anything not understood such as the stars and the signs of the zodiac. They speak the language of judgement which rightly belongs to God. Thus the act of judgement is given to the wrong forces. The cosmic imagery is sustained in this way and underlies each verse even when it is not openly articulated

Part 2

Part 2 connects to the opening lines of “A Responsory” as the chorus sings similar words and similar imagery to the opening lines of Part 1:

Words and silence standing face to face
Fight for the earth whose circles keep their peace
And dream of the tame seas, whose iron boils down
Draining the sand to spoil those shores again (*CP* 674-5).

The onlookers see in the stars the power of judgement and hide from such power in fear at the threat of it being enacted against them. The wheel of life of heaven spins inwards and fear turns humanity against itself. As this section of the poem finishes the final word of that judgement made in the heavens is war. The chorus sings of this corruption of peace and of creation in words which will later be used by Thomas, a protagonist in “A Morality”:

Now all is sand, or grass or scandalous water
Where the rank marsh pulls down one crooked gull.
Still the alarming heavens roll
Us earthward, wrestle with wordless time
And judge us dumb (*CP* 676).

These words, for some reason not made clear by the poet, bring about a change in the tone of the work. The soloist gathers together the ideas that have been keeping humanity in despair and uses them to challenge the corruption of words. She speaks of the vacancy of thought which has left men and women dumb. This is a different emptying to the emptying Merton associates with contemplation. It yields only a vacuum. For Merton:

The [true] dynamic of emptying and of transcendence accurately defines the transformation of the Christian consciousness in Christ. It is a kenotic transformation, an emptying of all the contents of the ego-consciousness to become a void in which the light of God . . . the full radiation of the infinite reality of His Being and Love are manifested (*Zen* 75).

The vacancy which has taken over in the world of the poem is the vacancy brought about by the human obsession with the ego. It is this vacancy that allows terror to take over in their twilight world. It prevents humanity seeing clearly the light “alarming heavens” and the “rank marsh.” Yet this moment of “dumbness” is a moment of release because it is followed by the realisation that “words would make us human”. In understanding that “killing our minds, we have denied our names” (*CP* 676) humanity begins to accept responsibility for the situation rather than disassociating from it as it is portrayed in doing in Part 1.0 f “A Responsory.” In essence this is the realisation Merton is arriving at in his understanding of himself as a monk and of the monastic vocation: “the spiritual life of one person is simply the life of all manifesting itself in him” (Merton *Gandhi* 6). The monks have a responsibility beyond their monastery and Merton is accepting his own share in that responsibility.

The knowledge of human denial of responsibility shifts the mood of the poem from despair to hope not in them but in the Other who invites humanity to share in the redeeming action of the Logos. In the poem this hope is expressed in paradox. Things act beyond their true nature. Appearances are deceptive but the promise of all things being restored to their proper place and function is made. When the word of redemption is spoken:

Steel can give back thunder
Fire can spring from wood
And mercy from the heart of man
Though that heart be dead (*CP* 676).

Corrupted language is healed by the word of love which penetrates even death. The one word which takes away fear and restores peace is *mercy*. Merton has a great love of this God quality. In “The Fire Watch”, the Epilogue to Merton’s work, “The Sign of Jonas”, (349-362) he writes of God as “mercy within mercy within mercy.” And again:

All life tends to grow like this, in mystery inscaped with paradox and contradiction, yet centred, in its very heart, on the divine Mercy. Such is my philosophy because it consists not in statements about a truth that cannot be

adequately stated, but in grace, mercy and the realization of the “new life” in us (McDonnell 17).

Part 3

Part 3 also begins with a confrontation expressed by the soloist in the form of a command. The natural unity of creation has been destroyed then restructured at the merciful hands of a God whose son brought order to earth out of chaos. Because of the fragmentation caused by a world with no definition it appeared that all things in creation were the enemy of man and woman. This was true particularly of the stars and the cosmos in which they existed. It seemed that the events which brought about life and death were written in the stars: that, in fact, the stars determined the future. The soloist sings of the truth, that is, that the stars are innocent:

Now let no man pretend to tame
These innocent lights
Nor judge these ordered strangers.
Fate, when they were older than our earth
Seemed to usurp their names
Making their skies the mother of our acts.
They, too young to kill us, are too old to think of us (*CP* 677).

The acceptance of responsibility alters the outcome of the cosmic confrontation placing it back on earth where it belongs but also back into the realm of contemplation: the salvific silence of God in which the divine Word can be heard.

Contrary to mute and impotent idols, God is “He who speaks.” He is the Word. It would thus seem paradoxical to speak of God’s silence yet this is another manner to describe His transcendence. Furthermore when this word no longer reaches man, God’s silence becomes formidable. Man, created in God’s image, is gifted with speech. He is responsible for its utilisation. For him, silence is one way to express what he thinks or feels. Sometimes his silence is laudable, at others it is reproachable (Montaldo *ES* 367).

In Part 3 humanity has accepted the responsibility of which Merton speaks for both its silence and its speech. No longer is humanity its own mute idol seeing gods where God is not. Nor does humanity have power over or in heaven.

In “A Responsory” Merton has moved from an experience of chaos. This movement passed through the confrontation of speech and silence, through disorder and corruption and the place of refusal to comprehend the truth. He arrived at a place of order where the power of the Word of God assumes its rightful place. This is the place of paradox; the place where the God who speaks in silence is seen to hold the heavens in his hand.

As in the works still to be discussed, the cycle of redemption comes to fruition when the Logos is recognised and humanity understands its relation to it: “the Mystery was in our wicked midst, and starlight beat like doves against our door.”

Merton understood that corruption of language indicated corruption of thought. This theme is a significant one in his essay “War and the Crisis of Language” (*Peace* 138-151). Such corruption also works in reverse. Language and thought, speech and mind, require healing. The act of redemption occurs through the death of the innocent Word so that true speech may overcome false judgement with false judgement written in the heavens. The stars are no longer the tools of false prophets rather they become witnesses to the God of light whose mercy “heals the regions of the mind” (*CP* 677).

The role humanity has to play in this act of redemption is spelt out by Merton as a renewal “of labour and worship, work and blessing”. New Testament scriptural language floods the final stanza sung by the chorus as they sing of the word of peace and of the “strong child” who is restored to his rightful place – enthroned in the heavens.

Conclusion

The theme of language is handled differently in “A Responsory” to that in “Tower of Babel”. The first poem emphasised political speech and the corruption flowing from that speech. In the second poem speech and silence, language and contemplation confront each other on the universal plane as much as in the human situation. These poems pre-figure “The Oratorio” and “A Morality”. In the last two works there is a stronger dramatic content which affects the language theme. The actual story of Babel is incorporated into each of these works not just the spirit of Babel. Again Merton’s own personal struggle is entwined with the larger dimension of the works. The next chapter will look at the issue of language in “The Tower of Babel: An Oratorio”.

Chapter 13: A Word That We Have Never Learned

The Theme of Language in “The Oratorio”

Introduction

Chapter eleven dealt with the theme of language in Merton’s work “A Responsory”.

In “A Responsory” the major confrontation is resolved through an interpretation of the Christian story. The Logos, the Word of God triumphs but there are two conditions to that triumph. Humanity has to assume responsibility for its blindness and muteness. It can no longer afford the accusation of the soloist: “Insensate man!” This Chapter will continue to look at the same theme and its development in “The Oratorio”.

When chaos is recognised and language once again becomes capable of carrying meaning then humanity must actively participate in the restoration of true order:

“Fifty days after the Word was slain and lived
He sent His spirit to ordain with flame
Twelve men too slow to believe,
Fishermen to find the ones the Word had chosen
Workmen to build together a divided nation (MS 9)

Flame for Merton often meant inspiration. It has that nuance here. This is the beginning of a newly imagined reality – not perfect but moving towards a better existence. This is also very much the discovery Merton made concerning poetry in 1959, it did not have to be perfect:

No need to have a compulsion to be utterly and perfectly “original” in every word [one] writes. All that matters are that the old be recovered on a new plane and be, itself, a new reality (McDonnell 16:1962).

The corruption of language occurs in the Babel works when experience is denied or if it is deliberately named incorrectly. When this corruption is corrected language too assumes the role of conveying meaning and building unity.

In the two longer and more involved works to be discussed Merton draws on his knowledge of the monastic and Christian context and on his own experience as monk and poet. In so doing he moves towards the resolution of his own dilemma but also learns to prophetically interpret his own age and its corruption in terms of the Babel story.

When Merton wrote “The Oratorio” he was dealing, as he was in the earlier works, with the problem he perceived he had regarding his vocation. In 1947 he came to the conclusion that:

Poetry can indeed help to bring us rapidly through that part of the journey to contemplation that is called active; but when we are entering the realm of true contemplation where eternal happiness begins it may turn around and bar our way (*Commonweal* 285).

This is hard language which almost inevitably led to the rigid conclusion:

In such an event there is only one course for the poet to take for his own individual sanctification; the ruthless and complete sacrifice of his art (*Commonweal* 285).

Merton had attempted to put this resolve into action previously. Cutting off his poetic life though was to some extent following the Biblical admonition to cut off one’s right hand if it offends you. Here Merton was struggling to be true to the greater compulsion of his life: the drive he experienced to contemplation. By 1950 he had rethought this solution and “The Oratorio”, “The Morality” and later poems began to examine the theme of language and particularly truth and lies as a facet of language.

Merton could apply his insights to his personal life, as well as see their application at the social and universal level. Through the process of writing

Merton understood that a poet could reach a level of contemplation through his activity/his creation, but true infused contemplation is total gift of God. A poet must be silent in order to receive that gift. Babel is only defeated by the paradox of the Word of God coming from the deep silence of God. The question was: how could that paradox be lived out in the life of a silent monk who wrote poetry and through his poetry spoke to many readers?

At the same time as he was wrestling with the above Merton became aware that desire for contemplation could never be satisfied by poetry, music, ceremonies or even Biblical pageantry (*BIW* 8). The irony of this realisation lay in the fact that he used all of these aspects of drama in his 1953 works and yet came to see how they prevented him emptying himself to receive the gift of contemplation. The deeper awareness that he arrived at in his journals, however, went beyond the above understanding. This was the realisation that his desire was not for contemplation but for God: "It seems to me that what I am made for is not speculation but silence and emptiness, to wait in darkness and receive the Word of God entirely in His own openness and not broken up into all His shadows" (Montaldo *ES* 281). Merton's desire for union with God was the antithesis of the desire of the inhabitants of Babel who desired equality with God; "whom they imagined as being only a little stronger than themselves" (*CP* 250).

Once Merton came to realise the brokenness, the Word having been broken itself, he could begin to integrate the two sides of life he formerly viewed as irreconcilable: the poet and the monk.

Merton's Concerns

Merton's personal and community concerns in the fifties focussed on the continuance of monastic life, his own place as monk and writer in the Gethsemani community and his deeper involvement in that community. He assumed responsibility for firstly, the Scholastics, and secondly, the Novices.

Even before these two appointments, as Director of Scholastics and then as Director of Novices, Merton was connecting more deeply with the Cistercian tradition, for example, he invited a group of twelve or more novices into the rare book vault where he was working to read the works of the Cistercian Fathers: “Meanwhile in the vault, I bless my children and talk to them one by one and it is much more interesting than writing a book” (Montaldo *ES* 460).

The books Merton was involved in writing at this time were also related to the spiritual life of the monks. *Bread in the Wilderness*, for example, was about the psalms. The psalms were recited everyday in the liturgy and formed the liturgical daily bread of the monks. *Bread in the Wilderness* included a significant passage related to the myth of the tower of Babel. The tower was story, metaphor and symbol for Merton at this period of his life. In this extract Merton uses paradox to highlight the pride which brought Babel into conflict with God. The implication is that modern society is living the Babel story once again:

The “wrangling of tongues” symbolises the confusion that was sent down by God upon the builders of Babel, who seeking to scale heaven with a structure of their own devising, were darkened and scattered in a division of tongues. Babylon, the city of division, the city of union, the city of those who love God unto hatred of themselves, was born of the gift of tongues (*BIW* 124-125).

Babylon is a city united by hatred – the inversion of Pentecost and the Pentecostal gift of tongues. Pentecost, according to Catholic theology, was the event which inaugurated the building of the City of God on earth. The Catholic belief is that this city is the Kingdom of God epitomised by the Church.

The Pentecostal gift had a totally different effect to the multiplying of tongues at Babel. There the division began in the corruption of the mind, followed by the corruption of language and the nations’ inability to understand each other. The opposite was true of the Pentecostal act. People understood one another although they spoke different languages. Pentecost is the metaphor and image of the healing of language and thought. Merton continues:

. . . For there is only one language spoken in the City of God. That language is clarity. Those who speak it best speak it in silence. For the eternal word of Truth is uttered in silence. If He is uttered in silence He must be heard in deepest silence, and His spirit, the Spirit of Love is also poured out in our hearts, proceeding from the Father and the Son, in an everlasting silence (*BIW* 125).

The language theme of “The Oratorio” (and also of “A Morality” to be discussed in the next chapter) moves into this realm of silence and adoration; within the realm of love. As will be seen the language of love is articulated in the final scene of the musical drama.

This analysis of the four “Babel Works” reflects the development of key themes in Merton’s thought: language, technology, war, oppression and contemplation. His ideas evolve slowly and come to maturity in later works such as *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and *The Inner Experience*. The latter was a work in progress at the time of his death and published posthumously.

The ideas in the political speech of “Tower of Babel”, and occasionally the actual words, are incorporated in “A Responsory”.

Lord, when the skies fall down to hell
Who will break the giant wheel
Who will stop the strict machine
Who will save us from the mill? (CP 672-3).

In the latter the poet envisions the confrontation with God taking place in the heavens and humanity attempting to displace God’s rightful position and place. For Merton speech equals action, silence equals the contemplative dimension of speech. “The Oratorio” then expands the argument by drawing specifically on the myth of Babel and on scriptural language to illustrate the struggle between good and evil as related in the Babel story.

“The Oratorio” thus reveals the evolution of Merton’s thought regarding contemplation beyond “A Responsory”. It also indicates the emergence of Merton as social critic and prophet. Merton is the monk who takes seriously

both contemplation and his understanding that he came to the monastery to find his place in the world.

The Oratorio: Overview

“The Oratorio”, then, relates directly to the Hebrew story in the Book of Genesis and contains both mythical and archetypal elements in its structure. The sin of Babel, as the *Jerome Biblical Commentary* states, (JBC 17) is the desire of the inhabitants of the city to make a name for themselves. Their pride lay in this and the tower is a symbol of their desire for power and equality with God:

Recitative: Once the whole earth was of one tongue
And the same speech. But each man said to his neighbour
Come let us make our name famous
Before we be scattered abroad into all lands (MS 2)^{xxvi}.

In Hebraic tradition the heavens belong to God and here the Babylonians are trying to reach Yahweh’s heavens and force God to meet them as equals. This is the sin of idolatry and the Babylonians idolise themselves and their achievements. They constitute their own idol. This desire stems from their lack of awareness of what God is. Merton’s discovery of God as *Being* – through Etienne Gilson’s exposition in his text on French Medieval Philosophy – moved him past the common misunderstanding of God like human but on a grander scale. In “The Oratorio” the builders of the tower reduce the concept of God to human dimensions so that the Babylonians are not fearful but become arrogant, imagining that grasp of technology puts them on an equal footing with the Creator of life. The parallels with our own technology-proud times are obvious.

The fall of the tower symbolises the second fall of mankind. Once again humanity is forced to leave “Eden.” This time it is the “Edenic” city which is destroyed, not simply barred to them. Babylon loses its own created Paradise where their ruler walks in the gardens in the cool of the evening; this is a mockery of Yahweh who walked in Paradise in the cool of the evening. The

myth indicates there is no place, rural or urban, where humanity lives in union with its creator.

The myth of Babel is also the dark side of Pentecost and “The Oratorio” dramatises this darkness. In the final scene, the Pentecostal coming of the tongues of fire re-constructs the world deconstructed in the time of Babylon. This new Pentecostal city of God is constructed of “living stones” – of human beings who through their love of God and each other build a lasting city.

Babel means to Confound

The word *Babel* is associated with the Hebraic word meaning “to confound.” The great city is synonymous with the revolt of humanity against God, the seeds of which have germinated throughout time. “The Oratorio” begins in mythic terms by portraying a dark archetypal figure in the first scene symbolising evil and revolt. This figure controls and oppresses human beings;

The dark one rises in his golden armor:
The plumed king, whose signs
Command the zodiac (*MS 2*).

The figure hearkens back to the figure of Lucifer, angel of light, who became the father of lies. In “The Oratorio” the cosmic figures of speech and silence become the archetypal images of truth and lies. The silence of God speaks truth and the plumed king can speak only lies. The cosmic forces of light and dark are dramatised as having an impact on the earth and its peoples.

Part One of “The Oratorio”

Merton sets the tone of “The Oratorio” by directing that the opening music be both violent and bright. This reinforces the tone of the words sung in the recitative.

The accompanying recitative, quoted above, suggests the falsity of the unity between human beings.

The recitative suggests a “once upon a time” place that has been lost through the ambition and pride of the speakers. This is the language of rebellion and of vengeance: hard and bright. Language is a means to be used for encouraging rebellion and uniting rebels. This rebellion is one for which each person is responsible, unlike the revolt portrayed in “A Responsory”. The latter began with humanity disassociating itself from the action taking place in the heavens until the shadow of that conflict forced them, through fear and bewilderment, to own their responsibility. In the opening lines, quoted above, the speakers are aware of their involvement. But they are also aware of the limitations of what they are doing and of the consequences which will ensue as a result of their pride: ‘Before we be scattered abroad in all the lands” (*MS 1*). The violence inherent in their act makes possible the emergence of violence in their leaders and their world. This violence is in the language of warning:

O fear the father of lies . . .
The wheel of his nativity
Is cursed with fire (*MS 2*).

Violence is also present in the description of the rising of the Babylonian king. He is like a new sun, but he promises a false dawn as his light comes only from the reflection of the real sun on his armor:

The dark one rises in his golden armor
The plumed king, whose signs
Command the zodiac (*MS 1*).

Eventually, as in Babylonian mythology, he will be swallowed by Leviathan, the creature inhabiting the primordial chaos.

The music, “violent and brightly coloured”, also reflects the false premise on which the Babylonians base their violent confrontation: Many machines serve him and his gods! (*MS 1*). The latent seeds of war the Babylonians have not recognised are germinated by their own violence against God and each other.

The Babylonian King

The king of Babylon is the mythic figure dominating this first section. He foreshadows the Leader who will emerge in *The Morality*. He is the archetypal figure of all dictators who have dominated and will dominate the world throughout history. He uses language and technology both as weapons of war:

I will not open my prisons
Nor quench my prisons
Nor cease to hang the heads of kings
Upon the branches of my priceless gardens
The hunters in the sky
Shall dread my wisdom
The tongue of my mouth
Divides and rules the world
In wars without end (*MS 2*).

This king is an idol. His golden armour has connotations other than those mentioned above. It brings to mind the golden calf when the word of Yahweh was disobeyed and an idol formed by Aaron, high priest of God’s people:

Aaron answered them, “Take the gold rings out of the ears of your wives and your sons and daughters, and bring them to me.” So they all took the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took them from their hands and in a mould melted the metal down and cast an effigy of a calf. “Here is your God, Israel,” they cried “who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Ex. 32: 2-5) (Jones 95).

When Merton imaged the king in golden armour he may also have in mind the golden idols of the marketing economy coming to birth in America. The guns of

Fort Knox resounded daily at Gethsemani as they guarded America's gold bullion. Gold is the source of modern power and the golden armour of the king indicates his strength and power – at least on the material level. Merton introduces words of technology, construction and machines; (*great cranes, wheel, fire, buildings, tower, ships*) to indicate the false premises on which this kingdom is based. The Babylonian king's spiritual power is rooted in his sense of himself as king and god. This king is his own priest and idol.

The king speaks the language of lies and the chorus and soloist emphasise this for the “insensate man” blinded by appearances:

. . .O fear the double-minded king
... O fear this Father of Lies (*MS 2*).

The language used makes very clear this Babylonian king is Lucifer, the original father of lies. The rising of the king is an archetypal moment when evil is gathered together in his person. This is the one whose “nativity is cursed with fire” (*MS 2*).

The wheel of fire, the wheel of the zodiac, the wheel of oppression all symbolically relate to the power of the king, as seen in the above reference. The sun and the zodiac speak of time and of the king's temporal power but also of his struggle to control the universe. The wheel of oppression and of servitude has been brought into being by his lies and violence.

The King is born of evil. His birth is the antithesis of the birth of the Logos. The latter's birth is celebrated with joy in the heavens not with the horror accompanying the birth of evil. His is not a miraculous birth although a fiery one: “His nativity is cursed with fire”.

God is uncreated *One*, existing infinitely outside time and yet in time through the incarnation. The Babylonian king is bound by time and his power is ultimately limited. His wisdom is to be dreaded because it is based on falsehood and is not wisdom at all, unlike the Wisdom personified in the Hebraic

scriptures and who played before the throne of God. There is no word of this king of Babylon which can be believed.

A divided tongue

Through the person of the king Merton portrays the total corruption of language. This is not simply a division of languages but a situation where:

The tongue of my mouth
Divides and rules the world (*MS 2*).

This is the birth of distrust, of treason and betrayal, of coercion and hate. The one word understood by all is again, *fear*. The anxious twilight world where “thunder curses in the dark” (*MS 3*) is brought into the light and the atmosphere is not simply one of bewilderment but it is ominous and filled with the threat of annihilation:

The ships have folded their wings
And fled from darkness
Winds are born of darkness (*MS 3*)

The priceless gardens of Babylon were terraced as were the ziggurats or places of worship outside the city. The king abuses the beauty and the strength of these hanging gardens by using them as places of death and execution. His claim is that he is the ruler with the one who has power over life and execution is his right. The result of this is that he unleashes the great anger of God whose breadth is sufficient to destroy the city and **unmake** the world of Babylon. What is not **unmade** is the poison that Babel has left in the minds of the scattered nations:

The nations swallow her poison
. . . generation after generation
Shall taste the wine of her lies (*MS 3*).

The divided tongues are not simply the many languages spoken of in this myth but also the split tongue of the serpent of Eden. The people have been taught to speak with the same forked tongue which in turn reflects their divided minds and hearts. The earthly city is established on the lies of the “Father of Lies” not on the truth of God. While Babylon dies, sinks into the desert, as does every great power eventually, the final word of division, which is war, is carried to the ends of the earth:

Generation after generation
Shall taste the wine of her lies (*MS 3*).

Oratorio: part 2

The militant language of war typical of all nations introduces the section part of “The Oratorio”:

Chorus (Marching song)
The bar-snake and the zig-zag snake
Will bite each other . . .
And drown each other in the sea
Who will reign, when both are dead? (*MS 3-4*).

The theme of division, of the divided tongue, is sustained in the image of the bar snake and the zigzag snake of which the army sings. This army is no regular army. The two symbols are those painted on the bikes of the Hell’s Angels groups in the 1930s. By using these images as symbols and signs, Merton implies that hell has been released in Babylon and that “Hells’ angels” march in unison at the command of the father of lies. The tribal wars between rival groups are mocked as the army marches in. By punning on the name of “Hell’s angels” Merton is assured of making the contemporary relevance of his text alive. The “Babel” produced in ages past is still with us today.

Merton also suggests that it is the irony of war that there can be no victor as long as wars are propagated and sustained. The king reigns now but if war continues all die no matter how powerful they are. What of the future?

Merton's words in the marching song suggest the unspoken answer to that question – “split”, “move”, “quench”. The situation will be the same if society does not learn from history. Leviathan, the monster dwelling in the seas, rises in the boiling waters of Babylon. Leviathan marks the return to primeval chaos:

Leviathan, leviathan

Boils the waters of Babylon (*MS 4*).

Leviathan emerges from the shadowy unconscious of the waters of Babylon. He was originally a monster capable of swallowing the sun and the Babylonian king, in his golden armour is impersonating the sun. By implication Merton suggests the king has set in action the very forces which will unseat him. It is Yahweh who must conquer Leviathan, originally part of the Babylonian cosmogony, and set chaos in order. (*PDS 599*). The theology of grace which will conquer the chaos is made free to act because Yahweh has to act to restore peace. Grace enters when Yahweh enters the world. The act of the coming of the Logos, which is also grace, is set in motion by the rebellion against Yahweh. Redemption is made necessary.

On another level Leviathan can also symbolise the totalitarian and political forces seeking to control the social order as well as the person. The Babylonian king is such a tyrant wanting, through a materialist philosophy, complete overlordship of the world. He claims to protect and serve his people but in fact demands complete and passive obedience.

A False Prophet

Babylon's king is the image of the false prophet:

The King of Babylon stands at the crossroads,
At the head of two ways, taking omens,
Viewing the guts of animals, and shuffling his arrows (*MS 4*).

He stands at the crossroads casting omens but always with the intention of destroying Jerusalem, the archetypal city of God. Whatever the omens reveal the march on Jerusalem will take place and murder will be done. The first murder, however, is not the physical murder of the people but the destruction of the city:

When Babel swayed against the moon
When Babel crumbled in the sky
Where then did her Buildings run
And, how then, did they die? (*MS 3*)

Language can be twisted and manipulated to the dictator's advantage. What cannot be so easily controlled, however, is silence. The protagonists in "A Responsory" were speech and silence. In "The Oratorio" silence and unmanipulated language, the language of truth, are both enemies of Babylon. The decree sung by the chorus "Let words become an instrument of war", re-introduces the political theme of war and the associated idea of propaganda. By controlling language the king will also control the thoughts and minds of the population. This is an Orwellian concept described by Orwell in his novel *1984* propaganda slipped over into total guidance by Big Brother, the god substitute.

Propaganda

Through propaganda then the King of Babylon seeks total control of his enemies.

As the symbol of Leviathan intimates, as the propagandist seeks to destroy his/her enemy through words, so the propaganda machine is one that can destroy the propagandist (manufacturer of words) himself:

Let there never again be silence
For silence gives the traitor words their meaning
Let the machine never again be silent
Or words will cease to resemble the machine,
And there will be no more production (*MS 5*).

The propaganda machine is one that can destroy the maker of the word, as propagandists are, and as the symbol of Leviathan intimates, in the same way the maker seeks to destroy his/her enemy:

Bass Solo:

The machine must destroy the maker of the machine,
For what is made is greater than the maker
And the word
Must destroy the speaker of the word,
For language is greater than the speaker,
Just as man is greater than God (*MS 4*).

The whole function of propaganda is to make it appear that the cause for which it speaks is so great that the question of whether the message is true or false is irrelevant.

Part 2 of “The Oratorio” then ends in exile. Words, not just silence, are sent away as they threaten the total dominance of the king. It appears that language has been defeated. The corruption is complete. The use of the word *camp* is ominous in the light of the concentration camps of the world then and now. The

death of Christ in the redemption of language is made explicit by the reference to crucifixion and by the fact that the word “Silence” is capitalised. The word “Silence” used in this way indicates it stands for God: for the personification of the Logos which is the silence and word of God: the word the *Logos* brings is always *salvation*:

Let words go to their camp by the waters of Babylon
And sing the song inspired by Babylon’s wine.
As for Silence, let it be crucified (*MS 5*).

Part 3: “The Oratorio”

In parts one and two Merton emphasises the myth behind “The Oratorio”. He establishes his theme of truth versus lies by relating the archetypal king of Babylon to the “Father of Lies” of the original story of “The Fall”. In turn he connects the word spoken by the king to propaganda, technology and the revision of history and to the image of chaos released by the king who draws on his armies to ensure that war and violence are let loose on the world. In association with this movement hell’s angels march to a military song and Leviathan the monster of the deep rises to bring with him primeval evil. Words and silence are both victims of this chaos and are sent into exile where the villager’s true home is forgotten.

Against this picture the deep anger of God rises against the lies and tyranny. The prophetic voice of truth is heard in the silence of the Word, and the memory of the true community, imaged by the village, glimmers faintly.

In this section the strong voices and longer speeches of the Bass and Contralto give way to shorter verse forms reminiscent of “A Responsory”. The words are very scriptural, as has been the imagery in the preceding sections, in their phraseology, tone and nuances. Isaiah and Ezekiel make their words heard and the words of the book of Exodus inform the background. The sound of their voices forms a lament intoned by the exiles. The lament is expressed in rhetorical questions for which there are apparently no answers:

By the ever changing waters
We sat down and wept
As if we had some other home (*MS 6*).

“Who will define movement and rest?” (*MS 6*) is another way of posing the question of the value of speech and silence. Such a question is at the heart of Merton’s own wrestling with the tensions between activity and faith, poetry and silence. Robert Daggy referring to what could be a fragment of the original “Tower of Babel: A Morality”, finds that Merton proposes some answers himself:

Was it not after all the Spirit that formed you in the womb of earth your mother? Are you not at the same time the child of heaven and the child of France, the baby of God and of a girl from Ohio? How will the earth be redeemed if you refuse to speak with her? How will the fields praise God if you do not lend them your tongue? Who will ever set down the witness of the deep rivers, the testimony that the mountains bear, of God’s revelations, if you do not resolve their language into music with your own pen which God has placed in your hand? And if you speak words that live by love, will you condemn yourself to silence by living without love? Hell’s silence is the pandemonium of despair, but heaven’s everlasting freedom is found where men and angels sing forever in God’s own public language (*Daggy Critique 15*).^{xxvii}

For Merton the solution partly lies in the need human beings have to allow silence/contemplation/solitude into their lives. Such a question challenges society’s frenetic activity and its denial of the relevance of rest and inaction. The “still centre” (*FQ 2*) in Eliot’s words, is, and was unknown and unsought.

Merton’s complaint was that this attitude of allowing the frenetic had crept into Gethsemani with the refusal to allow the monks their intervals as stipulated by the Usages, (the rules which directed everyday life and affairs at the Monastery). Even the commercial production of luxury items such as cheese and fruitcake were draining the contemplative atmosphere of the monastery.

The second question: “Who will distinguish noise from fear?” is relevant for today’s society, both within and without the monastery. The question is a plea for a solution to inner conflict. A new Word has to be spoken which will re-constitute language and re-establish it on the foundation of inner and outer truth.

What does Merton say language has become? Because truth is distorted and the mind corrupted, (“The wounded mind” of his verse), humanity is acting as if language was one dimensional. As the recitative proclaims language is simply:

an interminable series of signals
of their own vanity. Signs without substance
Ending in division (*MS 6*).

Signs have become simply pointers. They can direct but cannot lead to relationship. Language, spoken or otherwise, is potentially the core and heart of intimacy. The corruption of language has destroyed the possibility of intimacy which is based on trust and the acknowledged value of other human beings. When the greatest energy and creativity around language is poured into efforts to draw nations into war or into commercial advertising then language becomes debilitated and disempowered.

Merton recognised that on a much lesser scale the reduction of language to literally a series of signs could be a real problem for Gethsemani. Novices coming in to the monastery in the 1950s had to learn a new language in order to communicate in ways other than by speech. The Cistercian sign language had at least 800 signals! Many of these signs were skilfully and cleverly adapted for modern usage, for example. For example, Merton mentions in his journal that *cat* became the symbol for the caterpillar tractor. The learning that helped the original monks at Citeaux arrive at true silence now had a mechanical quality about it. Sign language had lost its true purpose. It now only added to the confusion of the mechanised monastery of the modern day. Merton is partly referring to the Monastery’s difficulty in “The Oratorio” when he writes:

The language of this land
Is an interminable series of signals
Of their own vanity. Signs without substance
Ending in division (*MS 6*).

The words of Ezekiel and again of Isaiah are used to heighten the intensity of the lamentation. This is the song of an exiled people who have lost their language and their memory of another way of living, another home. It is as though the mechanics of language have taken over and language has become a science. The element of the sacred is missing and old prophecies not recognised. The exiles cry out:

Lord when the seas pour down to hell
Who will save us from the sand?
Who will keep us from our end
Dryness and fire on every hand (*MS 6*)

The repetition in the last two lines emphasises the helplessness endemic in such a corrupt world. Sand and water become the symbol for such an undifferentiated world. Both pour over the people but “they only touch their skins” (*MS 6*).

Sand draws its symbolism from the number of grains it contains. It is a symbol of the promise of Yahweh to Abraham in the Hebrew text. There the symbol promises life and descendents to the Patriarch. Here the symbol represents the separation of the people from each other and from their past. It may also be a sign of the sins of the people who turned from God. In psychological terms the sand can represent the womb, shifting and impenetrable, adopting the shape of the bodies it covers. In this form the symbol can be a cry for regeneration which is in essence the cry of the exiles as they sing their lament in this section of the work.

Water is also a symbol of the undifferentiated state. When Human beings claim they are God then chaos must ensue. Only disorder can ensue from such a lie:

Good and evil: Sand and water all have become the same
They only touch our skins.
There are no actions: only explanations.
They give us numbers! (*MS 6*).

The restorer of language must be the one who understands that humanity has lost its capacity to believe because of the lies poured over it like sand and water. The language of God has been lost in this deluge.

For Merton, all people are born to be contemplatives and all are required to hear the silence of God. The restoration of speech and silence to their crucial place in human interaction and evolution is necessary for redemption. Merton's resistance, mirrored by the backwards/forward motions of his own struggle to be poet/monk or both, to understanding how to bring integration into his own life mirrors each person's resistance to the integration necessary to hear the word of God in silence. In other writings Merton will name this aspect of humanity as the conflict between the true or false self. For Merton the Logos, the Word of God is the answer to this need for integration and restoration:

Who will save us from the sand?
Dryness and fire on every hand (*MS 7*).

The irony is that Merton, the contemplative, must find his own salvation in the written word as much as in the movement towards the Logos which is contemplation.

The power wielded by the king, or the Leader, is the power of the machine alien to the village economy and lifestyle. The threat wielded by the king is the closure of production:

Let the machine never again be silent,
Or words will cease to resemble the machine,
And there will be no more production
Forwards and backwards,
Destroying history as fast as it is made. (*MS 5*)

The market economy becomes the fulcrum on which totalitarianism is balanced. The listeners are taken in by the argument and by the threat of those who believe the father of lies. Those who do not co-operate are sent into exile. The Bass trumpets the anger of the Leader that words have forgotten their “destructive function.” Such treason can only end in exile or death.^{xxviii}

Merton could apply his insights to his personal life, as well as see their application at the social and universal level. During the process of writing Merton understood that a poet could reach a level of contemplation through his activity/his creation but true infused contemplation is a total gift of God. A poet must be silent in order to receive that gift. Babel is only defeated by the paradox of the Word of God coming from the deep silence of God. The question was: how could that paradox be lived out in the life of a silent monk who wrote poetry and through his poetry spoke to many readers?

At the same time as he was wrestling with the above Merton realised that desire for contemplation could never be satisfied by poetry, music, ceremonies or even Liturgical spectacular. (BIW: 8) The irony of this realisation lay in the fact that he used all of these aspects of drama in his 1953 works, a time when he was seeking deeper solitude and contemplation. The deeper awareness that he arrived at in his journals, however, went beyond the above understanding: God, not simply contemplation or solitude was his desire:

His truth is formed in silence and work and suffering with which we *become* true. But we interfere with God’s work by talking too much about ourselves – even telling Him what we ought to do – advising Him how to make us perfect and listening for His voice to answer us with approval . . . Silence, then, is the adoration of His truth. Work is the expression of our humility. Suffering is born of the love that seeks one thing alone: That God’s will be done (Montaldo *IM* 138).

Merton’s Concerns

Merton’s personal and community concerns in the fifties focussed on the continuance of monastic life, his own place as monk and writer in the

Gethsemani community and his deeper involvement in that community as he assumed responsibility for firstly, the Scholastics, and secondly, the Novices. Even before these two appointments, as Director of Scholastics and then as Director of Novices, Merton was connecting more deeply with the Cistercian tradition, for example, he invited a group of twelve or more novices into the rare book vault where he was working to read the works of the Cistercian Fathers.

The books Merton was involved in writing at this time were also related to the spiritual life of the monks. *Bread in the Wilderness*, for example, was about the psalms. The psalms were recited everyday in the liturgy and formed the liturgical daily bread of the monks. *Bread in the Wilderness* included a significant passage related to the myth of the tower of Babel. The tower was story, metaphor and symbol for Merton at this period of his life. In this extract Merton uses paradox to highlight the pride which brought Babel into conflict with God. The implication is that modern society is living the Babel story once again.

The “wrangling of tongues” symbolises the confusion that was sent down by God upon the builders of Babel, who seeking to scale heaven with a structure of their own devising, were darkened and scattered in a division of tongues. Babylon, the city of division, the city of union, the city of those who love God unto hatred of themselves, was born of the gift of tongues. (*BIW* 124-125)

Babylon is a city united by hatred – the inversion of Pentecost and the Pentecostal gift of tongues. Pentecost, according to Catholic theology, was the event which inaugurated the building of the City of God on earth. The Catholic belief is that this city is the Kingdom of God epitomised by the Church.

The Pentecostal gift had a totally different effect to the multiplying of tongues at Babel. There the division began in the corruption of the mind, followed by the corruption of language and the nations’ inability to understand each other. The opposite was true of the Pentecostal act. People understood one another although they spoke different languages. Pentecost is the metaphor and image of the healing of language and thought. Merton continues:

. . .For there is only one language spoken in the City of God. That language is clarity. Those who speak it best speak it in silence. For the eternal word of Truth is uttered in silence. If He is uttered in silence He must be heard in deepest silence, and His spirit, the Spirit of Love is also poured out in our hearts, proceeding from the Father and the Son, in an everlasting silence (*BIW* 125).

The language theme of “The Oratorio” (and also of “The Morality” to be discussed in a later chapter) moves into this realm of silence and adoration, that is, the realm of love. The language of love, as will be seen, is articulated in the final scene of the drama.

Chapter 14: This is the Word the Prophet Saw

Language and the Oratorio: Parts 4-6.

Introduction

Language as the major theme of *The Babel Works* and the language Merton uses in his work “*Tower of Babel: an Oratorio*” have been analysed in relation to Parts one to three of that work. This language theme cannot be separated from the other significant themes of the works: technology, war and history. These themes will be discussed in a separate chapter.

Merton uses a form of the Hebraic technique of *parallelism* to construct this work. The first three sections relate to the power of the Babylonian king; the terror he inflicts on even his followers and the fear all who follow the “Father of Lies” experience through the ages. The poison of Babylon is not destroyed when the tower falls and the city dies. The Babylonian king personifies evil and the totalitarian state. He is the epitome of all-who sacrifice human lives to their own glory. Babylon’s poison endures in wars and hatred over the centuries. The Word of God, the Logos, is the antithesis of the king in both appearance and action. The apparently invincible king will be defeated by the Word, “which shall go forth from my mouth and save all men” (*MS 8-9*).

Two Languages: Latin and English

Latin, a language used in sacred rites in the 1950s, alternates with English in both parts one and six. This juxtaposition is deliberate, symbolising as it does, the situation of evil with that of good. Latin had a profound meaning for Merton, the priest. It was for him as a Cistercian, the language of liturgy and ritual. He uses Latin here to draw attention to the inappropriateness of using “God-language” to honour false gods. It was also the language in which this musical form was originally written. Merton may have seen English as a necessity for

his audience and used Latin to link to what happens when a language is debased or misused.

The metaphor of the division of language, and the sense of alienation resulting from such division is highlighted by the fact that Latin, the sacred language of Christianity, is used to adore evil. Truth is distorted when this happens. The two languages then reflect the alienation from God and from self which begins every time a false God is chosen over the one true God. Lucifer, rises shining with light, armoured against his own darkness. Human beings under the power of Babylon could not differentiate between true and false gods and this is one way of illustrating that amnesia.

The juxtaposition of the two languages also has an ironic function here. Such placement emphasises the strange and the different. It relates a little to the mystery languages used in idolatry, one of the themes of Babel. The two languages also highlight the division of tongues used to worship false gods. The final section of the work closes the parallel. In that section Latin is the universal language, and Merton wrote at a period when that could probably still be said to be true. He had to learn the language at his public school and one of his difficulties when he began his studies in England was that he was in a class below his age because he was backward in Latin. The final phrase Merton has his cast sing in the Oratorio is the great unitive song of adoration before the throne of God: *Adoremus Dominem!*

Love has reduced fear and it is not one voice which prevails, not an esoteric group, but a massed choir with all the understandings such a choir carries regarding universal and timeless worship.

Conflict

As stated in the previous chapters the sin of Babel is idolatry: “Come let us make our name famous” (Gen 11). The Babylonians, like humanity through the ages imagined control of word/speech/writing gave them the same creative

power as Divinity. There was a failure on their part to understand the nature of God:

If a person has a low idea of God he will have a low idea of sacrifice and in that event his sacrifice will have something of the character of a “deal” with the Divinity, who is imagined to need, and desire things that men also need and desire. The Divinity is thus considered as someone just a little more powerful than man, but with the same instincts and appetites. In some instances religion is scarcely separable from superstition (Merton *TLB* 36).

The myth of Babel, and the superstitions arising from it, relates directly to the Babylonians and yet gives some shape and form to Jewish thought. The Hebrews had adapted the Babylonian God, Marduk, into their own culture but wanted their God to be more powerful so there was considerable enmity towards Babylon. Irrespective of the truth or otherwise of the Hebraic faith, Marduk became Yahweh and Yahweh in turn became conqueror of the chaos and the one responsible for restoring order proving Yahweh was more powerful than the older God.

Merton’s inner struggle had some of this archetypal symbolism in it. His struggle was around the concept of fame. Publishing his work would make him personally famous, inappropriate for the self-denying monks of the Cistercian tradition. In 1953 Merton identified the struggle around his identity as that between monk and poet. The words “monk” and “poet” are generic but at the same time archetypal. Babel epitomises the archetypal struggle between the silent language of God which is *clarity*, the “monk” side of the confrontation. On the other side of the struggle was the false understanding humanity had of its own importance and of God. The dualisms against which Merton struggled were not of the same immensity but were still the struggle to bring into his own life order from chaos; disintegration to integration and discover his real name before God. These are elements of an archetypal struggle.

In relation to this struggle, whether on the individual, social or universal level Merton had this to say:

When man acts according to the temptation of Satan to be “like unto God,” he places himself as the unique subject in the midst of a world of objects. He alone is a “person”, he alone feels, enjoys and thinks, wills, desires, commands. The manifestation of apparent thought, feeling, desires are of little or no concern to him except insofar as they represent response to his own acts (*PML* 8-9).

And again:

The selves of others are nothing except insofar as they are replicas of Him. And when this is carried to a logical extreme (as it is, for example, by the totalitarian dictator), then society at large is made over into the image of the leader. The individual in such a society ceases to have any purpose except that of reflecting and confirming the leader’s megalomaniac idea of himself. (*Power and Meaning* 9).

Merton is concerned here not so much with the anti-Christ but with the undoing/unmaking of love. The king of Babylon is the vehicle in the Oratorio epitomising self-love, self-aggrandisement, and unwarranted pride. He, and his city, reflect the inclination to selfishness in us all which sees everything around us as simply objects for satisfying our egoistical cravings. This undoes love! The Leader forgets he is a creature and sees all as in his service, as his creatures. His power is totally dedicated to his needs and desires. This leader is caught in the web of his own lies. Those lies become the building stones of a false belief system constructing an edifice to falsehood: a temple to a false god.

Mood and Tone of “The Oratorio”

The tone of “The Oratorio”, parts one to three is ominous and the mood is fear. This section ends in exile with the seeming triumph of the Babylonian king and his followers. Subtly mood and tone begin to change in Part Four of the work. The language is still the language of death and war penetrating time:

Washed in winter’s rivers
Warlike seasons come
Cancer and Orion
The Bear and Capricorn (*MS* 7).

It is still winter but the rivers are free to run. They are no longer bound by their chains of ice. Life is beginning to move. Truth begins to overcome falsehood; love to replace emptiness and hate.

In part 4-6 of “The Oratorio” Merton begins to draw strongly on the language of scripture, that is, the written word of God. The written/spoken word of the Babylonians will not endure but the Hebraic word of that nation’s salvation history will last. It will eventually give way to the Christian story of death, resurrection and rebirth through the fire of Pentecost. In this post-Christian era of the 21st century there are attempts by fundamentalists to reclaim the story literally rather than as myth and metaphor. This is false understanding of scripture and certainly not the one used in “The Oratorio”. Merton is conscious of the allegorical/metaphorical language used in the telling of the myths associated with Christianity. He perceives and writes his own interpretations of that story through a Christian lens. He therefore weighs human experience in the scales of Christianity and through that story indicates that the true voice of God will overcome the corrupt prophecies of Babylon and its associated poison.

The scorpion

Men of war, spawned by the Scorpion

Cover the land, crossed by travelling stars (*MS 7*).

The first intimation of a new prophecy is felt in movement of these stars. The zodiac, enslaved also by Babylon and filled with images of death is being freed as is the earth. The changes in the Zodiac parallel the changes in the salvation history happening on earth. The Scorpion gives way to the water bearers who in turn give way to the constellation of Aries, the Ram. Each constellation carries with it an ancient symbolism and Merton adapts such symbolism to his movement from speech to silence. In the movement of Merton’s zodiac the domination of evil gives way to the unity of the constellations as Christ re-enters heaven.

The scorpion is a powerful symbol throughout “The Oratorio”. The sign of the scorpion appears at the time of the autumn equinox in the northern skies and is the dominant constellation at that time. By using this image with its ancient connotations Merton implies he is writing about the autumn of Babylon and its like.

Merton apparently drew on old Egyptian symbolism, closely related to some of the myths of the Fertile Crescent of the peoples of the Ancient Euphrates/Tigris area. In ancient Egyptian mythology the Scorpion stood as the apex of the autumn equinox. In legend Scorpio, the god, killed Horus, the sun, sending him to winter’s death. Later Horus was resurrected and Isis gave him rebirth. The Scorpion is the image of one of the sons of Horus. A further implication of this legend is that the four images of the sons of Horus were adapted to become the four images of the Evangelists. Merton does something similar to the twelve signs of the Zodiac in that he has them transformed into the twelve images of the Apostles towards the closing of the Oratorio.

The word “plumed” can also refer to the scorpion but has connotations relating it to the serpent and thus to the serpent of Eden with its forked tongue. Used in this context “plumed serpent” indicates the ever-ready nature of the scorpion to attack and kill.

The scorpion is the embodiment of evil. It is aggressive, malevolent and with its tail poised ever ready to kill. The poison of Babylon, paralleled later with the antidote, the wine of the Son of God, is embodied in this malevolence image.

Movement

In the movement in the final half of the Oratorio, as has been stated, is the movement from falsehood and deliberate dissimulation to clarity and truth. The movement symbolically occurs along the axis of the earth. The axis is the symbol of the dividing line between truth and falsehood.

Fleets move northward. East and west
The stars pursue their prey.
Time goes forward and backward
Weaving its web of light and darkness covering the land
With truth and illusion, life and death (*MS 7*).

This is the flow of time, the ebb and flow of life. Jewish mythology saw the great river of God moving along the vertical dimension of the earth. From this great river flowed the four great rivers known in antiquity –one of which was the Euphrates

The Exiles in the play camp beside a river which is both Euphrates and also a little like the river Lethe for the exiles, while they are there, weep for a home which they cannot remember. In this autumn and winter humanity cannot remember its name or story. The movement is to reclaim both and to remember who God is in relation to them.

Time

Part Four makes clear that the Scorpion's time is coming to an end. There is a promise of a new beginning. The Scorpion will not survive when the rains begin. Then the ancient deserts will begin to flourish again and the rivers flow. This is the time of change, of fertility; of spring. The darkness of autumn and winter, holding life imprisoned gives way to the light of truth and to rebirth. The web of light and darkness is so interwoven, however, that the lines of light cannot be distinguished from those of darkness. "Truth and illusion, life and death" - Which is which?

Change

Change begins to occur when the water signs of the Zodiac appear: who put their purchases down. The metaphor of rain has always been a traditional Hebraic/Christian one for the action of God in the world. The term is often

expressed as grace, which in Karl Rahner's phrase is defined as "The self communication of God." Here the rain is splendid:

Washed in splendid rain
The Bull, the Fishes come,
The Crab, the Waterman
And put their packages down (*MS 7*).

The earth is still – the eternal hills do not move, but change at the mythical and spiritual level is taking place. The world sees its ancient scars not as fresh but as white. These are the scars of war and corruption that are the marks of the battle between truth and falsehood. They are white with age because they have been carried for so long. The spring symbolises the release, the resurrection and final healing to come:

Twelve signs in the heavens fight the twelve Apostles
Whose words will grow like green life (*MS 7*).

Bursting the sunlit bricks of Babylon
For Truth grows back like life in spring
From the winter of death (*MS7*)

The prophecy contained in these words releases all that has been held in prison by the clay of humanity. It uses the baked clay bricks of the defeated city to bring life back into the world. Truth grows from that clay reminiscent of a new creation. Adam is reborn. Earth is remade. Skeleton houses, described by Merton, will find depth and be en fleshed again. This becomes a new and uncorrupted prophecy.

This new Word speaks clearly but in paradox:

The Word of God coming from far,
Is always near (*MS 8*).

This Word is immanent and transcendent; divine and human; a Word spoken by the silence of God. It is the one Word spoken so that all can hear: mercy.

Sacrifice and the Ram

The conclusion to Part Four begins to celebrate the triumph of the resurrection. Because Merton is using scriptural terminology he has in mind the image of the sacrificial lamb of the First and Second Testament. There are many parallels to the image of the Christ of the Christian story in the Hebrew tradition. Moses sacrificed a lamb after honouring Yahweh present in the burning bush.

The Ram is of course part of the Zodiac and in keeping with the Egyptian and Babylonian symbolism it speaks with a pre-Christian voice as much as it resonates with the Jewish/Christian typology. In ancient Egyptian mythology the ram was often a phallic symbol and the animal used as sacrifice on the days of atonement. Amon, the Egyptian sun-god, (Walker 386), also called the holy ram, played such a part. Aries the zodiacal symbol opens the year in March because that date used to be the atonement festivals in Rome. The Ram has often carried the symbol of atonement in many cultures and the Christian culture adopted the same imagery for the Logos who went freely to his death. He was the one who, as Isaiah says, “bore our sins freely for us”. The command of Eden, given to humanity to go forth and multiply is altered so that humanity can be regenerated and saved by this gift:

Go forth from my mouth and save all men,
Says the Lord God, in His eternal silence (*MS 9*).

While the ram denotes spring and atonement he is also imaged in “The Oratorio” as more powerful than the sun. This draws the hearer back to the false image of the sun as the golden armoured king rises to power. Here such a sun loses its ascendancy as does Horus and Sol and all the false gods associated with this sign.

The Ram then becomes the symbol and sign of the Word of God. He is more powerful than the zodiacal image of the sun but he is also the first sacrificial

victim in the line of martyrs whom Merton will celebrate in the final section of “The Oratorio”.

By using a phrase such as “stronger than the sun” Merton reveals his understanding of the zodiacal language. To the astrologer, the Ram:

Stands for the cosmic image of a force which is animal or rather animating, for fire which both creates and destroys, for a power which is blind and rebellious, profuse and disorderly, generous and sublime and which radiates outwards from a central point in every direction (Chevalier 786).

Aries, the Ram with all its ambivalence can also stand for in need of atonement; the insensate one, who cannot see his/her way clearly and who must be shown the way by the one who can truly atone for the flaws and faults of humanity.

Implicit in the idea of the Ram is also the idea of judgement. The Ram’s horn signals the final judgement. It is the warning that the walls of the old city will collapse as did the walls of Jericho when Joshua blew his horn.

Section Five and Six

The opening to Section Five of “The Oratorio” continues the last four lines of Part Four. The astrological symbols are sustained, once again, through paradox. Aries the fire sign who will quench the power of the water signs. He is the Pentecostal symbol denoting the fire of new spiritual life to come.

The Babylonian king was born in “a nativity of fire” a destructive birth that split the world. The Church, the City of God, will also be born through water and fire and it is the fire of Pentecost that is foreshadowed here. The fire sign, Aries, now takes precedence over the other signs and spring will initiate the Sun’s return, bringing light out of darkness, order out of chaos and:

Fire can quench water
Flame can stand upon foam.

Blood lies on the rock
When the sea goes home (*MS 8*).

Before this can happen in the salvific act of Calvary and the crucifixion must take place. Merton introduces here symbols of crucifixion: Rock (Calvary), smeared with blood (as were the lintels of the Hebrew people when they began their long journey to The Promised Land) nails, thunder and wood. The *leit-motif* of God, Mercy is experienced.

Scriptural Imagery

The Hebraic-Christian scriptures are the Word of God according to Christian belief. As a Cistercian the daily ritual of prayer and liturgy was centred on these scriptures. Merton did not believe in them literally but saw them as metaphor and myth carrying a truth beyond themselves and leading to a deeper understanding of the human story, admittedly within a particular framework, that of Christianity. Merton used the lens of these scriptures to critique the world in which he lived, often with great accuracy and perception. They have relevance to a post-Christian society today in the way any perennial and ancient text -such as the Bhagavad-Gita has - to society. Merton used the text from the vantage point of a believer who was committed to the contemplative way of understanding the Divinity.

Here Merton describes the Word of God in Scriptural terms: The Logos brings good tidings, restores our own city, brings mercy. The Logos is wounded and is silent:

He who was wounded
When He did not speak
He who was silent
Was killed for what His silence said (*MS 9*).

The Logos, God's new springtime, brings life to the earth and a plentiful harvest. Above all this Word is human not simply divine and acts as such. He gives His Godhead to bind "the broken world with wounded hands" (*MS 9*). In

this phrase Merton has perhaps a solution to his own brokenness and to an integration of the divisions within him. There is a possibility for healing ourselves when the dichotomies are recognised and named. By struggling with his own vulnerabilities Merton has offered a way of approaching the resolution of the true/false dichotomy in each one. Christ by becoming wounded holds the possibility of healing for all. Thus this wounded Christ offers redemption at many levels.

Pentecost

As Merton brings Part Five to a closure he parallels it with the opening of Part One: Pentecost is paralleled with the division of tongues occurring at Babel. Fifty days after the crucifixion and the fulfilment of prophecy the city of God is re-born.

The Christian scriptures speak of the ascension, the moment when Christ ascended into heaven, taking place after forty days. By this action, Christ, the Word of God, ascends into his proper sphere and metaphorically claims ownership of the heavens, the place that is God. The Babylonians sought to write their name in the heavens and to claim it for themselves. Now God has taken back what belongs to God in the Hebraic/Christian story. It is Christ's name which is written in heaven. The irony is, as Merton later explains in his essay on Prometheus, that is the gift human beings tried to steal was the one God/the gods were willing to give: the gift of fire, that is of Divine Love.

Fire

In some ways Merton saw himself as trying to steal fire from the gods/God when he wrote. The gift of God was the fire of inspiration the Apostles received but it was also the one that writers tried to steal for themselves. The contemplative aspect of fire, the fire of divine love, was also something that could not be taken from the gods.

For Merton the fire of divine inspiration penetrated everything. Section XI of his poem “The Legacy of Herakleitos uses the symbol powerfully:

XI

All things are fire.

The cosmos, which is the same for all,
No one of the gods of men has ever made;
But it was ever, is now, and ever shall be an ever-living Fire.
With measures of it flaming up
And other measures of it going out

Once Pentecost occurred there was no possibility of the Divine Fire going out. After this fire is given Christ ascends as God and man and claims possession of the heavens for both God and human beings:

Fifty days after the Word was slain and lived
He sent His Son to ordain with flame
Twelve men to slow to believe,
Fishermen to find the ones the Word had chosen
Workmen to build together a divided nation (MS 9).

For the Jews forty is the number of waiting, of preparation, of testing and of punishment. Forty days was often a milestone image in the Bible. Often, too, the number forty marks the completion of a cycle and ends in a radical journey of transformation (Chevalier 401). This is the story of Pentecost. Twelve individuals are transformed and in turn transform the world. With the loss of their leader the group must confront themselves, their fears and loss and wait in silence for the Silence of God to speak.

The additional ten days between Ascension and Pentecost indicate a time of fulfilment. The Law of the First Testament must be completed, that is the prophecies, fulfilled in every way. This, then, is the time when the false is eliminated and the truth is finally spoken by the Apostles, those, who “slow to believe”, nevertheless did so.

Section Five of “The Oratorio” ends with the fulfilment of the prophecy symbolised by Aries, the Ram. The days of atonement are completed; the annihilation of the false prophets is complete. The false prophets confused the hearers who did not know what to believe. Christ brings with him *clarity* which Merton says is the language of the city of God:

For this, the Spirit taught them tongues.
Thus are all prophecies made plain
Three hours after the sun
Shone on the temple trumpets in Jerusalem (*MS 10*).

Merton cleverly juxtaposes the story of Babylon against the story of Pentecost with these words. The sound of the temple trumpets heralds the death of Christ but also the death of darkness and the terror inspired by such a Babylon. There is now the promise that Babylon’s poison will be countered by “the wine of Christ.” The sound of the trumpet is a reminder also of the trumpet of the last judgement when Babylon is conquered without hope of rebirth. The trumpets signify the realisation of the prophet’s words: They have made heaven in the midst of us, Jerusalem in Babylon (*MS 11*).

Part Six

The chorus opening Part Six commences a Latin hymn to the Word. The words are taken from the Prologue to St. John’s Gospel:

In Principio
The word of God on high
Is the fountain of wisdom
His ways are eternal commandments.

Erat verbum
Et Verbum erat apud Deum (*MS 10*).

The Latin-English interchange hearkens back to Part One of the Oratorio but the ominous tone is gone. Merton clearly intends to show that Babylon is destroyed by the power of Christ's death and the language of this section is celebratory. The Word lives in peace and love, in communion, in Eucharist:

Those who have taken peace upon their tongue
Have eaten heaven (*MS 11*).

The corruption of body, mind and spirit is over. Handel's great alleluia chorus plays in the background because celebration is really about the same thing: "I know that my Redeemer liveth". The challenge Merton offers in his Oratorio is the challenge to find and recognise Truth in the miasma of lies and illusion propagated by the voices of evil and dispersed through war and brutality. The one true Word, spoken in silence, in contemplation, is lost in the violence of falsehood.

Part Six brings "The Oratorio" to a close. The word, *verbum*, dominates this section. This is the new word of God. *Verbum* introduces images of healing and salvation drawn from the First and Second Testaments. In a series of quatrains Merton celebrates the intervention of God with his chosen people, past and present; there is no longer any excluded person. Images of Eucharist remind the listener that while Babylon dies, the God-Word is eternal. The word *verbum* thus recalls the word of consecration at the silent heart of the Eucharist and the eternal presence of that Word before the face of God. As in all Merton's works "The Oratorio" is ultimately about the human journey to contemplation. The letting go of all that is false through discipline and detachment and the arrival at the place where our true name is known to the true God. This journey is one which moves us beyond the false self toward the peace and freedom imaged in the Swans and Sirius. The *Verbum cruces*, *Verbum dei* herald resurrection.

The final celebration of 'The Oratorio' is spoken as one voice, one mind and in truth:

Adoremus Domine.

Conclusion

“The Oratorio” included excerpts from the earlier Babel Works and foreshadowed the final work, “The Tower of Babel: A Morality”. These excerpts are also used in the last named work connecting all four works through word and theme.

In “The Oratorio” Merton used archetypal images to retell the story of the myth of Babel. In this way he explored human frailty particularly its vulnerability to falsehood and to lies. He objectified the evil forces behind deliberate illusion and destruction that found its expression in totalitarianism, malice and the abuse of power together with the denigration of the masses by drawing on the image of Lucifer, the fallen angel. That angel is reincarnated through the centuries in the persons of dictators such as the king of Babylon and perhaps, especially, the dictators of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Lucifer was the false sun and the false word who sought to control the heavens the height of power and arrogance. The heavens were the place of God. Lucifer is human ambition run wild.

In Merton’s works there is always an autobiographical element. The archetypal inner struggle he was experiencing between the archetypes of monk and poet was also explored subtly as the poet explored the original myth.

The Hebraic-Christian story of salvation served as the vehicle to propel the myth through the centuries. This is a story in which both heaven and earth were implicated as was hell. It was from the depths that the king of Babylon rose to begin his journey of hate. In the salvation history of the Christians resurrection is the actual event as well as the metaphor for the defeat of death and of all darkness. Pentecost is the time and metaphor for the fulfilment of the law and the healing of languages. It is the time of the coming of peace because then the Word of God triumphs.

By using the metaphor of speech and silence Merton moves the drama towards the contemplative moment which he sees as the Baptismal calling of each

person. The final moment of the drama is the moment of completion when the one word of adoration is sung by the massed group on stage. This moment presages the unity of time and place and persons which in this Christian tradition is the ultimate gift of God.

“The Oratorio” is significant not because of its poetic quality but because it is a summation of Merton’s beliefs and of his understandings of the world at a time when he was not able to read much beyond what was available at the monastery. His own inner struggle was important but it was connected to his understanding of the world and the Catholic understanding he had learnt at Columbia and elsewhere as well as his training in the monastery. Merton sought to find his place in the world and this meant he sought to understand what he was to give to the world. “The Oratorio” was his statement of faith and “The Morality” a deeper expansion of that faith and a further exploration of who he was and of what he needed to do in order to understand and love both worlds to which he belonged: the monastic and the secular.

Chapter 15 introduces “The Tower of Babel: A Morality” and explores the question: Why did Merton choose a morality play as the genre for this particular subject?

Chapter 15: You Must Discover New Words Born Out of an Old Time

Introduction

In 1957, at the end of his period of poetic silence, Merton published a much expanded version of his 1942 poem entitling it “The Tower of Babel: A Morality”. The poem had already been published in 1953. This chapter will examine why Merton chose the format of the Morality Play to dramatise the concepts and ideas he dealt with in the other three works. It will include some general background to Merton’s anthology *The Strange Island* which included the Morality Play.

The epigraphs to The Morality Play will also be discussed as will the play’s structure.

Title

“The Tower of Babel – A Morality” was included in Merton’s poetic anthology, *The Strange Islands*.^{xxix} The title of the anthology contained echoes of John of The Cross’s mystical expression.

The editor of The Hollis & Carter edition of *Strange Islands* had this pertinent comment to make regarding the poems:

“Your existence, though you despair, is rooted in hope.” These words of the prophet in The Tower of Babel, a morality play forming the second part of this book of poems by Thomas Merton, serve to summarise the theme of the collection as a whole. Written during the past seven years at the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, where the poet is a monk, these poems are about the anguish of the contemporary world created by man at the sacrifice of those characteristics which distinguished him from the rest of Creation. About defeat and despair . . . they deal, too, with hope, the Christian hope and trust in God still permeating a civilisation which has rejected them. (SI Notes)

This passage is significant in that it attempts to summarise Merton's poetic work to 1957 and indicates to some degree what Merton was attempting to achieve through his work. The poems in the text indicate that Merton is beginning to turn his face outwards. He is commencing to see clearly what happens when a monk begins to find his place in the world. Merton's poetry confronts the world and its self-idolatry strongly. That same poetry, however, also sings of the contemplative experience and of the significance of that experience in creating quite a different world to the one where anguish and despair reign. This process of confronting the world honestly means also an honest confrontation with religious life and with himself as monk and poet. The poems reflect that confrontation and no more strongly is it documented than in the morality play.

Medieval times

The medieval morality belongs to the Middle Ages and as such could seem to be outmoded but with the return of verse-drama in the 1950s and particularly with the production of *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Cocktail Party* and *A Sleep of Prisoners* interest in the Morality as a legitimate dramatic form returned. The work of T.S Eliot and Christopher Fry was being acclaimed in the medium of religious drama. Even the Australian writer, Douglas Stewart had produced a radio play in verse, *Fire on the Snow* in the 1950's.

This form of drama is an amalgam of verse and drama. *Everyman* is perhaps the archetypal Morality Play but there are many others which still have something to say to a modern audience.

Merton's choice of the morality as a form for his expanded work arose from his need for an evangelising tool which would be suitable for carrying out the mandate given him by Dom Frederic Dunne: to write about contemplation and encourage the spiritual life. Merton had a great love for the Twelfth century School of Chartres. In his journals he notes his love for that era – the great teaching and scholastic era of the church. It is possible also that Merton's love of experimentation, a love which was later put to good use in his experimental

poetry, led him to experiment with this dramatic form. The rhetoric of the drama is certainly scriptural, didactic and evangelical. There is, as a result, a loss of subtlety in characterisation and occasionally thematically, but this is compensated for by the wealth of allusions and great scriptural depth of the work.

The morality thus is primarily a didactic tool and was used as such by the Medieval Church. Merton has used it as such seeing the will to be entertained as strong if not stronger in modern times than it was in the Middle Ages. Merton's experience as teacher both in the monastery and outside it helped him realise the value of entertainment as an educational tool. The Morality Play was a perfect vehicle for education in faith. It did, however, remain a once only experiment for the author. Merton seemed to lack the ability to bring characters alive and to allow conflict to reach its climax and be resolved. His choice of the apologetic model made the focus on question and answer more pertinent than the development of the characters who voiced the questions. The questions and answers posed in the drama were, and are, vital to a world in moral, ethical and social conflict.

The era of the morality play was also the era in which Merton felt most at home himself. His yearning for contemplation was akin to the yearning of those who belonged to the School of Chartres, William of Conches, Gilbert of Poitiers, John of Salisbury and other teachers of that era. These were marginalised men in many ways; Gilbert had to stand trial for his ideas and William of St Thierry attacked William of Conches ideas with the support of St Bernard of Clairveaux – formidable opponents indeed. This marginal position Merton could identify with easily.

The chosen form, the morality, was a medieval teaching device used by the Church to reach an illiterate people as well as a way of celebrating festivals of the liturgical year. The morality's purpose is therefore didactic. Merton's play highlights the truth about evil as understood in the western Christian tradition. Merton dramatises the narcissism of the world living out its dream to be God through technology and through the violence of wars and dictatorship. Through

his poems he offers a different vision: a vision of unity made possible by the Word of God as spoken and understood through the lens of western Christianity.

Later Merton was to use other tools in his writing to assist with the confrontation of good and evil in himself and his world and to bring about self-integration. Zen Buddhism and the Hesychastic way are examples of such approaches to contemplation and to the integration of the self. In 1953 his struggle is to come to terms with the division between the sacred and the profane in the world in which he had lived and was living. For Merton Gethsemani was becoming a microcosm of the cultural and social evils affecting America. Merton saw, for example, that the “cheese Business” the monastery entered into was absorbing the life and energy of the monks which rightly belonged to contemplation. The awe of a young monk when he saw an order of cheese from Mrs Irving Berlin increased Merton’s fear and scorn at this infiltration of business economics and the corporate world into the solitude of Gethsemani.

Merton idealised the medieval world. The training he received through his studies in Scholasticism probably heightened the dualism between the sacred and profane he experienced in his life. Contemplation was made more difficult when the monastic world was so fragmented. The business world and the conveyor belt mind-set which led to more and more absorption of the monk’s time did not mesh easily with the monk’s first goal of contemplation.

In his 1940-50 Journal, *Entering the Silence*, Merton complains about the way the intervals, the periods set aside on feast-days for prayer and reading are swallowed up by work. The *Cistercian Usages* allow this time for contemplation but both Dom Frederic and Dom James occupied the monks in other ways because they did not trust the community to use the intervals well. Merton’s complaints grew steadily stronger as the journal progresses. Perhaps fundamentally he is complaining about the level of distrust between community and leaders symbolised by this action of the Abbots. Babel is as much about distrust of authority as it is about the other themes mentioned below.

The morality play was a suitable genre to use in confronting such issues because of its flexibility. Moralities were presented in many different venues and scenes were often performed in different locations. The mode of presentation was mobile and simple. Ostensibly Merton was aware of the potential both mediums had for conveying truth through drama. He was also very much aware of the way Bishop Fulton Sheen and other church people were using the media. Merton mentions this fact many times in his journals. While he disapproved of the glibness of Sheen's approach he recognised his skill at communication. Merton looked for something that would approach modern life with more depth and truth and which would be linked to tradition. The drama could be disseminated through various mediums, live stage, radio or television. The teaching mode also made it suitable for Merton. He could use both his educational and his writing ability. As master of Scholastics and Master of Novices Merton was doing a considerable amount of teaching. Merton, at various times, called the work a radio play and a television drama rather than referring to it as a morality play. A morality play seemed to suit these requirements. Merton's "Tower of Babel: A Morality" was performed on *The Catholic Hour* on NBC on January 27th, 1957. The version performed was condensed and adapted for radio by Richard J. Walsh. The play or poem, whichever way it is defined, is most suitable for radio. While it has some powerful visual scenes e.g. the construction of the tower itself or the ominous fist rising from the desert, on the whole it lacks the action and visual dramatic impact for a television drama.

Ross Labrie agrees that Merton wrote "The Tower of Babel: A Morality" as a modern morality play but adds "it might more properly be called a dramatic poem. The tower symbolises the hubris of technology as well as the abuse of language that he regarded as inevitable in a culture in which communication was primarily mechanical" (ATM130),

The work is a pivotal work for Merton. It is also, as is all Merton's work, autobiographical. In "A Morality" Merton undertakes an analysis of his world view and his own position in relation to the monastery and to the world outside the monastery.

It is no accident that he chooses an extract from Augustine's *City of God* as one of the epigraphs to the work. For Augustine the contrast between the city of God and the secular city was obvious as was the location of the secular city – it was outside the walls of religious life! Merton in his struggle to understand monasticism and his vocation had also been brought up as a novice on the idea that perfection lay in the monastery and not outside it.

Perhaps Merton's especial giftedness was that he had always been an outsider, a marginal person, and, to survive, had to think for himself. He was not able to lay that facility easily aside when he entered the monastery. He would not accept all that he was told as younger, more inexperienced novices would do without reflecting, critiquing and judging its value. "A Morality" is thus not just a critique of the morality of the secular world but also of the monastery and of himself and what he, as a contemplative monk and a poet was being called and challenged to do in the years he had left to live. Through this examination Merton reached a turning point in his own life. He saw he would have to speak out on political issues and could no longer be silent – the quiet, obedient monk! However, unlike Bernard of Clairveaux, Merton was to speak against war as a solution to the religious crises of his time. But like Bernard he was impelled to speak by love for others and for the world. In other words Merton's world-rejection stance and his mockery of things he did not understand were being transformed. Merton's choice was to write and to stand, as Ghandi did, for non-violence. In relation to that principle Merton took seriously the words he wrote in the poem, *Tower of Babel*: "The forgotten principle is that the machine should always destroy the maker of the machine."

The Strange Islands

The Strange Islands has the following dedication: For Mark and Dorothy Van Doren. This dedication indicates that the impetus for the play may have come from an incident involving Mark Van Doren's son, Charles. Charles had been part of a scam involving a quiz show in the States. Merton saw the boy as an

innocent who had been lured by the corrupt media and political system of which he became a part. This may have been an over-simplistic view on Merton's part but the incident, occurring around the time *The Tower* was first published could have catalysed him into action and thought concerning the corruption he saw pervading American culture. This corruption pervaded the political environment of the McCarthy witch hunts of that era which ruined the lives of anyone who had ever looked sideways at Marxism.

This incident, however, does not mean Merton was simplistic in his thinking. From an early age he had the ability to make connections. His mother recognised this as being a particular gift of her young son. His vision of justice was a powerful one and he recognised abuses at every level and was able to hypothesise with accuracy the forces which led to such behaviours and abuses. Poems such as "The Guns at Fort Knox" indicate the complexity of his thinking around the major issues of his day which are still among the major issues of today.

Such ruins cannot
Keep the armies of the dead
From starting up again.
They'll hear these guns tonight
Tomorrow or some other time.
They'll wake. They'll rise
Through the stunned rocks, form
Regiments and do death's work once more (SJ 7).

While this poem reflects some of Merton's major concerns – war, a culture of death and destruction, the abuse of nature, the connection between the past and the present, the ever present nature of death – "A Morality" continues these themes. Merton used his immediate world as lens and vision for understanding what was beyond that immediate context.

Later Merton realised he had passed through a number of stages in understanding Gethsemani and its place in the world. His first infatuation with it led him to idealise the monastery without owning its very real faults. Once stripped of his idealism he became cynical and depressed. Father John of the

Cross had to advise him to forget his own resentment in order to see his community clearly. Later Merton came to realise a truer vision of Gethsemani and the community. The pragmatic view which focussed on flaws lacked the transformative depths of a mystical vision which recognised the point of pure innocence and love at the *point vierge* of the soul –the place in a person’s soul untouched by evil: the residence of Being. In his search for solitude, however, there would always remain in Merton some ambivalence towards the Cenobitic life and he would always experience some struggle with the duality between his inner call to contemplation, to solitude, and his vow of stability, demanding he remain in community. In many ways the Morality merges the two sides of the conflict Merton experienced with himself and his desire to search out God’s will for himself.

Epigraphs to the “Tower of Babel” A Morality”

“A Morality” is then a watershed and a summation of how Merton viewed the world and the monastery during the 1950s. Through the play he dramatises the sin of idolatry. This is the sin which Merton and theologians agree, is the original corrupter of humankind and still works its evil today whether in the form of totalitarianism, misguided patriotism, fundamentalism or some other form.

Merton’s play is an adaptation of the myth of Babel as recounted in the Hebrew Scriptures – the First Testament. The myth is ultimately a myth of creation and inevitably in such a myth there is a confrontation of good and evil and all that confrontation implies. The myth of Babel affects the world, past, present and future. The morality’s basic themes (language, identity, history, dissension, namelessness, technology and so on) are derived from the Genesis text used as epigraph.

The story of Babel, as it occurs in the Bible, is an attempt to reveal the rebellion of humanity against the Creator. Human beings fail to understand the power of God and attempt to prove through their technological skills that they are equal to the Divine. God’s reaction is swift. The tower, by which the builders attempted

to force God to speak to them as equals, is destroyed. By this act human unity is shattered and languages appear. There is now no longer one voice but many. Speakers of one language cannot understand another language. Human beings are separated and scattered to the far ends of the earth. But while God has punished humanity the punishment also provides another chance for creation. It is not destroyed but allowed to develop differently to the way it had been progressing. While humanity's hubris is crushed for the time being it is not completely destroyed. As Raphael the guide says, Babel is in human hearts not just in their actions. As humanity spreads from one part of the earth to another so does man's hubris, his desire for power and control, his lies and manipulation of language, his fear of God and his failure to understand that God's word is love not fear are all evidence of this.

Babel then becomes Babylon. Humanity, not content with a tower, builds a city – invisible and evil – which sets itself against the living city of God. Merton combines Babel and the Babylonian exile to produce a myth universalising the themes of politics, power, conflict, idolatry, self-worship, inadequate knowledge of the Divine.

The play built around the myth of Babel is a confrontation between good and evil. This archetypal war is symbolic of the war the contemplatives face on many levels. Such a conflict is present in many classical Christian texts as well. The Spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius, with which Merton was very familiar, include a significant contemplation on the great battle between the kingdoms of good and evil. The first arena in any spiritual system where good and evil are to be overcome is that of the self. The Leader in Babel idolised himself and invited the city to do the same. The failure to acknowledge the one God's sovereignty is the source of all division and separation in creation.

A second epigraph links the morality to the Augustinian tradition.

Two kinds of love have created two cities: the earthly city is created by the love of self to the point of contempt for GOD: the heavenly city by love of God to the point of self-contempt. The earthly city glories in herself only, the heavenly glories in the

LORD. The earthly city seeks her glory from men, the heavenly, through the witness of a good conscience, finds GOD in herself as her supreme glory. The earthly city loves her own power, but the heavenly turns to GOD and says, "I will love Thee, O GOD my strength." St. Augustine, *The City of God*, xiv, 28 (CP 247-48).

This epigraph deepens the themes introduced by the reference to Genesis. In Augustine's work the mythic parameters for good and evil are set between the kingdoms of heaven and earth; the earthly city and the heavenly city.

The Tower is the symbol of the earthly city standing in opposition to the heavenly city as described by Augustine in his monumental work *The City of God*. In the first city there is a divinising of humanity and contempt for God. The second city, the Heavenly city has contempt of love of self, not of humanity. The contempt is for that aspect of humanity which places itself before Divinity. As Merton writes of the play:

The builders of the Tower of Babel are men who have repudiated God and His Truth. Instead of using their divinely given endowments in the service of God, they pervert His creatures and themselves by turning all things to the worship of themselves . . .

Man's true destiny is to build another city -a city of love And not the city of pride (Lentfoehr WS 154).

For Augustine Jerusalem symbolised the city of love and Babylon the city of pride. Merton begins his play by referring to Babel but then goes on to make the place of exile and fragmentation Babylon – following St. Augustine's symbolism. He also, of course, refers to the city of love as the Church. This was not simply the act of someone inside a monastery who had no choice but to see the Church in those terms. Merton consistently, even later in his life, tried to prove himself a "good" Catholic. He was loyal to the Church even though critical of much of what its representatives did. His obedience was tested many times especially in the later confrontations he was to have with the Bishops and censors over his peace writings.

A third epigraph is also used. This epigraph is taken from The Apocalypse and refers to Babylon rather than Babel:

And a mighty angel took up a stone, as it were a great millstone and cast it into the sea saying: with such violence as this shall Babylon that great city be thrown down and shall be no more at all . . . For all nations have been deceived by her enchantments, and in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all that were slain upon the earth. Apocalypse 18:21, 23-24 (CP 248)

While Merton's work is often apocalyptic in nature this particular quote highlights the source of evil in the fact that the stone the angel picks up is made by human beings – a millstone. Humanity's hubris is turned against itself by God's messenger.

Structure of “The Tower of Babel: A Morality”

The play is divided into two parts: Part One – The Legend of the Tower consists of two scenes: 1: The building of the Tower and 2: The Trial. Part Two is entitled The City of God and is composed also of two scenes: 1. Zodiac and 2. The Exiles.

Part 1, “The Building of the Tower”, establishes the myth. The construction of the tower is a physical process involving overseers and labourers. It is also a metaphorical and symbolic action of rebellion against God. The beginning of the scene introduces two observers who will relay to the audience the motivation and rebellion behind the construction of the tower. Raphael is the healer and guide. Thomas is the naive onlooker who would join the builders and who is taken in by the builder's interpretation of what they are doing. It is obvious that this is the dramatist's persona. The choice of name, Thomas, points to the autobiographical content of Merton's work. Thomas is the innocent, wandering through a world he does not comprehend.

The words of the chorus in Scene one establish the builders' lust for power and the pride they have in themselves together with their contempt for God.

Grow Babylon, grow
Great Babylon touch the stars.
What if the Lord should see you now?
Grow Babylon, grow (CP 250).

The singers foolishly imagine that the God, whom they cannot see, cannot in turn see what they are doing. There is blindness about their desire to replace God with themselves. It is this blindness which causes them to forget the omniscience and omnipotence of their creator.

The Leader, Captain and workers are all identified in this segment as is the watchman in the tower – the archetypal First Testament figure who recognises the coming of Yahweh. Here the watchman can do nothing as God’s action is complete before he can even warn the builders of the great destruction about to happen. The tower’s annihilation is accomplished as all the elements of earth turn in anger at the audacity of humankind’s desire to be as God. The fall of the tower is great and reverberates throughout the world and through the cosmos.

The evil that men and women have sown returns from the desert in the form of a shadow shaped like a clenched fist. This shadow is not so much the wrath of God as their own darkness turned against them. Their rebellion against God has made it possible for Leaders, such as the one portrayed in this scene, to exist. Their evil turns on them. The winds of God named are the symbol of the life-giving Spirit whose power and breadth can move over dry land as well as hover over the chaos.

The scene finishes in a similar way to Part One in “The Oratorio”: the seeds of war are scattered to the ends of the earth (CP 253).

Scene 2– The Trial takes place in an unnamed ruined city. Here human evil dominates and all that is natural is hidden and obscured. The Leader destroys men’s power to think rationally by changing the meaning of words and making even punishment seem a reward for the strange kind of fidelity his followers

have in relation to him. This is a little like the Orwellian world of *1984*. The result is that “Everywhere the great machines of war stand face to face” (CP 25).

The division caused by the division of language images the deeper metaphysical and spiritual divisions erupting. Truth and lies, fidelity and treason, love and hate can no longer be accurately identified. Meaning is lost. The Leader uses the ancient idea of the scapegoat to locate someone or something which can be made to bear the blame of the failure of the tower.

Who has taught these people
The lies they utter?
What enemy has poisoned their minds? (CP 255)

Language becomes the scapegoat for the fiasco. A kangaroo court is established and those who threaten the leader’s power and validity are brought to trial. Towards the end of the trial Merton will introduce the theme of Redemption because this morality is not just re-telling Babel but also narrating God’s plan of redemption as told in the scriptures and carried forward by Christian tradition.

This scene also includes, with some slight alteration, the words of the original “Tower of Babel” relating to language and to machinery.

Professor: history is a dialogue
Between forward and backward
Going inevitably forward by the abuse of thought
And the gradual destruction of intelligence.
Now the function of the word is
To designate: first the machine,
Then what the machine produces,
And finally what the machine destroys.
Words have no other function.
They belong by right to the political process:
Doing, making, destroying. Or rather
Being done, being made, being destroyed.
Such is history (CP 255-56).

The words of the poem here are given additional weight because they are spoken by a professor – symbol of authority and knowledge. In this scene Merton allows the three bastions on which modern society depends for stability – education, law and government – to be the means of betrayal of language which they manipulate for the Leader’s purpose. Each of the institutions is revealed as corrupt and self-seeking. Perhaps a weakness here is that religion is not included in the above group.

The trial the accusations grow more and more hysterical and language loses its meaning and is reduced to propaganda. Silence, which may have served truth, is condemned to die. The scene ends with the all out crucifixion of silence. The crucifixion of silence is the shadow of the crucifixion of the Logos – the Word of God.

By the time Act one finishes it seems that the leader has conquered and defeated God. This was the original idea of the builders of the tower. They did not seek so much to bring God down to human size but to magnify humanity to overshadow the Godhead. Human contingency on a divine being seemed no longer a reality.

Act 2, The City of God, offers a contrast to Act 1. Scene One is one of exile but, there is now a movement towards hope. The contrast between the City of sin and the City of God now begins to be apparent. The earthly city has had its moment in Act one:

Once, there was a city where these marshes are,
Ships at dockside, barrels on the quay,
Children running between the wheels
Watching the foreigner’s sandals
Fearing the unknown words of the men with scars (CP 261).

This city has shown itself to be contemptuous of God and of itself. The Leader has been contemptuous of truth and established his power through illusion. The movement away from self contempt begins as the prophet emerges to speak with Thomas and Raphael: “Do not think the destroyed city is entirely evil. As a

symbol is destroyed to give place to a reality, so the shadow of Babylon will be destroyed to give place to the light which it might have contained” (CP 263). A new creation is beginning. To bring it to fulfilment the prophet must interpret past and present events and reveal the truth suggested by the movement of the stars through time and space. The face of humanity is once again turning towards the true face of God. Creation is unchained and there is promise of a new spring.

The restoration which occurs in Scene Two – “The Exiles”, dramatises the restoration of the correct order of creation. This is the order not simply determined by the stars that is by fate or by the God’s playing dice for the souls of men and women but by the creator at the moment of creation. In this scene, as in the previous scene, there is much reminiscent of T. S. Eliot’s work *Four Quartets*. Merton may have borrowed the idea of the restoration of the pattern of life in the stars as well as the symbolism of the unity of the world seen through dancing and matrimony: “Music and dancing signify that we are one” (CP 267).

The rural scene becomes the sign of restoration and completeness. The city of illusion gives way to the real city where men and women live and eat and celebrate and above all worship. This is the place where God’s messenger can arrive and be welcomed. The watchtower which is established in this scene is unlike the original Babylonian tower. It is the place where the lion of Isaiah can walk and be recognised. The prophet speaks of this transformation and of the complete destruction of Babylon. The worship of this false city: “Wanting to be Gods, they were made less themselves. They might have become gods if they had deigned to remain men.” (270)

The finale of the morality is a celebration of the Incarnation: that dogma of faith which declares that the Son of God is made man. The last words of the play are words of adoration for the Word which restored language and in so doing restored humanity to itself and to God. The use of Latin, by tradition the universal, unchanging language, is symbolic of the restoration of the City of God.

This city is made of living stones, “You and I will live alike/ As a single person” (CP 269). The words of the Apocalypse bring the drama to an end and the Living Word, to which Merton has dedicated his life as poet and contemplative, is the one Word capable of uniting humanity. It is symbolic that the author has the words spoken by everyone on stage:

Lo the Word and the White horse
With eyes of flame to judge and fight
Power and meekness in His hand
Mercy in His look like wine.
He alone can break the seal
And tell conquerors His Name!
ADOREMUS DOMINUM!

Conclusion

This chapter examined the choice Merton made to dramatise his oratorio further. A morality play was a natural genre for a writer to choose who loved the medieval period and wanted to confront and teach certain issues on contemplation and faith. The Middle Ages were a high point in mysticism in the Church’s history.

The next chapter will examine the themes embedded in “A Morality”.

Chapter 16: When the Word of God Will be Planted Among You

Introduction

Merton scholars have paid little attention to the Morality play entitled “The Tower of Babel: A Morality”. The play illustrates the direction and evolution of Merton’s thought and indicates the way Merton confronted some key issues in his life in the 1950s.

Thérèse Lentfoehr, who had access to Merton’s holographic works states that “Tower of Babel: A Morality” was first printed in *Jubilee* October, 1955 (Lentfoehr 35). A copy of Merton’s explanation of the thematic content of the work is included in this thesis as Appendix Two, (Lentfoehr 154-156). Merton’s article was written for the production of the play for *The Catholic Hour* on in that year. He describes the foundational theme of the drama as:

The unity of man in the clarity and truth of Christ, in contrast to the apparent unity of the builders of the tower, which was an illusion, the strength of the tower a shadow. Its fall . . . does not cure man of his illusion. Quite the contrary, by means of lying propaganda and futile philosophies, the illusion is spread further and carried to the end of the earth (Lentfoehr 154).

Lentfoehr also noted that Merton made significant corrections to the first draft particularly to the section adapted from the original poem, “The Political Speech.” That speech was used in various ways in all “The Babel Works”. Commenting on “A Morality” Lentfoehr continues:

Preliminary drafts of the manuscript present interesting textual studies. The 12 holographic pages of the first draft and one typewritten page . . . show much correction and revision.

Perhaps the significance of the above lies in the fact that Merton made few corrections to his work as a rule and that he took the trouble to do so around this work indicates its importance to him.

The second half of *The Strange Islands* (published in 1957) consisted of the text of the morality play. The critics were not appreciative of the poetry and in writing to Mark Van Doran Merton comment on the glibness of his poetry (Labrie 123). At this stage he was moving into an area of social commentary as indicated by poems such as “Exploits of a Machine Age” (SI 18) and “The Guns of Fort Knox” (SI 7). Both these poems and others had themes relating to the “Morality Play”. Merton’s world was widening but it was still limited at this stage to elements which affected the monastery and the activities in the Kentucky area though the wider society was beginning to make an impact on his thinking and writing.

In his work *The Strange Islands* Merton was, according to James Dickey, “betrayed by his own complacency” (Labrie130). Dickey may have meant that Merton’s coupling of social criticism with spirituality and the religious tradition led to an overconfidence and too spiritualistic solutions to both universal and particular problems. To some extent this is true of the final act of both “The Oratorio” and “The Morality”. The original poem, “Tower of Babel”, did not venture too deeply into the Christian story but commented on the problem of technology and language. It left the door open to many possible scenarios. This was not true of “The Oratorio” or “The Morality”.

As previously stated, Labrie reflects that the work under discussion in this chapter could be called a dramatic poem rather than a modern morality play. While this is an insightful comment the work does, however, have typical characteristics of the older morality plays as it represents a religious viewpoint and retells the Hebraic Christian story of redemption. In keeping with the tradition of the morality play Merton’s work also educates in faith as well as providing moral and theological education.. Overall the play argues for contemplation as a solution to the corruption of life and language. Originally morality plays were written in Latin and Merton uses that language to express adoration of the Word in the final scene of the play.

The work is essentially an allegory even though Merton disliked an allegorical interpretation of scripture. The characters, with two exceptions, are aptronyms, that is personified abstractions of virtue and vice. Some though, such as the Captain and the Philosophers are representatives of mainstream social institutions. The only two directly named are Raphael, the traditional guardian spirit, often associated with healing, and Thomas who is the naïve Christian, the doubter. This figure is also Merton's persona. He is the one who walks on the margins, the appropriate place for a monk. The dramatic movement in the play is from Babel to Jerusalem; from the earthly city to the city of God.

Language

Labrie recognises that the basic theme of the play is language and comments that in this work communication is primarily mechanical. The abusive element of such communication is that humanity is also reduced to a receiver of the "backward-forward movement". At best such communication is pragmatic. At worst it is both corrupt and corrupting.

Basically language is reduced to a technology ("Then when the Tower is built, we shall have war" (CP 250) and becomes an instrument of war in the mouth of the Leader, who represents totalitarian dictators throughout the ages and in particular the dictators of the twentieth century. The play is significant regarding Merton's analysis of the disintegration of social interaction as it relates to the disintegration of language and to issues of power and control arising from the lust for political dictatorship. Humanity is reduced to a mechanical cog, easily replaced when it is destroyed or worn out. In an article published in 1967 and entitled "War and the Crisis of Language" Merton situates the modern problem of language:

Long before George Steiner pointed out that the German language was one of the casualties of Nazism and World War II, Brice Parain in France had studied the "word sickness" of 1940, the mortal illness of journalese and political prose that accompanied the collapse of France. In proportion as the country itself accepted the denatured prose of Vichy – in which peace meant aggression and liberty meant oppression – it lost its identity and its capacity for valid action. It succumbed to "a full armed language without practical

applications. " This, Parain reflected, had already happened before, in World War I, when words meant one thing in the trenches and another behind the lines (138).

For Merton the Cartesian mentality and the associated technological prowess, particularly in terms of weapon manufacture, is the disruptive force responsible for this mentality. Merton articulates the need to restore basic understandings and unities lost to life as the silence of the spirit is ignored.

In his work, *The Catholic Imagination*, Labrie also notes that the optimism Merton expressed in "A Morality" and in the Church was abandoned in 1964. Like Daniel Berrigan, social activist and a good friend of Merton, Merton was to say he felt like an alien in the church while still acknowledging the relevance of the institution to the world. He separated himself from the "triumphalist self-deception of Catholic centuries" (Labrie 127). This change in feeling and perspective was only beginning for Merton when he was writing "The Morality".

Heretic Blood

Perhaps the fullest interpretation of Merton's morality play is that presented by Michael Higgins in his work *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton*. The quotation from Blake's "The Four Zoas" is almost a key to Merton's intentions in the "The Tower of Babel: A Morality":

Read my books, explore my constellations

Enquire of my suns and they shall teach thee how to war. (Higgins 120)

It is obvious that Merton has been influenced by Blake. In the chapter on "Urizen: the marginal critic" Higgins writes of "Merton's theory of the disassociation of language from its transcendent source" (Higgins 133.) This theory underpins the morality. The morality is about the journey of language *from* its original source and *back* to that source. In Christian terms the disassociation is a metaphor for sin and for the fall from grace as well as the cycle of redemption which restored order to the universe.

Merton will pose moral and theological questions as the drama proceeds. This is in keeping with the didactic nature of such works. Thomas's first question "Ought we join" (CP 248) is the question which sets the whole tone for the play. It is not simply a question of social cohesion but one that begins to look at the problem of community which is behind the oppressive structures of language. Merton is interested in "communion", a deeper dimension of social being than community. Joining is a choice and thus Merton also sets the play in the realm of free will and focuses on the *being* of humanity which must open to the Being of God. This is a unity beyond belief, beyond speech and certainly beyond action. From the outset then Merton incorporates contemplation into the dramatic structure of the play.

A Moral Issue

Because this is a Morality the idea of contemplation as a choice made by humans in response to the invitation of God becomes a moral issue. The issue is explored through Thomas's growing understanding of the implications of Babel regarding the God-human relationship.

Merton's alienation is felt on a communal level because of his relationship with Gethsemani. The issues in Merton's creative work are here paralleled by the issues confronting Merton in his monastic life. This is due partly to Abbot James Fox's mechanisation of the community work and the seeming reduction of the monks to cogs in the machine. Merton is alienated from the noise and the soulless nature of the enterprise. The two archetypes of monk and poet meet in him at the level of marginalisation. In time he will come to realise both are necessary for redemption.

In 1968 in a talk given in Calcutta in October Merton describes his understanding of the monk:

In speaking for monks I am really speaking for a very strange kind of person, a marginal person, because the monk in the modern world is no

longer an established person with an established place in society (Merton AJ 305).

In relation to the role of the poet Michael Mott, Merton's official biographer, quoting Merton writes:

All really valid poetry (poetry that is fully alive and asserts its reality by its power to generate imaginative life) is a kind of recovery of paradise. Not that the poet comes up with a report that he, an unusual man, has found his wayback into Eden: but the living line, the generative association, the new sound, the music, the structure, are somehow grounded in a renewal of vision and hearing so that he who reads and understands recognises that there is a new start, a new creation. Here the world gets another chance. Here man, the reader discovers himself getting another start in life, in hope, in imagination and why? Hard to say, but probably because the language itself is getting another chance, through the innocence, the teaching, the good faith, the honest senses of the workman poet (Mott 478).

The poet is the opposite of the insensate man of "The Oratorio" and "The Morality". And both, the poet and the monk, in different ways, walk the margins of the world.

As the one who moves on the margins, Thomas, the questioner, is the archetypal figure who doubts himself and his society as well as his place in the community. The writer also doubts the larger society beyond Gethsemani and will eventually come to re-examine his own community in the light of his understanding of "monk" and the monastic calling. Merton explores some of the answers to the questions he postulates in the drama as he allows his protagonists to move through the-various levels of self idolatry, rebellion and corruption in the drama.

Conclusion

Chapter Seventeen will begin to examine the thematic content of "The Morality". The major theme in "A Morality" is, of course, language. But this theme is linked to Technology, war and peace identity and contemplation. All themes will be treated in relation to the dominant theme of language.

Chapter 17: We Can Quickly Learn Their Language

Language and “The Tower of Babel: A Morality.”

Act One: Scene One – The Legend of the Tower

The Symbolism of the Tower

The tower is the symbol of human pride and imagined self-sufficiency without God. Merton writes that the building of the tower “is man’s worship of his own technological skill, of his own wealth, his own ambitions, his own power to crush other men and make them his slaves. The building of the Tower of Babel is man’s construction of himself as a god. This is the illusion which lies at the root of all the evils of our time.” (Lentfoehr 154)

Questions

“A Morality” is introduced by Thomas and Raphael. Thomas is Everyman and also every Christian. He is the doubter, the pilgrim, accompanied by Raphael, the guardian spirit, who has knowledge beyond that of the ordinary Christian. It is as though monk and poet journey as two separate human beings. Thomas, the outside, is the marginal one, the monk. Raphael, the guardian spirit, becomes Merton’s *alter ego*, the poet characterised by imagination and wisdom. Raphael is also prophet whose knowledge is needed if Thomas is to know his identity and understand the society he observes from the margins. In this way he does not conflict with the role of the character identified as Prophet in the final section of the drama. Raphael interprets reality for Thomas. The character, “Prophet”, laments the past and hungers for a new future.

Walter Brueggemann in his work *The Prophetic Imagination* suggests that the prophet has two functions. The first voice critiques and embraces pathos. It seems that the character labelled “prophet” in the morality play has this role. The second role is to interpret reality and energises the new. Raphael carries this function. In the final scene the three voices, Raphael, Prophet and Thomas, will eventually interact together to voice the praise of the redemption completed by the Word, the Logos.

Thomas's first question is a moral question and relates to language, sin and community, the major issues of the drama:

Ought we, Raphael, to join
The builders of this city
We can quickly learn
Their language and their ambitions (CP 248)

Merton deliberately juxtaposes the words "language" and "ambition" and in turn links them semantically with the words "we", "join" and "builders of this city." In this way he introduces the thematic content of the drama – language, action and rebellion, true and false community and the vice that led to the rebellion of humanity against the creator. The act of building in this context is a caricature of creation. It is motivated by the egoism of the builders as well as their ignorance of the true nature of God and of what constitutes a genuine relationship between men and women and the God of creation. The builders exist in a moral and intellectual vacuum which waits to be filled. These people are controlled by the one designated simply, the Leader. "The Oratorio" made very clear that the Babylonian king, the Leader, was the "Father of Lies". The Leader has the same role in the morality play.

There is no way the builders of this earthly city can supplant Being yet that is what the Leader, his followers and those under his domination attempt to do.

The Tower is nearly finished.
It is the greatest of all Towers, in fact
It is the only perfect and eternal Tower. There has never been
Never will be another such Tower.
The Tower is inviolable. (CP 250)

The Leader's arrogance is startling and lacks perspective of himself and his relationship to God. The builders are subject to his rationalisation and self-idolatry and, because of this, they, too, have lost perspective. They believe God has no choice but to do as they say now they have constructed this "inviolable" tower. They demand God meet them as an equal. It is again the story of

Prometheus stealing the gift God would gladly give to them. In the Christian story the Logos spoke to enable human beings to become the sons and daughters of God. Thomas avoids being entrapped by these same arrogant illusions because of Raphael who has both wisdom and imagination. He is the guardian spirit *par excellence*.

At one level beyond language, perhaps, the builders realise the impossibility of achieving equality and the tower represents the failure of their rebellion. Pride leads them, then, to manipulate language so that it appears that this failure is, in fact, a success:

First Builder: What is this thing called war which has been promised us as our reward for finishing the tower?

Second Builder: It is another work invented by the Leader, more glorious than this one as well as more exciting. (CP 252)

War is anything but a reward and brings with it not the promise of life and prestige but death and corruption. Human life is devalued in every way and silence is lost when killing each other is viewed as a reward. A moral truth is lost in the quagmire of ambition and arrogance.

Babylon is the prototype of all powerful and degenerate cities and thus of Augustine's earthly city: a place where stillness and silence is lost. Cities are places where, as Gerald Manley Hopkins says, "Nor can foot feel being shod". (*God's Grandeur*) Cities are the places of the insensate man and woman, whom Merton will later label as exiles. Community is difficult in such places; communion impossible. Cities, for Merton, create an inability to feel human unity with creation; an inability to know the creative force and not confuse it with technological power and scientific expertise. Thomas, the pilgrim, comes slowly to understand that what looks like unity is often only an imitation:

Thomas: But surely they love one another! Otherwise how could they unite in a common endeavour? Surely, they are united, and their union has brought them success?

Raphael: No, they have only united in their common, though hidden desire to fail. Their ambition is only the occasion for a

failure they certainly seek. But that requires their failure come upon them, as it were, out of the stars. They want to blame their ruin on fate, and still have the satisfaction of ruining themselves (CP 251).

Raphael is the link between the material and spiritual world. He can enlighten the naïve Thomas as to what lies beneath appearance as he does in the above quote. Raphael is the image of the true prophet; the one who interprets reality. He articulates the word Thomas must hear as he stands on the margin. When Thomas does rejoin society he will join it as one who hears the Word of God “coming from afar” (CP 262). Thomas will be the contemplative who will understand silence and be able to use speech wisely. He will have learnt to recognise truth and not be drawn in by the illusion of unity as he was when he first approached Babel.

Raphael speaks of belief and unbelief, distinguishing clearly between the two.

Raphael: Instead of believing in themselves they seek to convince themselves by their activity, that they exist (CP 251)

The Leader, on the other hand, speaks to the community with false promises. His belief is only in himself and he has identified with Babylon. When Babylon fell so did the Leader fall from his Tower. In anger he uses language to draw all men into servitude to him:

Leader: Now we must settle the question of guilt.
The Tower fell. Babylon was dishonoured. (CP 254)

The Leader identifies with the Tower and his words are about himself as much as about the construction. His words breed fear and mistrust. He uses the tentativeness, the naivety and uncertainty of men and women like Thomas to fuel his drive for power. His word is false but he weaves his illusions in a masterful way:

The Tower is inviolable. It will
Be attacked by invisible powers
From above and from below by agents of social corruption
(CP 250)

The *claritas*, that great Scholastic term for the beauty and intelligence of true speech of the City of God, is usurped by the lie. The Leader claims for the Tower, and for himself, because he is identified with the Tower, two qualities which belong to God: perfection and immortality. Out of this comes another promise already embedded in the language of the lie: the promise of war:

Then when the tower is built
We will have war . . . soon you will
Taste the excitement of war (CP 250)

The insensate one, that is, the unfeeling human, will be given back the power to taste, feel, hear and so on. Only this time the senses will be corrupt by the corrupt mind of the Leader. The Leader destroys the power of the poet to wake the subconscious to something new. His words are words of death. He arouses the excitement of the people but at the same time takes away their ability to judge, think and act for themselves. The result is the production of robots: Merton in “A Responsory” uses the term *zombies* to describe the same phenomenon. These are people who respond without thought because language, as used by the institutions, corporations and political leaders has confused and bewildered them. The Leader at Babel, even when the Tower is destroyed, achieves what the Orwellian prophecy has foretold. People are moved to a state of mindless conformity and uniformity. This is the one voice, one mind of Babel. In fact, as Merton, also says through Raphael, in this context, “activity is their substitute for faith” (CP 251). The Babylonian’s failure is one of belief and understanding:

They think they speak the same
Language, that they are of one
Mind.

Presently
We shall discover that they are
Only of one voice. Many minds,

Many thoughts, signifying nothing.
Many words, many plans
Without purpose. (CP 249)

This unity is a mockery of the unity of the City of God. The builders' belief in the Tower has no foundation in a reality, especially a spiritual reality. Their Tower is a tower of unbelief.

Belief

Thomas poses not only a moral question but a theological one when he asks Raphael, "What have they failed to believe in?" By asking this question Merton continues the second task of the Morality which is the teaching of faith. Raphael's response moves the question and answer into the realm of being, of existence. He at least gives the listener a sense of such essence. The builders of Babel for all their egoism and their ambition have

1. No belief in themselves
2. No belief in God
3. No belief in unity.

Raphael spells this out:

First, they do not believe in themselves, and because of this they do not believe in God. Because they do not believe in themselves or in God, they cannot believe in unity. Consequently they cannot be united. Therefore they cannot finish the tower they imagine they are building (CP 251)

Raphael focuses on the question of identity. Who are we? These are a people who have no God and no identity because they have lost their way. They are the exiles who have no place to call home. They have no standard against which to feel their existence and their reality. The heavens, the place where God exists, at least gave them a sense and knowledge of who they were in relation to God but in trying to be equal to God they lost their measuring gauge.

Raphael is not simply talking about life when he speaks of the lack of awareness of their existence. Action tells these builders they are alive. Existence is on a

different plane. Existence implies wholeness and an awareness of where you have come from and where you are going. Existence as defined by Merton in this drama implies a contemplative stance in life.

Those who constructed the Tower only know they exist by pitting themselves against an adversary. The deeper the thirst for such knowledge the more powerful must be the adversary. What greater antagonist is there than God and so God, as they understand God, becomes the opponent of the citizens of Babel. This God is indestructible. His being is incomprehensible to them and against such a God their demands can only fail. It seems then that failure is the real ambition of these people as Raphael has said. By this time, failure is the only reality of their existence which they can sense and therefore experience.

The One Word

The inhabitants of Babel cannot believe in a compassionate God because by their actions and beliefs they have cast God in their own image. God is truth and, in Merton's terms, "mercy within mercy within mercy" (SJ 362). The Leader is the direct opposite to mercy and the Babylonians are being formed in his image. They no longer experience compassion and cannot give it. Their words have lost meaning. In that void the one word which does have meaning is the word the Leader wishes to have in relation to them and that word is fear:

. . .the one word which strikes
At the heart of creation and dissolves
It into its original nothingness (CP 252)

These people cannot enter the void and darkness of contemplation because the void they experience is that of their own unmaking, of their own nothingness and that, as merton says, is intolerable. It is only by the appearance of the Logos that experience of peace and the language of the Logos will be the language of God: *Claritas*. This is the language of mysticism.

Claritas is a scholastic term. Michael Higgins comments that *claritas* implies essential beauty as well as intelligibility. Blake always insisted upon this

when he defended imagination against scientific reason. *Claritas* is, therefore, the language of the poet. Reason and logic only give an approximate understanding. The poetic instinct, akin to mysticism lifts “things” from the barren chaos of nature into the created order of thought “ (Higgins 124-125). Higgins continues:

In poetic intuition objective reality and subjectivity, the world and the whole of the soul, coexist inseparably. At that moment sense and sensation are brought back to the heart, blood to the spirit, passion to intuition (Higgins 126)

To “denature” language is to take the experience out of language and therefore ask the impossible of communication. The first builder’s comment: I believe in work without food and sleep/ Although it is not yet possible (CP 249) is to wipe out logic completely. Experience shows how impossible it is to do without food or sleep. The speaker satirises the impossibility of such a lifestyle – inhuman and suicidal. The impulse towards such an ambition is as insane as challenging the power of God with human strength and arrogance. The builder himself can hear the insane component of his comment and yet struggles to maintain his belief in the Leader’s words. The inability and refusal to let go of the lie maintains the totalitarian system.

On another level the builder’s comment may also be an implicit wake-up call to Merton’s own institution. Gethsemani was taking on American corporate and cultural values in the name of efficiency and by establishing a business was in danger of overlooking the essential experience of a monk: the contemplative experience. As well it is a wake-up call to Merton himself whose commitment to writing and lecturing projects were taking over his contemplative thought.

Claritas is the language of love. Raphael reveals the problem of existence, of experience and of unity is finally the problem of the denial of love:

Because if he does not exist, then they do not have to be troubled with the problem of their own existence either. For if they admit they exist they will have to love one another, and this they find insupportable. (CP 251)

A quantum leap would be necessary to believe in a God who was a God of love and who was not an oppressive tyrant because such a God was outside the Babylonian experience.

The Leader, like all totalitarian dictators, offers those he oppresses only an experience of war. In mockery he invites the builders to be participants in their own oppression:

First Builder: What is this thing called war which has been promised us as our reward for finishing the tower?

Second Builder: It is another work invented by the Leader more glorious than this one as well as more exciting (CP 252)

War is the Leviathan. It is the monster rising from the depths of the subconscious, buried beneath the sands of chaos but always present. In some ways war is a mockery of God's anger apparently possessing the power of God but it is the shadow of God's anger, in that war can only bring death. God's power is over life and death. The threatening fist rising from the desert, in Act 1, scene 1, rises from the wilderness – the place where God is not:

Thomas: O Raphael, that cloud first came up out of the desert no bigger than a man's fist. Then at once it stood over the tower, like a man's arms. Then suddenly the burly dark filled the whole sky. Can you still hear me in this wind? (CP 252-253)

In Jungian terms the images in the above quote is the shadow as well as the projection of Babylonian's evil onto God. God's true reaction to their pride and idolatry is to send the Logos, God's own Word, to speak the language of God's truth and mercy:

Christ's mercy heals the regions of the mind.

Blessed by him our acts are free.

Heard by Him

Our silences bear fruit. All our words become true (CP 266)

The Fall of the Tower

Given the above it is inevitable that the Tower will collapse as all constructs, spiritual, material or other must fall if their foundation is an illusion. Merton writes:

That falsity must inevitably break through, and the world of illusion must collapse. Meanwhile in order to preserve the illusion, three great means are used: a frantic activism, the domination of the masses by fear and ultimately the use of violence in war. All these means must fail. The structure must fall to the ground. (Lentfoehr 155)

The fall of the Tower has implications for all ages. Merton suggests that there is no place to hide from this fall and that all institutions will feel that impact:

Hide us from the fall, hide us from the fall!
Hide us in the catacomb, hide us in the well!
Hide us in the ground, hide us from the sky!
Hide us from the Tower's fall! (CP 253)

While catacombs may relate to the burial places of many ancient cities, such as Alexandria, the word brings to mind the Christian meeting places in ancient Rome. The word *catacombs*, therefore, implies that the church is directly implicated in the fall of the tower as much as other institutions. There is no place to hide from the results of this fall because Merton is not speaking about physical collapse like the destruction of the Lighthouse of Alexandria. This Tower is “not a building but an influence, a mentality, an invisible power” (CP 260). That comment implies that all the institutions within a city are similar to those of the fallen city. In such a world there is no way to hide from the corruption and oppression flowing from the mentality of Babylon.

In Scene One all human beings are invited to assume a moral and theological responsibility for the release of “Babylon’s poison” and for its spread throughout the world. In some ways Merton’s social critique was overdramatic and this arose out of the context of post world-war, pre cold war, his own experiences in religious life and

the divisions he experienced within himself. He understood a divided world from such experiences. Later he was to temper his social criticism and at the same time to make it more focussed and sharper. Merton realised he was a marginal person, but he also realised that he, too, was a guilty bystander: (The phrase became the title of a book he wrote). Through his writings, Merton also realised, he could assume some responsibility for shaping and directing the world towards a recovery of truth and of the integrity of language.

Part One: Scene Two

The Trial

The Trial which constitutes Scene Two of *The Morality* focuses dramatically on the appropriation of language by the representatives of the totalitarian state and the human institutions which absorb and oppress humanity, with humanity's tacit permission. Without God a leader has to be sought elsewhere irrespective of the truth or falsehood, the inauthenticity or validity of the leader's claims and promises.

The Leader of the "mammoth state", as Higgins, quoting Jung, indicates, uses the mechanism of the word as a means of control:

[We see this happen when] belief in the word becomes credulity, and the word itself an infernal slogan capable of any deception. With credulity comes propaganda and advertising to dupe the citizen with political jobbery and compromises, and the lie reaches proportions never known before in the history of the world. Thus, the word, originally announcing the unity of all has in our day become the source of suspicion and distrust against all. (Higgins 146)

Thus the scene opens with the words:

Raphael: Everywhere the great machines of war
Stand face to face. The hunters in the sky
Bargain with life and death.
Babylon, like a great star wandering from its orbit,
Unsettles the universe, dragging nations down into chaos (CP 254)

Again the state is not a physical place but a condition of being, of restlessness and hate that pervades the universe. This is so because “a renegade authority . . . has arrogated to itself the power of the word and severed the world’s link with transcendence” (Higgins 146).

Setting

The city of this setting is a non-city. At the same time it is every city past and present and to come:

Once there was a city where these marshes are . . .
Now all is sand and grass and water
Where the rank marsh draws down one crooked gull (CP 261)

For Merton, as Labrie observes, “New York was the city, the archetype of the modern city, for better or for worse. Merton’s poems about cities such as ‘Song of Not Much praise for New York’ and others contain a loose collage, a heady synthesis of biblical and secular images punctuated by a vision of the fall of New York – the modern Babylon” (Labrie 120). Merton later claimed New York as his city and came to realise he loved it. Having lived there and attended university in that city he had a right to claim it as his own. But he also claimed Louisville, a city on a much smaller scale, as his city because of its proximity to Gethsemani. When he went into a city Merton went to Louisville. There is an ambivalence in Merton’s feelings about real cities but he was never ambivalent about the city that was the state of mind of modern society. The latter was the place of rebellion and the internalised earthly city of Augustine. That was the city where language became so sophisticated it lost its meaning and it was the place in need of redemption.

It is possible that New York served as model for the decaying city centre which served as seat of judgement in the trial scene. In that centre:

Ordinary modes of communication had broken down into banality and deception . . . violence has gradually come to take the place of other, more polite communications. Where there is such a flood of words that all words are unsure, it becomes necessary to make one’s meaning clear with blows (Zen 138)

And again

The incoherence of language that cannot be trusted and the coherence of weapons that are infallible or thought to be: this is the dialectics of politics and war in the twentieth century. (Zen 138)

The leader

The problem of Babel is not so much the problem of tongues but the problem of pride. The two are connected and Merton agrees that the “denaturing” of language arose out of pride and the resultant lust for power. It is the Leader who personifies power, pride and control. The Leader’s faith is not even so much in the weapons he possesses or in his military might but in his sense of himself as infallible. This is the matrix out of which all tyrannies emerge. This Leader re-defines reality and re-shapes it in his own image. To do this he uses the denatured prose of Vichy: “In which peace meant aggression and liberty meant oppression.” (Zen 138) The same treatment of language is portrayed by Orwell in 1984 with his house of love, a euphemism for a place of torture. It is the same sadism in the sign above the Nazi concentration camps that promised life and gave death. In such situations language loses its identity and its capacity for valid action. Falsehood’s interpretation of language during the trial reiterates this:

I will give you the only words that will serve your purpose . . . Your city is made in my image and likeness. I penetrate reality by destroying it. Those who follow me will be split in half and each one, instead of being one man, will become two angels. If you follow me and listen to my words, you will find this out for yourself (CP 260).

Humanity’s deepest longings for peace are drowned out by the malevolent voice of the Leader which channels all experience and all knowledge:

For peace
Peace is this: only a giant voice.
There shall be one Babylon, fearing the creator.
There shall be one Babylon, hating itself (CP 254).

This is a vision of Hell.

For Merton the only way that truth can be sustained in an oppressive situation is through the Logos. This is the way of non-speech, of contemplation. It is the place where humanity is silent before the silence of God. This silence is full of the awareness of the other and is the direct immersion in mystical love. Understanding beyond images and concepts cannot be tampered with in any way and can maintain an integrity beyond the power of the spoken word: “The very nature of language is to bear witness to objective truth: and this objective truth is the enemy of great illusion: (Lentfoehr 155).

The Leader’s aim is work; this could be translated euphemistically as servitude. Those whom the Leader enslaves have speech taken from them. In Merton’s thinking the absence of speech is not the same as silence and the trial at which the Leader presides emphasises that. The absence of speech implies an animal muteness before powers the oppressed cannot comprehend. There is a mindlessness here which makes the Leader’s powers possible. Through his words hatred and fear are turned inwards as the Leader seeks a scapegoat to blame for the fall of the Tower in each age.

Hitler crying over the slaughter he instigated in Poland is an example of such scapegoating in our time. Merton chronicles Hitler’s words to the Polish people: How wicked you must have been to have me do this to you. Compassion and mercy are negated and the qualities which shape humanity in the divine image are lost. Words which once “contained the silences beyond the stars” (CP 262) are betrayed.

Treason

The trial is motivated by betrayal. It foreshadows the trial of Christ where false witnesses are brought forward to condemn the innocent. Such a trial is the reversal of the Truth Manifestos held in South Africa. Language is the innocent quarry. The trial extends the condemnation of language found in “A Responsory” and in “The Oratorio”. In this scene Merton elaborates the arguments against the forms of language which still retain their integrity. His own approach is to establish a dialectic between these forms and the elements of society which work together to establish their power base.

The military establish control of the broken city –“Hell’s Angels” are released. Their song is about power and the magical portents sustaining that power. The Zodiac writes in the heavens the names of the different conquerors holding sway over time and space. The movement of the stars reveal the insubstantiality of their power. Their claim to be immortal is revealed as a sham. Life and leaders perish. This Leader, in his turn, betrays his people:

Now we must settle the question of guilt.

The Tower fell. Babylon was dishonoured.
Our armies though everywhere victorious
Are full of traitors. Sabotage
Halts the production of new weapons.
Who is responsible? (CP 252)

The “lie”, the fundamental nature of treason, is present in every word the Leader utters. The use of “we”, for example, is the royal substitution for “I” but like all such substitutions rarely means what it says. The speaker is not one whose identity is tied up with the people’s identity. It is not the voice of the Christ identifying with the suffering: “Whatsoever you do to the least of my people you do to me.” The use of the plural by the Leader is ominous. This is the betrayer who will find a place or person on which to project the guilt of Babel. This is the voice of anti-mysticism. The word “we” is the sign of power over the other and the abrogation of the power of judgement which belongs to God or to the one God has appointed as judge.

Raphael has already spoken of humanity’s subconscious desire to fail. The Leader’s explanation of that failure is sabotage. Not the inner sabotage of the person in conflict but the sabotage of those who want to overthrow the despot and the tyranny of word and weapon established by him. Sabotage explains the failure of technology and of war. In keeping with the technological view of society language will also be viewed by the Leader as a technology:

Each word becomes an instrument of war. Words of the wheels and machines. Steel words stronger than flesh or spirit. Secret words which

divide the essence of things. Last of all the one word which strikes at the heart of creation and dissolves it into its original nothingness (CP 252)

Words are to be handled as weapons. They are made of steel, creating division and measuring life to its last millimetre.

Through them the Leader will manipulate propaganda and falsehood spreading the seeds of deceit. This denigration of language condemns humanity to a mental illness that, as Merton expresses in his essay “War and the Crisis of Language”, is “a deadly contamination of reason and speech by the inherent ambiguity of war.” (Merton 142). Perhaps in this trial the Leader is the personification of war, one of the riders of the Apocalypse. He is certainly acclaimed as a deity, albeit a false one, as the judgement begins:

Silence! Traitors, salute the Leader.
He brings you life, salvation,
Prosperity, peace. Can you not see that despair
Unhappiness will presently cease to exist. (CP 255)

Language itself is first brought to trial and words found to be in “league with sense and order and even silence. Words are in the pay of thought and of communication.” The sane foundations of human communication are undermined as the trial proceeds. Language becomes a technology – something that has the power to function mechanically. There is no possibility of forming new ideas or creating new ways of living or of human interaction. Language is to be seen as simply a reaction to pushing a button. Language is defined in terms of production and what is produced is simply what is fed into the machine producing words. While language is ostensibly on trial it is the philosophical and theological definition of a human being which is questioned. The ‘being done, being made, being destroyed’ (CP 21) is the cynical and malevolent summation of life, and if the *being* is understood as essence, then it is also God whom they are attempting to destroy as the high priest attempted to silence Christ for ever.

Witnesses

The witnesses at the trial are also tools in this process of redefining a human being. They react to the Leader in the same way the machine reacts to its operator.

The first witness, the professor, and similarly other witnesses such as Law, create the illusion and repeat the argument Merton used in his previous works regarding the revision of history. Such revisionism was a technique certainly used by the Japanese government and by many nations including Australia and the United States today. The truth is that words do not create history but narrate the experience and perhaps interpret it correctly if used with integrity. They allow future generations to build on what has passed so that they can define their future. The Professor destroys the integrity of the historical moment. Both Law and Philosophy work together also to destroy language, the enemy of “the Mammoth State”. In so doing they destroy their intellectual capacity to understand truth and the reputation of academia to be a valid interpreter of truth:

Words create reality as fast as they are eaten by it
And they destroy reality as fast as they themselves
Come back to life, out of the minds of men.
This is the movement of history:
The backward, forward working of the web,
The plunge forward into the web,
The struggle backward, but not out of the web (CP 256-257).

Merton’s image of the web captures the stickiness and entrapment arising from the tangle of lies and hypocrisy begun by the professor in response to the Leader. This image provides a visual understanding of those who are drawn into complicity with the consciousness and subconscious elements of destruction set in motion by the Leader.

In this trial the condemnation of language is, as has been said, a condemnation of Truth, of God, of Logos. In saving propaganda and the total condemnation the judges condemn themselves by disassociating from truth and preserving its illusions around the Leader and the power of war. Babylon continues to stand against God even though it has experienced the power of God in its own shadow rising from the wilderness. This shadow hovers over time and space in the form of falsehood who claims:

The Tower is a spiritual reality and so am I. the Tower is everywhere. What you call the fall of the Tower was only its beginning, its passage into a new more active phase of existence. The tower is not a building but an influence, a mentality, an invisible power. The Tower stands and I am the King who lives on the summit of the Tower. And because I am everywhere, everywhere is the Tower of Babel. (CP 260)

Merton speaks of the concentration camps in similar terms to the way he speaks of falsehood and propaganda when he writes to Czeslaw Milosz. In the above Silence is crucified for the good of the Leader yet in the crucifixion of Silence all those who believe in truth are also crucified:

Actually it is God Himself who is in the concentration camp, that is, of course, it is Christ. Not in the collective sense but especially in the defilement and destruction of each individual soul there is the renewal of crucifixion (Mott 358).

At the end of the first act the authority of Falsehood (and propaganda) is established and Silence, who is not even brought to trial, is sentenced to execution. In this way the men of Babel seek to destroy all meaning. The music then signals the all-out crucifixion of Silence.

Chapter 18: Thy Words Are True

Part Two: Scenes One and Two.

In Part One, Scene Two of “A Morality”, The Trial, the judgement of language is farcical. Technology and war have destroyed the language of the heart which is the language of the spirit. And, as Merton argued, continued to do so in the 1950s:

The most unique and disturbing feature of this spiritual degeneration is that it finds itself armed with a colossal will-to-power and with almost unlimited facilities for implementing its brutal aspirations. Thus twentieth century man who mistakenly imagines himself to be standing on a peak of civilised development (since he confuses technology with civilisation) does not realise that he has in reality reached a critical point of moral and spiritual disorganisation. He is a savage armed not with a club or a spear but with the most sophisticated arsenal of diabolical engines, to which new inventions are added every week (*Stone LL 54*).

Part Two of “A Morality” heralds a change from the apocalyptic prophecy of disaster. Mercy and *claritas* begin to penetrate the poison of the world’s Babylons:

In the last days the Word, wise without omen, strong without armies, will come to the crossroads of the broken universe. The Truth will speak to the dead. Then God will awaken them from oblivion with His Word, and they shall sit up in their tombs, and look upon the Word Whom they have slain, and recognise His eyes like wine (*Merton CP 263*).

Resurrection is named as a reality and Merton propels the Christian story through crucifixion and resurrection to the rebirth of Pentecost. The Babylonian spirit was symbolised by water in Part One. The use of the word *poison* implies this water, is contaminated and, the emergence of the marshes in Part Two, Scene One strengthens the idea of contamination. By analogy, Yeats’ “ceremony of innocence”, baptism, is also contaminated yet the moment comes in that ceremony when the Babylonian spirit is “boiled away.” Boiling is

believed to remove impurities and so the balance in nature and society begins to be restored once the impurity of Babylon is dissolved. Nature itself revolted against the Babylonian rebellion: “Wind with a thousand fingers”, “The burly fist”. “The darkness”, all tell of the purgation of the city. Now is the time of the city of light – the heavenly city.

There is much in Part Two of “A Morality” which recalls “The Oratorio”. Merton, in the notes he wrote for the play points out that the tone of this section has changed as the tone of the final section of “The Oratorio” changed. It is now “lyrical and reflective.” (Lentfoehr *WS* 155) The setting in Scene One of this section is the same as in Part Four of “The Oratorio”, a ruined city. In this case it is a buried city not just one ruined yet visible.

Both the First and Second Testament imbue Part Two of the drama. Isaiah and the Psalms dominate until they are replaced by the Prologue to St. John’s Gospel in the final section. As the Word is realised false prophecy weakens. The Word is without omen, yet Babylon still seeks to show its power over heaven and earth, over time. This is the power that in the Jewish and Christian theological worlds belongs to God.

God’s time is now, is *Kairos* and the cycle of time moves as God wills. As Merton moves the drama through the Christian Redemption story he aims to show that God’s time is cyclic and divisions no longer exist in time or elsewhere. This was the beginning of an understanding of contemplation of which he was to write more fully at a later date:

The contemplative life is primarily a life of *unity*. A contemplative is one who has transcended divisions to reach a unity beyond division. It is true that he must begin by separating himself from the ordinary activities of men to some extent. He must recollect himself, turn within, in order to find the inner center of spiritual activity which remains inaccessible as long as he is immersed in the exterior business of life (Merton *IE* 147).

And again:

From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians. If we want to bring together what is divided we cannot do so by imposing one division upon the other or absorbing the one division into another . . .we must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ (*Chuang Tzu* 21).

This scene parallels the emptiness of the world after the crucifixion. It is the time when Hell appears to triumph. Christ is buried and has descended “into Hell”. There is a void, a space before God’s intervention in the world’s history. A tomb, a wasted city, a place of death, “speeches which have ended in exhaustion”, against all odds, will produce new life. Even though:

Words were poured over us like water.
Sentences ran down our necks
Like sand, Sand and water,
Good and evil, truth and lies
All were the same (*CP* 263-4).

The moment of making distinctions and of understanding the nuances of life has arrived. When the Logos comes at this moment of resurrection then language, too, will be reborn and will know rebirth.

The Christ, the Logos, is the Truth of God. For Merton this is the only channel through which humanity will recognise the speech of God. Patrick O’Connell, in an unpublished paper, notes that when language is restored to its true purpose it “supports the community that arises out of primordial silence. Language and silence are affirmed to be complementary.” (O’Connell, *MS* 4). Both lead towards the fullness of unity which is the fullness of Truth and which Merton names as contemplation.

The Setting

The setting of the first scene in Part Two is on the marshy edges of a river. Here there are only memories of a long buried city. But this city flourishes in the subterranean world and also exists as vestigial traces in the human subconscious. While the surface activity of the city has disappeared there is still agitation and movement in the stars as they mark the passage of time:

The stars pursue their prey.
Across the edge of the sky
Time moves east and west
Covering the land with light and darkness,
Life and death, truth and illusion.

The hills stand where they were before,
The stars pass by (*CP* 261).

The discovery made by the ships moving in every direction is that the old poisons, the old terrors exist beneath the crust and below the oceans. There is always the threat of hell breaking loose unless the Word of God comes to heal and fill the emptiness:

Thomas: there is
Neither cursing, nor praying, nor dancing
Neither living nor dying, buying nor selling
No more traffic on the waterfront
No more pianos in the cabaret.
Prophet: The city under the sand
Lives everywhere. It is not a buried city (*CP* 261).

Thomas's words bring the effects of Babylon into the present with his talk of pianos and cabaret. The poison of Babylon travels across many centuries and seas.

The Zodiac

In his work, *Bread in the Wilderness*, Merton speaks of types and antitypes in scripture... *Type* was the theological term Merton used for a special manifestation of God and of “His continuous providential intervention in history”. Type is the symbol of the antitype which is the reality. The symbols Merton uses in this section of “A Morality”, such as the Zodiac, are types, that is, symbols of this presence of God. For Merton “universal cosmic symbols repeat themselves over and over with the seasons”. They reflect the action of God like the light of the sun on the vast sea of creation . . . cosmic symbolism is like clouds and rain but typology is like a storm of lightning wounding the earth unpredictably with fire from heaven” (*BIW* 58). Such is the zodiac.

The Quatrains

The six quatrains which celebrate the power of the Zodiac intersperse the prose-like passages spoken by Raphael and the Prophet in Part Two, Scene One. They are integral to the dramatic movement and structure of this part of the drama. They form what is essentially a theological discourse between the Prophet and Raphael. Thomas, later in the drama, will also speak with an authoritative theological voice drawing images from the Christian tradition, for example, the mirror, with its strong Pauline overtones and with its hint of the images used in Zen Buddhism. The mirror image of God has been shattered, not simply broken. That sign must be re-constructed so that the city, the person, the word may reflect God’s Truth once again:

Prophet: Men were made to be the mirror of God. They were meant to be one mirror filled with His one light. When will the pieces be brought together again, and receive the divine image (*CP* 262).

The false interpretation of the Zodiac’s light must be replaced by a different understanding. The quatrains are the tools Merton uses to illustrate this transformation. The quatrains appear with slight variations in both “A Responsory” and “The Oratorio”. In “A Morality” they are chanted by children rather than by a chorus.

The first quatrain in “A Responsory” reads as follows:

Washed in winter’s rivers
Ancient seasons come
Cancer and Orion,
The Bear and Capricorn (*CP* 262).

This quatrain has the same positioning in the series in all three works. The second line of the above, however, varies in “A Morality” and “The Oratorio”. In the later version it reads, “Warlike seasons come.” This is in keeping with the development of the theme of language and its association with war and technology which becomes more dominant in the later works. In the two earlier works this quatrain is sung by the chorus, whose function is commentary on the heavens and their interaction with earth. In “A Morality” it is children who chant all the quatrains so that they become a kind of singing game forming the background to the other speeches. Children reflect new life, hope and innocence. They highlight the lyrical sense of spring as the constellations proper to that season in the northern hemisphere appear.

The second quatrain reads as follows:

Washed in silent streams
The Lion and the Twins
Come crowned with diadems
With weapons in their hands (*CP* 262).

This is the time of winter when ice crowns the world and powerful weapons threaten the universe.

This verse appears as the number two quatrain in all three works whereas the third quatrain in “A Responsory” becomes the sixth in both “The Oratorio” and “A Morality”.

In terms of hope and promise the sixth quatrain provides a climax to the chanting. The typology of the Ram is used in many ancient religions and is particularly well known in the Hebraic/Christian tradition. It is important in the Second Testament as a type of Christ who becomes the antitype, that is, the reality it foretells. In those scriptures it has multiple meanings and significance. Christ is the sacrificial lamb who dies for his people but the ram can also be symbol of the lost sheep of Israel and of the forgiven sinner. This quatrain is heavy with prophecy as is the whole Part Two of “The Morality”:

Storms and tides of Spring
Divide their chains and come.
The Ram rides in their brine
Stronger than the sun. (CP 263)

The one powerful word which stands in opposition to the word *fear* desired by the Babylonian King is the word *freedom*. The Zodiac marks the freedom of spring and the word *freedom* reflects the freedom of life and death brought by Easter. Here the Ram becomes more powerful than the sun, the ancient god, for whom Easter was originally celebrated. Now the Ram, the Lamb of God, has displaced the ancient festival for his own festival of light. The implication is that the shadow and the illusion of Babylon are fading. Perhaps to strengthen the symbolism the word *Ram* is capitalised in “A Morality” but not in “The Oratorio”.^{xxx}

Merton’s use of the word *brine* is also compelling in this context. The word conjures up the clean, sharp smell of the sea. The desert fathers in their arid environment describe “God as a sea”. So “brine” is a word which images God as well. God is all pervasive, completely present and the atmosphere in which humanity exists without awareness. But the word “brine” also has the sense of tears latent in it. There is a sense of the release of suffering and of the tears which are freeing just as the sun melts the chains of ice which have held the seasons in check.

In “A Responsory” the fourth quatrain is as follows:

Washed in splendid rain
The stars and planets come:
The crab, the waterman,
And put their packages down (*CP 675-6*).

“The splendid rain” marks the fertile time. In “The Oratorio” this is also the fourth verse and is kept unchanged except for what is possibly a misprint in “A Morality”. The word “fish” is spelt with a small ‘f’ whereas the names of the other constellations are capitalised. These four lines herald the coming of the rains to wash away the emptiness and to fill the empty rooms through which the “winds blow” to cleanse, to purify and to startle into new life. This is the time of Pentecost.

The fifth quatrain in “A Morality” varies slightly from the original quatrain in the second of “The Babel works”:

Washed in silent peace
The Swan and Sirius come,
The Virgin with the scales,
The wind, and the bone moon. (*CP 263*)

A similar quatrain in “A Responsory” differs in lines one and two. It reads as follows:

Washed in summer’s peace
Both Mars and Jupiter come (*CP 676*).

By changing the above, Merton has given consistency to the manner of naming the constellations. The symbolism is of summer and the end of winter, the fullness of the seasons. The term *bone moon* derives from the eastern Cherokee who called February’s full moon the bone moon after their meagre diet of bone-marrow soup during winter. While winter is over there are still lean times to come and the hungry must wait for the fulfilment of the promise of summer. The winter has been spiritually meagre but this new summer for the world promises a far more substantial nourishment than it has experienced to date. Merton will

celebrate the Word as living bread in the final scene.^{xxxi} .This is the same promise which Merton writes in many other works, for example:

They turn to shadows in the spring.
The city they thought theirs
They surrender to the gentle
Children that were
Unhappy in the electric flood
And emptiness.

Believe Him alone
The Gentle One (*CP* 678)

Summer is the time of surrender and a time of healing for the children of God.

The quatrain which stands as the third stanza in “The Oratorio” and “A Morality” is missing from “A Responsory”:

The Beast stands in the sky
With poison in his thorn.
The Archer bides his time
And death hangs on his arm (*CP* 262).

The symbolism of the scorpion has been discussed and is important to Merton’s symbolism in the last two of “The Babel Works.” As the Scorpion dies in the sky – mythologically killed by the Archer – the season of life begins.

The Scorpion the Archer

The scorpion and the archer are symbolic of the universal destructive power of war. Merton elaborates on the misuse of language and of symbolism in investing war with overtones of heroism and grandeur in the section in the Babel works as has been discussed and will be discussed further in this thesis. Merton sees propaganda as the main instrument for accomplishing this whitewashing of the innate destructiveness of society. The shadow of war is thus reflected in the heavens.

In his later works Merton will challenge the rhetoric of war- particularly in his writings on peace. In *War and the Crisis of Language*, he wrote:

What next? The illness of political language – which is almost universal and is a symptom of a Plague of Power that is common to China, America, Russia and Western Europe – is characterised everywhere by the same sort of double-talk, tautology, ambiguous cliché, self-righteous and doctrinaire pomposity and pseudoscientific jargon that mask a total callousness and moral insensitivity, indeed a basic contempt for man. (Merton, OP, 150)

The language of astrology, of the stars, reflect the same rhetoric according to how they have been named by past cultures. There is violence in the heavens. Merton was to explore this theme of violence and of callousness to humanity over time and in particular through cultural and social empire building, in his final works, particularly in the long poem *Cables to the Ace*. This work confronts the nature of empire building and the destructive and abusive force such empire building releases on unsuspecting and vulnerable cultures. Spirituality is lost in a web of moralising and dogma when the language of the Church as well is used to justify such invasions. The language of violence has no relationship to the language of contemplation which is ultimately, for Merton, the language of the world's redemption.

At the time of the cold war Merton was again to use the constellations to speak of the senselessness of war; Ursa Major (Russia) and Uncle Constellation (United States) typify the stupidity of war throughout all ages and times:

Now with a fortune in weapons and a cowboy riding his mind
Uncle Constellation gallops headlong down the sky
To the pure gems of Texas oil and firebird lotteries
And napalm in the magazines and bandits
Come forward eager to be recognised in person
Carried away with implements
To break more bottles with a convivial star
With stallions in the lucky wind
Flaming away like saloons or gone
In the unlucky airborne cars.

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Note to subversives: Uncle has two extreme right hands and means business! (Merton CP 435)

Merton has interpreted the nature of his adopted country clearly both for the twentieth and the twenty-first century. The constellations remain symbolic of humanity's propulsion towards war and the symbolic of the drive for wealth and power which drive that compulsion.

The Seasons

If each section of “A Morality” represented a season then Part One, Scene One equals autumn as the threat of death and war and the abuse of technology is felt by the builders of the Tower. Scene Two is winter leading to the crucifixion of Silence. Part Two, Scene One with the chant of the children and the release of winter’s chains is springtime and the final scene the true generative summer:

The Word of God is coming from afar
Is always near. Near in the stillness of the thing that speaks.
Near, not dead, evening the heart of one that lies.
His silence is always near. His Word is near.
We cannot listen. We turn away fearing an accuser (*CP* 262-3).

The implication is that this is a merciful judge who comes. In fact fear is groundless. The one who “looks with eyes like wine” paradoxically sees with clarity. This person is intoxicated with God’s love. Merton certainly knew the other form of intoxication and he also knew what it was like to be seized by mystical love having written of the waves of emotional response to his awareness of God’s presence in his early monastic days. The drama indicates that it is humanity’s vision that is blurred and clouded. The darkness, not the light, is present.

The voice of the prophet signals the change of vision necessary for the world to perceive and understand the Messiah and “the heavenly city.” The Augustinian city of God is in one sense also a morality, a state of mind which opposes the mentality of the Babylonian city but it is also more than a symbol or state of mind. It is the enduring reality of the Kingdom promised by the Logos. “Though we may run in the dark, our destiny is full of glory” (*CP* 263).

This city is built on the “thought and the silence and the wisdom and the power of God”. The contemplative way is both the movement to this city and the arrival at it. The journey is into darkness to arrive at the light and to experience the transcendence of God.

Scene Two: The Exiles

The title of the second scene, “The Exiles”, immediately recalls the wandering Aramean peoples who eventually became the Chosen People of Israel.

The chorus sings an opening lamentation reminiscent of the Hebrew songs beside the waters of Babylon when they were taken into exile. This lamentation is a kind of farewell to oppression at the same time it questions what is really happening to the exiles. The words echo the poem, “Tower of Babel “and “The Oratorio”:

Lord, when the skies fall down to hell
Who will stop the giant wheel
Who will break the strict machine
Who will save us from the mill? (*CP* 264).

The quatrain speaks of the compression of heaven and hell, of the inability to distinguish up or down, truth or lies, so that one cannot be distinguished from the other. There is the anxiety of not knowing what their journey has been about or where it has taken them. Yet there is also the need for responsibility for the part they have played in their own story. These are nameless people, identified by number. They are not nameless simply because their experiences but nameless because of what they have done to themselves:

The winds of this land
Are interminable signals of their own emptiness
Signs without meaning (*CP* 265).

The apparent truth that these people no longer have a home is another lie that has to be contradicted. To maintain that belief is to continue to assist in their own oppression. At one level Babylon, the place of exile, is all they know and all they will know. Yet to believe **that**, is to continue to believe the lie instigated by the “Father of Lies” who has brainwashed his followers into believing he is the messiah. At the same time he took from them everything of value including their human worth. The truth is though that another city does exist and is to be offered to them through the intervention of God in their history. The true city of

the heart extends the boundaries far beyond the known. The true centre is Jerusalem, symbolic city of God to which they must turn their face to find their true home.

The Israelites in exile mourn for their broken dream, for prophecies they have not known, remembered, recognised or seen fulfilled. Babylon, the place of confusion and of illusion has taught these exiles to experience the depth of alienation. In their response to their experience, at this crossroads where omens disappear, in this broken city, lies their hope of transformation.

The song these exiles sing is the psalm sung by the Hebrew people in their Babylonian exile yet it belongs to everyone who has ever experienced exile:

By the ever changing waters
We sit down and weep
As if we had some other home (*CP* 264).

For these exiles there is no longer any sense of direction or of place. The tragedy is heightened by the fact that the waters are “ever changing”. The land has neither centre nor stability. For Merton, who himself wanders through the Babel drama as Everyman, this is the post-modern condition when the religious and the spiritual are no longer trustworthy. To whom do the exiles look for guidance in a strange world?

Lonely and disoriented, the victims of Babel wander aimlessly in a wasteland wondering if life has any meaning (*Lentfoehr WS* 156).

In this meaningless word activity loses its meaning as much as anything else. Merton suggested that constant activity is one of the ways tyrants maintain their control over those they oppress. As activity becomes unproductive the suggestion that the power of the oppressor is waning begins to shape the dialogue. The prophet redefines the action of the machine – being made, being done and so that the exiles are no longer the passive recipients of action but movement is understood as seeking, searching, and waiting. With such words choice is returned to the exiles if they are able to hear and understand the

prophet. What will be asked of these people if they are to return home is detachment and the ascetism of trust.

Existence

Act One of “A Morality” established that Babel was the result of the despair associated with a futile existence. If the Leader persisted in his tyranny, the society he dominated would eventually be made in his image rather than in the image of Yahweh. Life would be a cloning of a misshapen reality, not an existence as a created being. For existence there has to be a sense of morality and, Merton also suggests, a sense of theological reality as well. Out of these two comes a sense of the other, and the ability to form relationships, or at least the ability to recognise, the other has the right to exist. Existence is individual as well as social and is beyond the will to power, beyond technology and beyond mass production or the capacity to achieve scientifically.

For Merton *doing* and *making* in Babylon, past and present, supplanted *being*. In fact the Babylonians knew they existed through their action against God, that is, through their sin. Punishment at least let them know there was a relationship and that in feeling their punishment they could feel their existence. It was proved through pain – a somewhat masochistic outlook but perhaps the only one possible to a passive people who were caught up in a view of life which saw existence as a giant machine.

The displacement of prophecy onto the stars ensures that despair and fear face those with a life “cursed by stars”. In this way the perceptions of the alienated regarding the absurdity of their own condition and by extension the absurdity of the human condition is projected onto creation.

In the 1960s Merton was to write further about the absurdity of the human condition without God and without belief and sensitivity. In his essay “Rain and the Rhinoceros” Merton refers to Berenger, Ionesco’s the anti-hero. Berenger is similar to Thomas in his bewilderment as he poses the first question of “The Morality”:

When Berenger finds himself suddenly the last human in a rhinoceros herd he looks into the mirror and says, humbly enough, "After all, man is not as bad as all that, is he? " But his world now shakes mightily with the stampede of his metamorphosed fellow citizens, and he soon becomes aware that the very stampede itself is the most telling and tragic of all arguments. For when he considers going out into the streets "to try to convince them," he realises that he "would have to learn their language." He looks into the mirror and sees that *he no longer resembles anyone*. He searches madly for a photograph of people as they before the big change. But now humanity itself has become incredible, as well as hideous. To be the last man in the rhinoceros herd, is in fact, to be a monster (Merton *Rain* 6).

For both social pressure and a fear of isolation and loneliness argue for participation in a morally soulless world. Eventually the poet/guardian Raphael will bring Thomas to the realisation that "the power of error . . . is after all not in the city but in ourselves" (Merton *Rain* 6). Berenger has no such guardian spirit. He must survive the stampede of the rhinoceros on his own . . . as ultimately the poet and monk must do also.

There was no possibility of meeting God at the level of contemplation as long as activity substituted for a contemplative faith. Part Two, and in particular Scene Two of the drama reveals the possibility of reclaiming a contemplative view of the self and of the world. The argument the prophet presents for this is somewhat circular but he does show that hope can only emerge from despair. If there is no despair there can be no need for hope, yet a suffering people have the capacity to see beyond themselves and to recognise their own contingency. A people who trust in their machines and their technical prowess have no hope of understanding themselves:

Heisenberg quotes the Chinese sage, Chiang Tzu, who, twenty-five hundred years ago discovered that dependence even on a simple kind of machine caused man to become "uncertain of his inner impulses." Naturally, the advance of science and technology is irreversible and man now has to come to terms with himself in his new situation. He cannot do so if he builds an irrational and unscientific faith on the absolute and financial objectivity of scientific knowledge of nature. The limits of science must be recognised and blind faith in an uncontrolled proliferation in technology must be abjured (Stone *LL* 60);

The prophet speaks as follows:

Prophet: If you exist, you exist in hope. To cease hoping is to cease existing. To hope, and to exist, is to have roots in God. But one can hope and yet be hopeless: that is, one can exist without believing in one's existence. The man who does not believe in his own existence is rooted in despair. But he could not despair if he were not able to hope. Your existence, though you despair, is rooted in hope (*CP* 265).

The prophet's role is to re-establish the meaning of existence for the exiles so that it is no longer defined by production or development or scientific progress.

Recognition

The final section of the morality – the second half of Act Two, Scene Two, is about restoration, the return to Eden, albeit a new Eden. Here Merton's sense of the lyrical is really noticed. The stars "are the signals of Christ who holds them in his hand". The imagery becomes the imagery of nature and of celebration. The nameless the numbered, are once again called by name.

Isaiah's words about turning swords into ploughshares, and other prophecies concerning restoration, signal a rebirth of innocence and freedom. This rebirth is even beyond the innocence of the children who chanted of the passing of a lifetime. It is the time of the Child, as the children's chorus in a way foretold:

You must discover new words reborn out of an old time
Like new seeds from an old harvest
If you would bless the world with rest and labor
With speech and silence
And crown your peace with timeless blossoms
When the strong Child climbs quietly to His throne (*CP* 266).

The Ancient, the bearer of the faint memory, the Exiles, have of the past brings to consciousness those elements of human togetherness that are beyond the mechanical and the technical: love, work, marriage, festival, village, celebration, worship. In the description which follows there is a glimpse of Merton's own

past, St. Antonin certainly but also the joy of the festival and life he experienced for a short time in Cuba and especially Havana:

The Ancient: Look, here is a village! Here is a festival!

First Exile: Houses see their faces in the water,
Dressed in flags and vines. Boats and wagons
Gather. Flowering wagons and crowned oxen!

Second Exile: There are blue and yellow canopies

For flute, fiddle and drum.

Raphael: Singing together, dancing together.

Signify that the people are one (*CP 267*).

These people are able to distinguish what is true from what is simply a reflection in a mirror or in a river. "Houses see their faces in the water". In such a place the union of body and soul is possible. Here, in this the living city of God, there are no dichotomies:

Dancers: Once a body had a soul

They were in agreement,

Said the body to the soul,

I will be your raiment.

Said the spirit to the flesh

Now we are a person (*CP 267*).

The word *person* is of the utmost importance. A sense of morality brings to life the sense of personhood which had died when tyranny took away free will and choice. Personhood enables relationship and so the dancers are able to sing:

Once a person had a friend

They were in agreement,

Said the person to his friend,

Take my heart and keep it.

You and I will live alike

As a single person (*CP 268*).

Relationships of all kinds, from friendship, through marriage, to that expressed in worship, can now flourish as the imagery of growth and harvest indicates.

This understanding comes through the knowledge the villagers have because they are those “who have never been conquered by the builders of the ancient tower”. Merton explains this phenomenon as follows:

The world is not evil, and man’s city is not in itself an illusion. Only Babel is illusion. Man’s society united in the peace of Christ, reflects the great ultimate reality of God Himself and foreshadows our destiny to be eternally one in Him. When this has been made clear the true fall of Babylon begins (Lentfoehr *WS* 156).

Pentecost

The division of language and all that language signifies, created by and at Babel, is healed only by God’s intervention in history, that is, by the Pentecostal moment. The fire of the desert and of destruction gives way to the fire of love which, like the burning bush of Mosaic time, will burn but not destroy.

Unity

The language of *claritas* – the heart language of beauty and mercy, at the same time the language of intelligence and of wisdom dominates the final verses of the drama. As the paradigm around which the drama is structured is the Christian story the final section celebrates the restorative power of Christian love and of the Christ who is love. The celebration is also of the tangible symbol of the Eucharist – the gift, which in Merton’s terms is both type and antitype: sign and reality of love.

The symbol of this unity is marriage. Marriage is a multi-dimensional symbol. It is a symbol of commitment between man and woman, of earthly unity but also of the marriage of heaven and earth in many faith traditions.

In this morality marriage is also the symbol of contemplation in its highest form. In the verses which celebrate marriage there is an obvious debt to Eliot as there is elsewhere in the play but Merton and Eliot were simply drawing from the

same mystical tradition in which the highest form of contemplation is signified by the mystical marriage.

For Merton there was another level of union beyond the community and that is the level of communion. In this restoration of time and place through God's intervention in history there comes the possibility of communion. This is a union of deep intimacy where all are made one in the loving heart of God.

The Word of God

"The Morality" concludes with a different kind of festival. Humanity approaches the last judgement and Merton stresses the eternal nature of the Word. That Word speaks of mercy and freedom uttered in silence. For Merton to speak of God's silence is simply another way to speak of God's transcendence, of His infinite difference. This can only be conveyed by the words of Scripture. It is the Prologue to John's Gospel that ushers in the final celebratory moments.

The Prologue of St. John's Gospel has Gnostic overtones and celebrates an esoteric understanding of the Logos, of Christ's pre-existence to creation and of the Word as the Light of God whose coming is Mystery. It is an appropriate passage to conclude a play which originally derived from the Mystery plays of the Medieval Church. The Latin words echo profoundly as they intersperse the key events of the salvation history of the Judaeo-Christian story:

. . . eternal commandments
. . . divided sea
. . . Word spoken on the mountain
. . . Men bitten in the desert
. . . Word made flesh
. . . Word in the desert
. . . snow endured the force of fire
. . . peace on their tongues
. . . heaven in their midst/Jerusalem in Babylon

The Word is the power of salvation throughout history and the “ultimate revelation is of the Verbum crucis/Verbum pacis - the word of the Cross is the word of peace – the final word leading to eternity” (O’Connell *MS* 9).

Conclusion

The world of the play has moved from the cross-roads to the empty city and its desolate square to the corrupted marshes beside a river to the village and its festival. This is a mythic journey made by Raphael and Thomas, the two aspects of Merton’s persona. At that point there is the final triumph of The Word witnessed by Thomas and Raphael where all can say: “Thy words are true” (CP 273). Here is present the one who alone can break the seal and tell conquerors his name. The poison of Babylon is healed in that timeless moment and language restored.

In some way Merton as protagonist has also walked towards his own integration. It is no longer just Raphael who speaks with wisdom and compassion to the Exiles as the drama moves to its conclusion. Thomas also can speak a word of hope in the same language as Raphael; poet and monk understand each other’s language. Both are drawn into the contemplative experience. Thus the simplicity of the word of contemplation is spoken by the poet here as he will also speak them elsewhere:

Then the quails begin their sweet whistling in the wet bushes. Their noise is absolutely useless and so is the delight I take in it. There is nothing I would rather hear not because it is a better noise than other noises, but because it is the voice of the present moment, the present festival. (Merton *Rain* 8).

The moment which concludes the morality is the present moment also but it as well the moment of infinity, the moment of eternal relationship:

All: Lo the Word on the White horse
with eyes of flame to judge and fight
Power and meekness in His hand

Mercy in His look like wine.
He alone can break the seal
And tell the conquerors His Name.
ADOREMUS DOMINUM! (*CP 273*).

Chapter 19: The Word, the Beginning and End

Introduction

The previous chapters have explored the context informing Merton's life, his struggle to understand the tensions concerning poetry and contemplation which arose in him affecting his definition of himself as monk and contemplative. The chapters then analysed a group of Merton's texts which revealed a development of his thinking around language, war, technology and identity.

This chapter will draw together the threads of the previous chapters using "The Tower of Babel: A Morality" as its reference point. This drama indicates the evolution of Merton's thought and contains the seeds of some future directions that he will take in his writings. Some of the works Merton produced after 1955 have already been referred to in this text.

Contexts

A medieval morality play was normally performed in Latin and often in a series of different locations. Props were minimal. Sometimes the stage was a movable cart and people moved from cart to cart once the location was set up. This structure seems an appropriate one for Merton who was at heart a wanderer and a nomad. In his early life Merton moved about constantly. The way he travelled and the places he lived prevented him from becoming insular in any way. In keeping with this physical movement he also moved psychologically and spiritually from one mind/heart/soul space throughout his entire life.

Although for many years Gethsemani provided him with a stable home there were times when he longed to leave. Occasionally the monastery, which he did not hesitate to critique subtly, in "A Morality" embittered him. He once described himself as a political prisoner in it and as early as 1947 he questioned

his vocation to the Cistercians. At that time he was also struggling with another vocational crisis: whether to stay in the Cistercians or to leave to go to the more eremetical order, the Calmoldolese or alternatively, the Carthusians:

One day things look one way and then they look another. I suppose it is the result of emotions and natural passions. Today I was once again able to see the value of Gethsemani, not for myself, but for others. I wonder how much self-flattery there is in that! On the other hand God definitely has a work He wants me to do in this Order (Montaldo *ES* 102).

The last few months of life were very much like the early days when he was travelling with Owen. Owen “saved” him by coming to Flushing and taking the child with him in his travels. Merton was never very happy in suburbia or in a city. He spent those last few years travelling in Asia with the added hope of returning to Europe and especially to Wales on his journey back to Gethsemani. That hope never eventuated but the old longing to move freely and to move alone never left him

Gethsemani offered Merton a stable context because in many ways it was still an enclave of the medieval world. The Cistercian life-style enabled Merton to escape his own century. This escapism, he later realised was a moral issue he had to confront. The very clothing worn by the monks; the primitive nature of their sleeping, eating, washing routines; the rigidity of their daily life style determined by the seasons and the emphasis on working with their hands were all aspects of life in the middle ages. They were elements brought into the 20th century by the Cistercians.

Thus Gethsemani epitomised for Merton the twelfth century, the place and time he felt most at home in, and a place and time he loved:

And also it struck me: these people with their minds and their appetite for structure and solidity, they find things that satisfy them in twelfth century Citeaux. [Etienne] Gilson, too. Henri Pirenne, too. And when I see Citeaux as they saw it, I begin to find out something else about the way God’s love works in the world (Montaldo *ES* 172)

Merton said a number of times that he was intellectually and spiritually most comfortable in the atmosphere of the School of Chartres of the Twelfth century. He was attracted also to the Scholastics, who were medieval philosophers, the most famous of whom was St. Thomas Aquinas, the Dominican theologian. Merton found the work of men such as Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain attractive. Gilson's work on French Medieval Philosophy opened a spiritual door for Merton. The understanding of God he developed from that moment set Merton on a particular path to contemplation from which he never looked back. Maritain's work on *Art and Scholasticism* influenced his approach to his Master's Thesis and enabled Merton to express a life-long attraction to William Blake in his work. But Maritain's work led him to see a split between the work of the speculative intellect, contemplation, and the work of the practical intellect, writing. For the young Cistercian the resulting inner tension was never absolutely resolved.

"A Morality" provided a twelfth century dramatic tool to examine the moral issues around Merton's stance of world-rejection and a place to allow him to reflect on how he was to rejoin the world. By the time he wrote the drama there was no question of "should he rejoin the world?" – the question was simply when and how. The drama gave distance so that if Merton was in any way accusatory of the monastery - and he was - the accusation was buried in the dialogue about Babel whose poison seeped through the centuries to the present day.

Saint Antonin, Prades

Another reason why Merton was drawn to a morality play as his chosen genre included his early experience of St. Antonin, the village on the Catalan border where he was born. The village is located "where several rivers meet on their way to the Mediterranean, in the Pyrennées-Orientales administrative department" (Bear 2001). The play is after all autobiographical, as are most of

Merton's works, and traces the journey of Merton's persona, Thomas and Raphael, as they observe Babel's poison infecting the world. In his autobiography he includes a nostalgic description of village life as he imagined his parents living it:

And Mother would paint in the hills, under a large canvas parasol, and Father would paint in the sun, and the friends would drink red wine and gaze out at the valley at Canigou, and at the monastery on the slopes of the mountain (*SSM* 6)

This village, and others like it, for example, in the Midi^{xxxii} is certainly remembered in the play (and "The Oratorio") by the description, which could have been a typical village anywhere in France but which certainly was derived from Merton's own experience.

Merton added to the description of the village in the play some of the sensory experiences he had in San Antonin, and elsewhere when he lived in the South of France with his father:

First villager: In the gray hours before dawn
When horses stir in the stable,
Swallows twitter outside the shutter,
The streets smell of fresh bread,
And when the church door opens
One can see the lighted candles
And listen to the sacred bell (*CP* 268).

The villagers in the same play celebrate a wedding, perhaps remembered by Merton from his own experience of attending one in San Antonin. Their present joy is informed by past experience:

We have heard
The same songs before, at other weddings.
That is why we play them now.
We find ourselves made new
In singing what was sung before (*CP*269).

Tradition was very important to Merton and was one of the attractions of the Catholic Church for him. The Church had a long spiritual and liturgical tradition which has endured for two thousand years. “A Morality” enacts the Hebraic-Christian redemption story, the church’s story, beginning with Babel and the second fall. It dramatises God’s constant walking with God’s people, or, as Merton would say, God’s intervention in history. The seeds of the past germinated for Merton as he walked nostalgically through his own story in parallel with the Church’s story. Like the Thomas of the play, he questioned constantly what was happening and why, and attempted in his answers to go further than just explanations.

The sensory and visual imagery which pervades the second half of the play is thus more than an explanation than a description. The imagery indicates the reclamation of the “insensate” man – the one cut off from human expression and experience and begins to look towards a new beginning, a resurrection. The resurrection is not simply a new beginning but a transformation of the past, a completion of tradition. It is Merton doing what Sandra Schneiders (“Merton, Friend of God and Prophet” 81) suggests is one of his greatest strengths, the capacity to imagine an alternative reality out of the present reality. The Prophet in the play is simply another one of Merton’s personas as is the prophet, the one who can envision the new. He is an aspect of Merton that has been discovered by many writers, for example, Thomas M. King, who saw Merton as the mystic at the heart of America.

A number of texts Merton wrote himself were to prophetically challenge the world order of his day and certainly still provide food for thought for those who are dedicated to peace, ecumenism and who want to “guard the image of man for it is the image of God” (*RU 6*). In an address as much to himself as to his book, and its readers, Merton writes:

You are not big enough to accuse the whole age effectively, but let us say you are in dissent. You are in no position to issue commands, but you can speak words of hope. Shall this be the substance of your message? Be human in the most inhuman of ages: guard the image of man for it is the image of God (*RU 6*).

Writers who explore Merton's written and spiritual world today are very likely to examine his vision and the prophetic quality of his work as it speaks to us today. Ross Labrie's text, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*, is just one example of the new direction Merton scholars are taking in the present century.

The vision of a possible future offered at the conclusion of "A Morality", may be too spiritualised and pat for some readers. It is an early attempt by Merton to incorporate the faith tradition to which he belonged in a world he was re-evaluating for himself. The ending is the story. His future poetic works such as *Cables to the Ace* (CP 393-454) and *The Geography of Lograire* (CP 455-610) explored new ways and new techniques in understanding that same world.

The Christian story unfolding in "A Morality" enabled Merton to put the Christian story together for himself and to stand back and look at his faith and his understanding of it from a dramatic perspective. "The Oratorio" gave him a semi-dramatic foundation from which to develop that thinking, allowing him to expand it into "A Morality" confronting major issues in this century as well. Thus "A Morality" enabled Merton to put the Christian story together for himself and to stand back and look at his faith and his understanding of it from a dramatic perspective.

Merton possessed the ability to absorb everything he read and heard and use that material in his writing. The last work, "Geography of Lograire" was still a work in process when he died in 1968. There are sections even in this work which take up some of the themes of language present in "A Morality". To give one example only, *naming*, is one of the concerns in the Cargo song section of Lograire. The Prophet speaks of naming in "A Morality":

If you have not heard your name, it is not because it has not been spoke. The Lord, Who names you, lives within you. You live by the name He utters in secret. This is the hope you are rooted in (CP 265).

Naming here has many connotations. The words harken back to Isaiah: “I will give them an everlasting name” (*IS. 56:5*). It is God’s right to name us. We are named in Baptism, and theologically, we become different, becoming adopted sons and daughters of God. The baptised belong to the Church, the earthly city of God. But the one who can name us can claim ownership of us.

While naming is important in the Christian tradition the act of naming also evokes ancient beliefs concerning the power a person has over another if they know their name. The power is even more potent if they can name you. To work magic on a person their name must be known.

The name God utters in secret is the most precious possession human beings have and relates to the secret prayer a person speaks in their heart. It is the gift of life. But to give someone your name is to disempower yourself. In ancient times the word *Yahweh* was not spoken. None could have power over *Yahweh* yet in “A Morality” *Yahweh* speaks His own name through the Logos. In an act of trust of the very race who betrayed God, God gives his Logos, the Word which is God’s name.

In the last days the Word, wise without omen, strong without armies, will come to the crossroads of the broken universe. Then Truth will speak to the dead. Then God will awaken them from oblivion with His Word, and they shall sit up in their tombs, and look upon the Word Whom they have slain, and recognise his eyes like wine (*CP 263*).

This treatment of the significance of names and naming looks towards other works of Merton. *The Geography of Lograire*, still in process in the year of his death, has a section entitled *Place Names* (*CP 552*) which in turn, can look back to Babel:

1871 -1883
Baron Nikolai Miklouho-Mclay
(Tibud Maclay)
Comes and goes
Exploring

Recording the language
As a reward for hospitality
Leaves the coast
With his own name:
“Maclay Coast”
To further honor
The place where he landed
He called it “Constantine Harbour”
(Grand Duke Constantine
President of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society
Had paid for the trip) (CP 552-553).

In the above quote God’s prerogative in naming is taken over by a stranger who arrives in a new land and without taking any notice of the inhabitants gives the place a new name. This man is an oppressor, who unlike the Leader in Merton’s drama, does not know he oppresses others. He takes for granted that he can come to a strange place, dehumanise the inhabitants by ignoring all culture and social customs preceding his visit. The names that belong to the people and place are stolen. In *Lograire* Merton takes oppression one step further than in “A Morality”. The stranger does not think of justifying his behaviour. It is clear that the man is arrogant and without any idea he is doing anything wrong. He takes for granted his own superiority.

There is also in this segment a shift to a different kind of war than in Babel. Here the market government begins to be seen. The one with money, who can fund the expedition, is the god who must be placated with name and sacrifice. In one way this is a new world movement, the pragmatic rationalising of the economy worshipped in the one who has wealth, knowledge, technology. Those without are as nothing. In another way this attitude is as old as Babel, as old as those who demanded the golden calf to worship because they were exiled and had no names because they had no country (Ex 32;4). In *Lograire* the Baron effectively takes their country from the original inhabitants. It will be named as he has named it on all documents from then on. The question Merton leaves the reader with in this new work is are social and cultural questions. Who are we to invade another land through war or commerce? How is it that in doing so we feel we can take on the stance of a god? The one

who has nothing who uses his or her belief in *cargo* and magic in the hope of a better way of life is on a stronger moral footing than the invader. These at least believe in a power greater than themselves to give back to them what was lost through spiritual, and physical invasion of their land. “The Morality” poses this question in a different way: Why must we live in fear? (*CP* 265).

Everything is Autobiography

This work examined and agreed with William Shannon’s notion that everything Merton wrote, even his ascetical and historical works had an autobiographical flavour. In many cases the illustrations Merton used were those which were drawn from his past and present experiences. Even if they were not they are nuanced with the particular texture of Merton’s writing and his characteristic approach to life.

Merton recognised that he could only write well about things for which he cared. He acknowledged that in writing he was writing his life:

I am writing this for myself because paper plays a definitive part in the spiritual formation of a writer, even in the formation that will make him cease to be a writer, and transform him into something else.

Because I believe this transformation is necessary.

For 37 years I have been writing my life instead of living it and the effect is vicious, although by the grace of God it has not been as bad as it might have been. But I cannot let myself become a hermit merely on the grounds it looks credible on paper (Montaldo *IM* 138).

“A Morality”, is, as has been said, a further re-telling of Merton’s own story. Perhaps the movement of the play itself indicates this: Scene One, The Legend of the Tower becomes in Scene Two, The Trial. This in turn moves to “Zodiac” and the last scene “The Exiles”.

It is as though Merton, using the archetypal story of Babel, has divided his own life into two sections paralleling the division of the play. The earthly city is contrasted with the City of God. Merton's autobiography moved through the place of Purgatory; his place of sin was in the world. He left the world, rejecting it for what he believed was the centre of prayer in America that is the Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky. For Merton, Gethsemani became the City of God. It was that part of the Church which imaged the spiritual world most accurately.

The choice to place himself in the drama was obviously deliberate. There were many other names he could have chosen. Nathaniel, the apostle without guile would have been an adequate choice. That Apostle's name conveyed some of the qualities he required in this character. But no, Merton chose his own name and as such it is Merton who walks the journey.

It is important that Merton does allow his persona to walk that journey because this enables Merton to confront a moral issue in himself. "A Morality" points to the transformation which is happening in Merton. He is letting go his own attitude of world-rejection and beginning to see that he is involved and has responsibility for the attitudes and behaviours in society. In the beginning of the drama Thomas is the naïve questioner, the marginal person, who asks the moral and theological questions:

Ought we Raphael, to join
The builders of this city?
We can quickly learn
Their language and their ambition (*CP* 248)

Thomas is uncontaminated by the building at Babel. He is attracted by the activity and the seeming unity of the builders and their leaders. Perhaps this is an indictment on his earlier self attracted to many things, artists, writers, and places and responding with too little wisdom and counsel to the superficially attractive. Raphael provides him with counsel. Thomas's perceptions have to be honed so that he will not become victim to the Leader's panegyric. This implies

a sorting out of his beliefs. The false have to be separated from the true: the false self from the true self. The rationalisations of the builders who hear only what they want to hear cannot be Thomas's stance.

The world in this section of "A Morality" is the place where illusions can take root and flourish because "activity is their substitute for faith" (CP 251). Faith has disappeared at all levels of experience. The Leader using propaganda's voice, demands worship. When self-idolatry occurs the result is punishment and war. Nature itself turns against the Babylonians. Thomas must stand and look with horror on the punishment meted out to the proud.

Change

By the time Thomas has moved to Scene 2 of Part 2 he is spiritually and intellectually changed. He no longer questions the why but relays the scene and interprets it in union with Raphael. He has moved through the crisis of language and understood that the story of Babel is his own story. This story will relate particularly to the tension he experienced within himself as poet/monk: an archetypal way of expressing the dilemma Merton had between the two calls he experienced in his life. The first call was to contemplation and the second to writing.

In the final section of the drama, naivety has given away to an accurate perception of the truth of the God who sends the Word to save God's people. Thomas still asks questions but they come out of his ability to hear God in nature. He now understands the way nature connects with God. This is not a punitive connection as it was when nature turned against Babel. There is a deep longing in nature for God as St. Paul writes in his Epistle: "Creation waits with eager longing" (*Rom 8:19*).

Once Babylon has fallen Thomas is free to ask his questions:

Thomas: I hear the voices of the islands. What do they sing?

Raphael: They sing that Babylon is fallen.

Thomas: I hear the voice of the hills. What do they sing?

Raphael: They say there shall be no more war.

Thomas: I hear the voices of the Cities. What do they sing?

Raphael: There is no more despair! (*CP* 271).

Merton certainly experienced despair. George Kilcourse writes of just that aspect of Merton. Merton intimates in a December 1, 1964, entry that Christ “pulls all things in me together” to save him from misdirection and lassitude, the “mask for despair” which he so easily experiences (*CP Ace of Freedoms* 123).

Raphael and Thomas’s unity is also demonstrated as they alternate celebrating the coming of the Word. Merton, as priest, has a part to play in this New Jerusalem. This is the role he moves into as he celebrates communion open to all with no restriction. For Thomas Merton this is a new place. He saw himself as entering the church as a sinner and leaving the place of evil behind him. Now, perhaps unconsciously, his drama sings of the welcome all will receive when Babel gives way to Jerusalem.

What new seeds are present in this change? Merton was a forerunner in the ecumenical movement long before it became popular. He understood the value of one’s own tradition but he also understood the need for those of different traditions to meet together. His desire for the unity of all in Christ is explicit. The later Merton was to move beyond the parameters of the Christian religion into the world of Asian religions and also to the atheistic countries to share open dialogue with men and women from all over the world. **This** was one step beyond what was envisaged in “The Morality”. The drama indicates Thomas’s willingness to learn and to understand all he can of peoples different himself.

The Archetypes: Poet/Monk

Merton had many sides to his character as Naomi Burton Stone says in her interview with Paul Wilkes. She says there were many Thomas Mertons (19) but she also says:

The one thing that I feel, the inspiring part to me of his life, is not what he did or didn't do, and what he did before he was a monk, or whether he was the perfect monk or not. It's the fact that he stayed there, and that he really gave up a lot. I think maybe I'm one of the few people who understood what he was giving up when he went into the monastery before he had sold any of his writings, except for book reviews or something like that, because he really knew he was a writer. I certainly knew he was a writer. (19)

Raphael and Thomas begin their journey as marginal people. They are outsiders watching the building of the Tower but not actually taking part in it. Their role throughout the drama is that of observer. Raphael is the perceptive one, the spiritual guide who brings healing and wholeness. He is the monk aspect of Merton. Thomas is the writer. While he does not write in the drama he has the archetypal qualities of the writer. He is the one who interprets what is happening in Babel. He is that aspect of Merton therefore who can interpret what is happening for Merton himself and his world. Thomas is, therefore, the one who questions, who asks, who learns. It is as though Merton has split into two the two deepest parts of himself and allowed them to walk through the journey together.

By 1968 Merton had clearly defined the monk as the marginal person:

In speaking for monks I am really speaking for a very strange kind of person, a marginal person, because the monk in the modern world is no longer an established person with an established place in society. We realise very keenly in America today that the monk is essentially outside of all establishments (*AJ* 305).

Raphael and Thomas are certainly outside the establishment of Babel. Raphael the guide shows Thomas the truth about that establishment. It is a totalitarian system, a system which dehumanises those inside it. The only safe place, as long as tyranny rules it, is to stand outside such a place, institution or organisation. That is where Raphael and Thomas stand until the institution changes and then they too join the festivity and the celebration. When the tension in Merton is resolved between the archetypes he too will be free.

The struggle was an ongoing one for Merton and would never fully be resolved even though he rationalised around the issue of whether he should continue writing poetry or not. He ended using his poetry, as much as his prose, to confront social issues and to learn to love the world within and outside the monastery.

Throughout “A Morality” the specific forms in which his love for people were to take shape are, of course, not so evident. The racial tensions he confronted in his poetry are certainly one form of the oppression he was to confront radically in the future. His poetry and writing were to take a very active part in the peace struggle in the future. Although the tension remained: Merton walked both the contemplative and writer’s path all his life.

Parker J. Palmer’s definition of *contemplation*, given when he is discussing Merton’s ideas about contemplation, as, the human way into oneself and one’s world and certainly into the place where God exists in each one: “contemplation is any way one has of penetrating illusion and touching reality” (30). Babel was the antithesis of the contemplative place. It was the place of the deepest illusions. It was a place Merton had to be careful of because he could find himself there very easily. His relationship with Margie showed him that. Not that the love was an illusion but the arguments he used to rationalise his behaviour at times were based on self-deception. It was only his constant rigorous self-examination that allowed him to arrive at the truth of what was his deepest longing.

Palmer goes on to speak about the divided life Merton decried and which he, himself was living when he first read Merton’s writings. In this, as in all things he wrote of, Merton was speaking from experience. He knew division in his life and the poet/monk division was one of the major divides he experienced from the time he entered the monastery. While the morality play mirrors that division in its key figures, Thomas and Raphael, other key aspects of Merton emerge in the characters. Surely some of Merton’s shadow seeking ambition and prestige is present in the Leader? The Prophet, too, speaks with Merton’s voice as he explains the action of God in the history of the exiles.

Merton experienced contemplation as a deep inner call. He wrote many times about his desire to be lost in the face of God. Babel is the place where one is lost in oneself or where one loses oneself. It is the place where contemplation is replaced by activity. This was always one of Merton's fears concerning the monastery from his early days as a monk. It is one of the areas where he most critiqued Gethsemani:

restless and avid for change and new projects . . . where many machines are used in monastic work . . .there can be a deadening of spirit and sensibility, a blunting of perception, a loss of awareness, a lowering of tone, a general fatigue and lassitude, a proneness to unrest and guilt which we might be less likely to suffer if we simply went out and worked with our hands in the fields. (Thomson *Firecrackers* 10).

Those who operated machinery found it difficult to cope with silence. The intervals for private prayer and spiritual reading were taken away from the monks because it was feared they would not use them adequately. Merton writes critically when yet another foundation is planned and the monastery becomes alive with planning and doing. His longing is for something different:

Yet I still wish we could plan monasteries as Edens of contemplation rather than hells of heat and activity (Montaldo *ES* 190).^{xxxiii}

Merton was to write much on technology and its effects on society in the future. His texts include *Raids on the Unspeakable*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and *Redeeming the Time*. The builders' reactions and the control through technology in "The Babel Works" contained the seeds germinating in the cited texts. Merton's text, *Redeeming the Time*, written when the Vatican Council was discussing technology makes the following pertinent comment:

On the other hand, there is no use in trying to fulfil these possibilities by bringing in God as a kind of supreme machine – or the supreme machine – as if his essence were [was] not only knowable to the scientist but relevant to physics. In fact this kind of argument implicitly posits God as a physical object . . .for the Catholic theodicy, God is not simply one of the many existents which exercises a causal influence on

other existents, he is subsistent Being itself, *ens a se, ipsum esse subsistens* and the cause of being, *cause essendi*, of all that is.

This is the theory which can be applied to the persona of the Leader in the play. He assumes the appearance of a God and imagines he has the attributes of God. God, Merton says is not a being but Being itself.

This is the error of Babel. They imagined God as a being like themselves but only a little stronger. The self-idolatry of Babel poisoned their image of God. They constructed that image out of fear and terror. The inhabitants of Babel had the intuitive knowledge that they had misinterpreted God. And they had. They saw God through the lens of their angst and their arrogance. Merton knew the essence of that Being is love and mercy” “What is my new desert? The name of it is *compassion* (Montaldo *Es* 463). In that love and mercy, however, is a power beyond the imagination. But this God destroys only to create. Merton has the chorus sing in response to Thomas’s question at the demise of Babylon:

Thomas: How was Babylon destroyed?

Chorus: By one Word uttered in silence

Babylon is destroyed.

Raphael: By the One Word Who is in the beginning, and Who shall be in the end. He was, He is, and He shall be. He who is has only to be mentioned, and all He knows not is no longer known (CP 271-2).

Out of that destruction came the knowledge that Jerusalem was hidden in Babylon.

Language and Silence

Merton’s dilemma between monk/poet:writer/contemplative was expressed in the drama through an exploration of language and silence. The second scene *The Trial* was prefigured in “The Oratorio” but was dealt with more fully in the play. Language is not wholly evil but is the enemy of contemplation when it moves into the realm of propaganda and other forms of falsehood. To which voice was Merton listening? Those who accepted false gods, even when they appeared magnificent and overwhelming, are forced to serve an idol “in chains” for the

rest of their life. Merton's struggle is to free himself from the chains binding him through pride to his writing but also to his drive for contemplation. He must examine all the contexts out of which he is living to see where truth lies. "The Morality" picks up on the areas Falsehood celebrates and examines them. What is the conclusion?:

Chorus: We know the Word of God is spoken
Never to be forgotten
Not to be echoed in the ear
Printed upon a piece of paper
And forgotten (CP 271).

For Merton it is the contemplative dimension that emerges as significant. But the voices of the poet and the contemplative are not separate. They are at least walking in the same direction. Together they respond with the total voice of the cast in contemplative praise of the truth, the Logos, who is both language and silence.

Merton continued to write on contemplation. In fact all of his works while containing elements of autobiography are also about contemplation. "The Morality" opened doors to further explore the connections between language, war and technology, between language and oppression, language and imagining. His alternate reality was a place of peace dominated by "the strong child [who] climbs quietly to his throne" (CP 678). He would never again create quite a spiritualised reality such as that but he lived out of a reality which was deeply spiritual.

Conclusion

If he could not plan his Eden in reality Merton could at least plan it on paper. "A Morality" ends in an Eden that contemplates a reality which Merton believed would endure far longer than any of the technology invading the monastic silence of Gethsemani and luring those who place their faith in activity and technology into a mentality of progress and pride. Merton's writings on peace and non-violence are attempts to build community and move even beyond that

to the level of communion symbolised by the joy of the one act of adoration embodied in the last scene in the drama.

Part C: Finale

Chapter 20: Finale

This thesis, *Thomas Merton and the Towers of Babel*, examined three aspects of Thomas Merton's history and work:

1. The contexts which brought him to Gethsemani and to the moment of writing "The Tower of Babel: A Morality".
2. A group of works, entitled "The Babel Works", connected by their subject matter and theme. In particular the final work "The Tower of Babel: A Morality:" was seen as significant as it contained the seeds of future directions for Merton's writing and
3. The dilemma Merton experienced in the forties and fifties concerning his two vocational callings to contemplation and writing. The tension arising from this quandary affected him when he wrote the last three of "The Babel Works"

This thesis concludes firstly that the contexts interacted on Merton in such a way that he became so deeply immersed in both the Catholic and Cistercian tradition. One context in particular, the influence of Scholasticism through Jacques Maritain and others led to a split in his thinking around his vocation and gave birth to the poet/monk dilemma.

Secondly studying the chronology of "The Babel works" revealed a development in Merton's thinking from the time he wrote "A Responsory" to when he wrote "A Morality" he had moved from being a world-rejecting outsider to one who knew he had to take responsibility, even in a minor way, for the transformation of society. The name of his work *Redeeming the Time* published in 1966 indicates his deep connection with his faith- it is after all the Logos in Catholic theology that redeems the time – and the fact he is prepared to be a participant in the act of redemption.

The main theme of the "The Babel Works" is language and this theme was discussed in relation to the other themes: technology, war, identity. The theme

of language became a tool also which Merton used to confront his dilemma around the monk/poet issue which affected him in the forties and fifties.

One of “The Babel Works”, “The Oratorio” had previously been little studied. This work was a transition step between “A Responsory” and “A Morality”. Although Merton was musical he had never attempted a musical work before. This thesis showed that this work provided a base on which to re-think his world-rejecting attitudes. It enabled him to begin to come to terms with his own ambition and hunger for fame because like all Merton’s works it has an autobiographical component. It is a significant work in the evolution of Merton ideas in the fifties.

Thirdly Merton used the personas of his play to work out his own difficulties around the issues of monk /poet in particular. Thomas and Raphael are both outsiders and marginal people as are the monk and poet. Raphael is the voice of wisdom and contemplation, seeing into the nature of things. Thomas is the naive one who needs to be invited to imagine. He is the voice of the poet. In the play’s beginning they are together but speaking with different voices. At the play’s conclusion they are still together and speaking with complementary voices. Language and silence understand each other. This thesis believes that while the poet and monk may not have become one they are walking in the same direction.

Finally “A Morality’ contains seeds of Merton’s future thought particularly his thoughts on social action and on contemplation. The play moved Merton not back to community itself, something he was always to find difficult, but towards communion-: and compassion. While Merton still had to wait to accept his place in the worlds he inhabited fully in 1953 he could nevertheless write:

The Spirit is alone here with the silence of the world
(Montaldo *ES 141*).

ⁱ A complete copy of “The Babel Works” are included in this thesis as Appendix One. With the exception of “The Oratorio”, “The Babel Works” are to be found in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* as follows: “Tower of Babel, 21-22; “A Responsory”, 672-678 and “The Tower of Babel: A Morality, 247-273. “The Tower of Babel - An Oratorio”, is in manuscript and is located in the Special Collection section of the Brown Library at Columbia University, New York. The manuscript was given to the University by Mark Van Doren as part of a bequest he made to Columbia.

ⁱⁱ This quote is taken from one of Merton’s journals. Merton placed an embargo on their publication until 25 years after his death. They were then released with Patrick Hart OCSO, Merton’s secretary, as general editor. The journals are as follows:

Volume 2: *Entering the Silence*, April 1995

Volume 3: *A Search for Solitude*, April 1996

Volume 4: *Turning Toward the World* September 1996

Volume 5: *Dancing in the Waters of Life*, June 1997

Volume 6: *Learning to Love*, September 1997

Volume 7: *The Other Side of the Mountain*, July 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ Merton knew of the dangers of compulsion and warned himself against it as in the following written in 1958: I am not going to write as one driven by compulsions – but freely, because I am a writer, and because for me to write is to think and to live and also in some degree to pray (Cunningham SS 219)).

^{iv} Merton thought Gerald Manley Hopkins a great Catholic poet and applied to Columbia University to do his doctoral dissertation on Hopkins but was not allowed. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton wrote:

My reading became more and more Catholic. I became absorbed in the poetry of Hopkins and in his notebooks – that poetry which had only impressed me a little six years before. Now, too, I was deeply interested in Hopkins’s life as a Jesuit. What was that life? What did the Jesuits do? (*SSM 234*)

^v Merton uses the phrase, “God’s intervention in history” to mean the same thing as “God’s journey with humankind”. The latter phrase is seen as more theologically appropriate today. Merton’s phrase will be used later in conjunction with “The Babel works.

^{vi} Many of Merton’s letters have been collected and published in a series as follows:

Vol 1: *The Hidden Garden of Love*, 1985

Vol 2: *The Road to Joy*, 1989

Vol 3: *The School of Charity*, 1990

Vol 4: *The Courage for Truth*, 1993

Vol 5: *Witness to Freedom*, 1994.

^{vii} The morality play was also published in a special edition and Lentfoehr gives the details of that publication: a special edition of two hundred and fifty copies of the text with woodcuts by Gerhard Marcks was printed in the summer of 1957 on the hand-press of Richard Schowsky, Hamburg, in Garamont-Antiqua type from the Letter Gieteriff Foundry, Amsterdam – the paper handmade by J. W. Sanders Düren and the binding by Theophile Zevary, Hamburg.

^{viii} Paul Hindemith (1895-1963) was a central figure among the composers who came into prominence in Germany after World War I. He left Germany when Hitler came into power and spent two decades in the United States, where he taught at Yale University and at the summer school in Tanglewood, Massachusetts. (Correspondence with Patrick O’Connell, 2006)

^{ix} The Post-Tridentine period covers the time from the Council of Trent to Vatican II.

^x *Exordium* is an on-line study course written for Cistercians. It is a program of Reflection and Study on the Values of the Cistercian Reform to celebrate the 9th centenary of the Order. The course was prepared by Father Michael Casey of Tarrawarra Abbey, Australia and published in instalments on the web by in 1998.

^{xi} The term “white monks” was used to distinguish the Cistercians from the Benedictines who wore black habits.

^{xii} Merton records: Dom Antoine [of Melleray] abolished that peculiar invention of Dom Augustin, The Trappist Third Order. In getting rid of these secular teachers, Dom Antoine relieved the Order of a most oppressive and unwieldy burden and delivered the monks from the danger of being saddled everywhere with schools and colleges. It has not generally been recognised that this move did as much to save the Cistercian Order as anything that had been attempted since the French Revolution. If

teaching had been inseparable from Trappist monasteries, it would have meant a change in the very essence of the Cistercian vocation. (Merton's own teaching ability and experience was to be channelled into his work with scholastics and novices as well as into his writing).

Thomas Merton. *The Waters of Siloe* London: Sheldon Press. 1976. 102

^{xiii} The original 1953 text is used in this discussion: (Merton, 1953)

^{xiv} This definition was given by Father Pat O'Shea, in a lecture to Masters of Theology students at Turrumurra, Australia in 1995. It is simple enough but at the same time it is profound.

^{xv} **Quietism**

Related: [Protestant Denominations](#)

A heretical form of religious mysticism founded by Miguel de Molinos, a 17th-century Spanish priest. Molinism, or Quietism, developed within the Roman Catholic Church in Spain and spread especially to France, where its most influential exponent was Madame [Guyon](#). She preached her doctrines to members of the French aristocracy, winning a convert and friend in Madame de Maintenon, Louis XIV's wife, and an ally in Archbishop [Fénelon](#). Another quietist was Antoinette [Bourignon](#). The essence of Quietism is that perfection lies in the complete passivity of the soul before God and the absorption of the individual in the divine love to the point of annihilation not only of will but of all effort or desire for effort. Molinos talked about an entire cessation of self-consciousness, and Madame Guyon maintained that she could not sin, for sin was self, and she had rid herself of self. Molinos and his doctrines were condemned by Pope Innocent XI in 1687. A commission in France found most of Madame Guyon's works intolerable, and in 1699 Pope Innocent XII prohibited the circulation of Fénelon's book, the *Maxims of the Saints*.

Bibliography: See W. Backhouse and J. Janson, comp., *Guide to True Peace ... Composed Chiefly of Writings of Fénelon, Guyon, and Molinos* (1946).

^{xvi} **Jansenism**

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

Jansenism was a branch of [Christian](#) philosophy founded by [Cornelius Jansen](#) (1585 – 1638), a [Flemish theologian](#). It was a movement of the reading public, the [bourgeoisie](#) and [aristocrats](#), rather than a groundswell of instinctive belief.

An opponent of the [Jesuits](#), Jansen proposed a return to the principles laid down in the work of St [Augustine of Hippo](#). His posthumously published work, *Augustinus* (1640), gained an increased following, and prominent adherents of Jansenism included [Racine](#) and [Pascal](#). In France, Jansenism was associated with the [convent](#) of [Port-Royal](#), which operated a number of famous schools that educated Racine and Pascal, and by the books of [Pasquier Quesnel](#).

Jansenism emphasized [original sin](#), human depravity, the necessity of divine [grace](#), and [predestination](#). In Jansenist thought, human beings were born bad, and without divine help a human being could never become good. This meant that one had to be very careful about one's choices, exhibit a high level of piety and moral rectitude, and prepare carefully through [prayer](#) and [confession](#) before receiving [Communion](#) (hence they favored less frequent reception). The Jansenist idea of predestination based on Augustine's writing and close to that of [Calvinism](#), was that only a small number of human beings, the "elect", were destined to be saved.

Jansenism was condemned as [heretical](#) in several [papal bulls](#), notably by [Pope Innocent X](#) and [Clement XI](#) (*Unigenitus*). It is interesting to note that because Jansen himself died before his work was published and he included statements of submission to the Roman church in it, he himself was never considered a heretic. The final condemnation of Jansenism was by St. [Pius X](#), who advocated daily communion and communion for children as soon as they could distinguish the host.

In France, King [Louis XIV](#), acting under the pressures of the [Jesuits](#), sought the end of Jansenism. Particularly targeted was the convent of Port-Royal. In a very symbolic gesture, the convent was razed in [1710](#) after the last nuns had been forcibly removed.

Contrast: [Molinism](#)

External links and references

- [CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: Jansenius and Jansenism](#)
- <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txc/jansenis.htm>
- http://frenchminds.healthekids.net/course.phtml?course_id=628
- <http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/people/A0858980.html>

Retrieved from "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jansenism>" 23rd January 2006.

^{xvii} The Catholic dogma believes in a state of punishment after death where souls are purged of their sins and guilt before being allowed into the presence of God.

^{xviii} The excerpt quoted was published in *The Road to Joy*, 233. This volume was edited by Robert Daggy and published in 1989 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

^{xix} Matthew Kelty's talk was given at a visit made by an Elderhostel group to Gethsemani in September 1999. The author attended the lecture.

^{xx} The letter quoted by Higgins was written by Merton to Robert Lawrence Williams, 16th July 1968.

^{xxi} *Aseitas*: the English equivalent is a transliteration: aseity – simply means the power of a being to exist absolutely in virtue of itself, not as caused by itself, but as requiring no cause, no other justification for its existence except that its very nature is to exist. There can be only one such Being: that is, God. And to say that God exists *a se*, of and by reason of Himself, is merely to say that God is Being itself. *Ergo sum qui sum*. And this means that God must enjoy “complete independence not only as regards everything outside but also as regards everything within Himself. (SSM 191)

^{xxii} This extract is taken from a carbon copy of a letter to Catherine de Hueck 6th October 1941 – quoted by Mott.

^{xxiii} Merton includes the following quote in his *Asian Journal* which explains his use of the term “myth dream”: The “noble lie” in Plato’s republic? Cornford calls it a simple mistranslation of the phrase γένυάιου τι ἐνψένδομένοισι ψέμδος is “fiction” or “myth”. Γένυάιου is “on a grand scale”. The “noble lie” is the myth dream by which in fact every society lives, only some are “nobler and more credible than others. Maybe the “noble lie” is really the credible and workable myth. The trouble is that such myths cannot be consciously fabricated. – See F. M. Cornford: “The Marxist View of Ancient Philosophy” in *The Unwritten Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1950, pages 132-133. (AJ 264).

^{xxiv} Not every Catholic theologian even in the 1940’s would agree with Merton that one form of contemplation must necessarily preclude the other. Fr. M. Leonard SJ in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* referring to “Art and Spirituality” stated that the intuition of the artist sets in motion the very same psychological processes which accompany infused contemplation.

^{xxv} The four works are included in their entirety as Appendix One of this work.

^{xxvi} The numbering of the quotes relates to the copy of the manuscript which was numbered from the cover (1) through to (10). The quotes do not relate to the position of the pages of the work in Appendix One.

^{xxvii} Daggy’s quote is taken from: Thomas Merton, “The Angel” (fragment in the Thomas Merton centre, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky).

^{xxviii} Merton originally wrote “destructive function” to describe words in this verse but he altered that word by hand on the manuscript to “position”. The verse reads:

Traitor! You have betrayed your sacred trust:
You have forgotten your position
In the state of Babylon (MS 5)

^{xxix} Merton, Thomas. *The Strange Islands*. (London: Hollis & Carter; 1957)

^{xxx} The copy of The Oratorio being used for this thesis is the unpublished manuscript lodged at Columbia University, New York in the rare Books section.

^{xxx1} Patrick O'Connell unearthed the symbolism of the term 'bone moon' in his research on *Tower of Babel: "The Oratorio"*. The internet reference is as follows:

<http://outside.away.com/outside/magazine/200009/200009wild.html>. September 2000.

^{xxxii} Merton stayed in Murat, also a small French village, after he had spent some time in the school infirmary with fevers. "When Father had to go to Paris, he took the opportunity to send me once again to Murat, to spend a few weeks living with the Privats, who would feed me plenty of butter and milk and would take care of me in every possible way" (SSM 63). The Privats gave Merton loving care and he experienced the freedom of the woods and mountains during his stay there.

^{xxxiii} Gethsemani made a number of foundations after the war as the monastery was filled to overflowing with men drawn to the Order partly because of their war experiences but also Merton's own writings drew some to Gethsemani.

Appendix One: The Babel Works

Tower of Babel

The Political Speech

History is a dialogue between
forward and backward
going inevitably forward
by the misuse of words

Now the function of the word is:
To designate first the machine,
Then what the machine produces
Then what the machine destroys.
Words show us these things not only in order to mean them
But in order to provoke them
And to incorporate us in their forward movement:
Doing, making, destroy or rather
Being done, being made, being destroyed.
Such is history.

The forgotten principle is that the machine
Should always destroy the maker of the machine
Being more important than the maker
Insofar as man is more important than God.
Words also reflect this principle.

Though they are meant to conceal it
From the ones who are too young to know.

Thus words have no essential meaning.
They are means of locomotion
From backward to forward
Along an infinite horizontal plane,
Created by the history which they themselves destroy.
They are the makers of our only reality
The backward-forward working of the web
The movement into the web.

(CP 21-22)

A Responsory

For Paul Hindemith

I

Chorus?

Words and silence, standing face to face
Weigh life and death. The hunters in the sky
Seem to control our seasons.
The trees stand where they were before,
The stars pass by.

Lord, when the skies fall down to hell
Who will break the giant wheel
Who will stop the strict machine,
Who will save us from the mill?

Soloist? Or all the people?

We found no man to lead us
No man to teach us
No man to heal us.

Life and death are one
They said. Good and evil
Both are to be feared
Life and death are terrible.

Night and morning,
Health and sickness
Not to be distinguished.
Both, they said, are terrible.
Both are to be feared,

Everything is dusk, they said:
Not light, not dark:
Nothing is defined.
Truth and lies are food of fear.
Things have lost their names
And all things are terrible,
All, they said, are terrible.

There are no actions, only explanations.
No hope, no pity:
Only a setting sun

Chorus

Who will define movement and rest?
Who will distinguish noise and fear?
Bring us a word that tells the mind
More than an echo in the ear?

Soloist or All the people

They give us numbers when we lose our names.
No man tells us who we are.
Numbers never let us know
What we are for.
Words are poured over us
Like water. Words run down our necks
Like sand. Sand and water
All are one. They only touch our skins.
No one tells us what the words are for.
They give us numbers.

Chorus

Lord, when the seas pour down to hell
Who will save us from the sand?
Who will keep us from our end,
Dryness and fire on every hand?

II

All

Washed in winters rivers
Ancient seasons come
Cancer and Orion
The Bear and Capricorn.

Chorus

Words and silence, standing face to face
Fight for the earth, whose circles keep their peace
And dream of the tame seas, whose iron boils
down
Draining the sand to spoil those shores again.

All

Washed in silent streams
The Lion and the Twins
Come crowned in diadems
With weapons in their hands

Chorus

Old light, new darkness weigh us in their scales,
Deliver us to war-gods, or to men
Of war, men without wonder

Spawned by the scorpion.
Our lives heave homeward on the wheel
That bears the stubborn stars,
Light and darkness know our poverty.
They plan our death, and mark our scars,

All

Storms and tides of spring
Divide their chains and come.
The Ram rides in their brine
Stronger than the sun.

Chorus

High seas draw backward for their bloodless war
Then bite their brothers' shoulders as they run.
Hand over hand the open harbor
Lands their enormous burdens one by one.

All

Washed in splendid rain
The stars and planets come:
The Crab, the Waterman,
And put their packages down.

Chorus

Now all is sand, or grass, or scandalous water
Where the rank marsh pulls down one crooked gull.
Still the alarming heavens roll
Us earthward, wrestle our wordless time
And judge us dumb.

Soloist?

Insensate man! Words would make us human.
Killing our minds, we have denied our names.
Silence, if we remembered, was our Mother.
Shall we regain her, some more temperate time?

Soloist?

Trees stand where they were before
And villages are gone.
The plowman follows his machine
Across the edge of the sky.
The stars pursue their prey.

Chorus

Fire can quench water
Flame can stand upon foam
Blood lies on the sand
When the sea goes home.

Steel can give back thunder
Fire can spring from wood
And mercy from the heart of man
Though that heart be dead.

All

Washed in summer's peace
Both Mars and Jupiter come
The Virgin and the Bull
The wind and the bone moon.

III

Soloist

Now let no men pretend to tame
These innocent lights
Nor judge these ordered strangers.
Fate, when they were older than our earth,
Seemed to usurp their names
Making their skies the mothers of our acts.
They, too young to kill us, are too old to think
of us.
Lighted children, friends of silence
They sing to us in fields and rooms.
They are the signals of our Christ
Who holds them in His hand.

Chorus

We waited for their light in winter
Learning discipline.
We worked until they came, in summer time
Reaping the words we planted
Under another season.
For the words of God were planted,
Working in word and silence
Barn and city, house and square:

The mystery was in our wicked midst
And starlight beat like doves against our door.

All

His mercy heals the regions
Of the mind, Blessed by Him
Our acts are free.
Heard by Him our silences
Bear fruit, our words are true.

Chorus

Therefore we must renew
Labor and worship, work and blessing.
Cure the land with prayer and plow,

Cure the sea with wonder.
We must receive new seeds from an old harvest
Old truths out of a time newborn
If we would crown our timeless peace with timeless blossoms
When the strong Child climbs quietly to His throne. (CP 672 -678)

Tower of Babel (Oratorio)

Columbia University Libraries
Special Collections

Spec Ms Coll Van Doren

[Merton], Thomas
Trappist, Ky. , 3 June 1954
To Mark [Van Doren]
t.l.s. , 2p.

[Merton Thomas]
"Tower of Babel"
Trappist, Ky. , ca. 1954
t.ms. , 10p. Oratorio (draft)

Gift of Mark Van Doren

TOWER OF BABEL Oratorio

Part One

1- Musical introduction – formal and solemn, followed by
Recitative: (merely spoken, without any background)

Once the whole earth was of one tongue
And the same speech. But each man said to his neighbor
Come, let us make our name famous
Before we be scattered abroad into all lands.

2- Violent and brightly coloured music introduces the chorus:

Chorus:

Rex Babylonis, sapiens et magus

Solo: (baritone)

The dark one rises in his golden armor:
The Plumed King, whose signs
Command the zodiac.
His ships like birds
Cover the southern water.

His prisoners – cheaper than sand:
His crooked caravans
Crawl to his constructions from the corners of the earth.
Many machines
Serve him and his gods!

Chorus and solo (The baritone sings against the background of ominously chanted Latin)

Rex Babylonis
Sapiens et magus
O fear the double minded king!
Vir duplex animo,
Potens et callidus
O fear this father of lies
Dividens unumquemque sicut vult
The wheel of his nativity
Is cursed with fire.
Rex Babylonis,
Sapiens et magus
Aedificavit sibi turrim.

3.

Bass solo (King of Babylon)
I will not open my prisons
Nor quench my questioning fires
Nor cease to hang the heads of kings
Upon the branches of my priceless gardens.
The hunters in the sky
Shall dread my wisdom.
The tongue of my mouth
Divides and rules the world,
In wars without end.

4 – Ominous music, preluding the mounting anger of God.

Chorus – The word of God is coming from
Very far. The hidden thought of God
Weighs like a burden on the tower of Babylon.

(Music indicates the rising of a great storm)

Chorus Perdam Babylonis nomen!

Baritone solo:

The ships have folded their wings
And fled from darkness.
Winds are born of darkness!

The almond trees grow pale before the cloud.
See where the great cranes sway in the sky!
Thunder curses in the dark.
The Lord comes down and looks upon this tower!

Music - - the fall of the tower.

Recitative (no background - - solemn in the silence
following the fall.)

Babylon has been a golden cup in the hand of the Lord
And she has made the whole world drunk
The nations swallow her poison,
Stagger and fall. Babylon has flowed to the ends of the world.
Generation after generation
Shall taste the wine of her lies.

(Music – reflective and resigned)

Chorus (very simple and sad)

When Babel swayed against the moon
When Babel crumbled in the sky
Where, then, did her buildings run
And how, then, did they die?

When Babel fell from the stars
When Babel tumbled to the ground
The builders, with divided tongues
Took their sin to the world's end.

Solo – (Contralto)

Now blow upon these plains, you winds of heaven,
And purify the empty sand.
Purify the houses where strange spirits sing.

Chorus – Blow, blow, you winds of God, upon the wanderers
Scatter the seeds of war to the world's end.

PART TWO

Music - - quiet, but strong, becomes the march of an approaching army

Chorus (Marching song)

The bar-snake and the zig-zag snake
Will bite each other

Marching song – con't

And drown each other in the sea.

Who will reign, when both are dead?

Split that mountain! Move that town!
Quench the sun and bury the moon.
Leviathan, leviathan
Boils the waters of Babylon!

Recitative: The King of Babylon stands at the crossroads,
At the head of two ways, taking omens,
Viewing the guts of animals, and shuffling his arrows
The right hand road
Goes to Jerusalem
The left hand road
Leads to Jerusalem.

Two ways going to the same land
Three swords sharpened for the same murder
Four roads leading to the same disaster.

Chorus: The King of Babylon stands at crossroads at the head
of two ways
Shuffling his arrows!

Recitative: (no background)
Gather the people together
Stop all cars
Gather the people in the square
Stand them in the cattlemarket square,
Open the windows of the frozen houses
And fill the whole city
With the sound of one great voice
Pronouncing a sentence of death
Upon the traitor: Silence
And upon the other traitor: Language!

Chorus: Et dixit Rex Babylonis
Quid est veritas?

Bass solo: (King of Babylon)

History is a dialogue between forward and backward
Going inexorably forward
By the murder of words.

Now the function of the word is
To designate: first machine,
Then what the machine produces,
Then what the machine destroys,
And finally what destroys the machine.

Chorus: Let words become an instrument of war!

Bass solo: The machine must destroy the maker of the machine,
For what is made is greater than the maker.
And the word.
Must destroy the speaker of the word,
For language is greater than the speaker,
Just as man is greater than God.

Bass solo: The word, then, is a means of locomotion
Backwards and forwards
Along the infinite horizontal plane
Created by the history which words themselves destroy
Words made reality and are eaten by it:
The backward-forward working of the web,
The forward movement into the web,
The backward struggle, but not out of the web.
Words must work without purpose, and without ceasing.

Chorus: Call language to the witness stand!

Bass: You have betrayed your office. What is your defence?

Contralto solo:
Villages are slow to forget
The silence of the ancient years.
Houses and churches cling together
Fastened by the words of other generations
And by the silences of the dead Fathers.

Chorus: Words are agents of the traitor silence!

Contralto: The word of God came from afar
From the eternal silence
That villages should cling together
In the silence of God their Father.
Meals are made together,
Weddings are celebrated by all in one.
All their words are one
In the silence of Mass.
One small bell tells all times,
One same small bell
Recalls the silence of the blessed Fathers.

Bass: Traitor! You have betrayed your sacred trust:
You have forgotten your position
In the state of Babylon.

Chorus: Let there never again be silence,
For silence gives the traitor words their meaning.
Let the machine never again be silent,
Or words will cease to resemble the machine,
And there will be no more production
Forwards and backwards,
Destroying history as fast as it's made.

Bass: (solemnly pronounces the sentence, without musical background)

Let words go to their camp by the waters of Babylon
And sing the song inspired by Babylon's wine.
As for Silence, let it be crucified.

(Music – an all-out crucifixion of silence.)

PART THREE

Chorus: By the ever changing waters
We sat down and wept
As if we had some other home.

Contralto: Lord, when the skies fall down to hell
Who will break the giant wheel?
Who will stop the strict machine?
Who will save us from the mill?

Chorus: We saw this evil city broken in the water
And we turned to weep
As if we had some other home.

Contralto: Who will define movement and rest
Who will distinguish noise from fear?
Bring us a word that tells the mind
More than an echo in the ear?

Recitative: We found no man to teach us,
No man to heal us. No word
To wash the wounded mind.
The language of this land
Is an interminable series of signals
Of their own vanity. Signs without substance
Ending in division.

Chorus: One by one we lose our names.
They give us numbers.
Words are poured over us

Like water. Sentences run down our necks
Like sand.

Recitative: Good and evil: Sand and water all have become the same
They only touch our skins.
There are no actions: only explanations.
They give us numbers!

Contralto: Lord, when the pieces of the world
Melt in the enfolding flame,
Who will raise our bones from death?
Who will call us back again?

Baritone: How shall we hear and understand
A word that we have never learned,
A name that we were never told,
A cry that man has never made?

Contralto: Lord, when the seas pour down to hell
Who will save us from the sand?
Who will keep us from our end
Dryness and fire on every hand?

Chorus: Who will save us from the sand -- --
Dryness and fire on every hand!

Tower- 6

PART FOUR

Chorus: Washed in winter's rivers
Warlike seasons come:
Cancer and Orion,
The Bear and Capricorn.

Baritone: Men of war, spawned by the Scorpion
Cover the land, crossed by the travelling stars

Chorus : Washed in silent streams
The Lion and the Twins
Come crowned in diadems
With weapons in their hands!

Baritone: Stars mark the skeletal towns
Cities visited by winds:
Windows where no light is kindled,
Houses where no one is loved,
No word is heard!

Chorus: The Beast stands in the sky

With poison in his thorn.
The Archer bides his time
And death hangs on his arm

Baritone: Fleets move northward. East and west
The stars pursue their prey.
Time goes forward and backward
Weaving its web of light and darkness, covering the land
With truth and illusion, life and death,
Speech without silence,
Silence charged with death.

Chorus: Washed in splendid rain
The Bull, the Fishes come,
And Crab, the Waterman
And put their packages down.

Contralto: The Hills stand where they were before.
The stars pass by.
Twelve signs in heaven behold our misery
Counting the world's white scars.

Baritone: Twelve signs in heaven fight the twelve Apostles
Whose words will grow like green life
Bursting the sunlit bricks of Babylon:
For truth grows back like life in spring
From the winter of death.

Chorus: Washed in silent peace
The Swan and Sirius come
The Virgin and the Scales,
The wind and the bone moon.

Tower - 7

Contralto: The Word of God, coming from far,
Is always near:
Near in the stillness of the thing that moves,
Near in the silence of the thing that speaks,
Near, not dead, in the heart of him that lies.
His silence is always near. We do not listen
Fearing an accuser!

Recitative: In the Last Days, the Word, wise without omen,
Strong without armies
Come to the Crossroads of the broken universe:
Then truth speaks to the dead with eyes like wine!

Chorus: Storms and tides of spring
Divide their chains and come.
The Ram rides in their brine
Stronger than the sun.

PART FIVE

Baritone: Fire can quench water
Flame can stand upon foam
Blood lies on the rock
When the sea goes home.

Chorus: (once sung, this chorus continues as background of all the ?????)

Nails can give back thunder
Fire can leap from wood,
And mercy from the Heart of Man
Though than Heart be dead.

Recitative: How beautiful upon the Mountains are the feet of
Him that brings good tidings, and preaches to us
And with His words defines salvation, and restores us
To our own City, which we had almost forgotten, since
It was destroyed!

Baritone: He who was sent
He who came and spoke for us
And was not heard, was
Slain at the **center** of our earth.

Recitative: For one small moment I have forgotten you,
But with great mercies will I gather you again,
Says the Lord your Redeemer.

Contralto: He who was wounded
When He did not speak
He who was silent
Was killed for what His silence said.

Recitative: As the rain and snow come down from heaven
Watering the earth, giving the sower the seed, the reaper his harvest,
So shall my Word be, which shall
Go forth from my mouth and save all men,
Says the Lord God, in His eternal silence.

Tower - 8

Baritone: He was killed

He who was taken, suddenly returns,
Binding the broken world with wounded hands.

Recitative: My word shall not return to me empty,
Says the Lord God.
My word shall do as I please,
Says the Lord, God who gathers Israel.

Chorus: He who as out to death, Alleluia!
He who was lost has found us, Alleluia!
He who was destroyed, delivers us
Smashing the brazen gates of Babylon!
Alleluia!

For the Word is spoken
Never to be forgotten:
Not to be echoed I the ear,
Printed upon a piece of paper and forgotten.
No, the Word lives
Louder in silence
Louder in the heart than on the lip
Or in the ear.
Silencing the loud blood
Living in the quiet mind,
Silencing the wild body:
Grain dying in the ground,
Growing with work of hands,
Calming the envious brain!
The Word was dead and lives. Alleluia!

Baritone: Fifty days after the Word was slain and lived
He sent His Spirit to ordain with flame
Twelve men too slow to believe,
Fishermen to find the ones the Word had chosen
Workmen to build together a divided nation:
For this, the Spirit taught them tongues,
Thus are all prophecies made plain
Three hours after the sun
Shone on the temple trumpets in Jerusalem.

Tower – 9 **PART SIX**

Chorus: In principio

Baritone: - The word of God on high
Is the fountain of wisdom
His ways are eternal commandments.

Chorus: Erat verbum

Et Verbum erat apud Deum.

Baritone: The word leaped down in darkness men could touch
Nor did their dens deliver them.

Chorus: Et Deus erat Verbum

Baritone: The word held open the divided sea
Until the tide drowned Kings.
The Word spoke on the Mountain.

Chorus: Et Deus erat Verbum

Baritone: Men who were bitten in the desert
Grew well, remembering the Word
Or seeing His mysterious sign.

Chorus: Verbum caro factum
Verbum sanctum!

Bass: Flesh did not understand
The Word made flesh.
Those who feared the voice of thunder
Scorned to eat the Word made Bread.

Chorus: Verbum crucis,
Verbum sanctum.

Baritone Nor wheat, nor meat
and Nor meal, nor bread:
Contralto: The Word was given in the desert
Where snow endured the force of fire.
The Word came down upon the wilderness
Touching the tongues of men in crystal morsels.

Chorus: Verbum crucis
Verbum pacis

Baritone Those who have taken peace upon their tongue
and Have eaten heaven:
Contralto: They have made heaven in the midst of us,
Jerusalem in Babylon.

Chorus: Verbum crucis.

Tower - 10

Bass: This is the word the prophet saw:
This is the tender plant
The bleeding root of his despised report:
The Word who would not speak when he was wounded.

Chorus: Verbum sanctum

Baritone: Give rest, give rest O Lord
To the slain souls who sing beneath the altar.

Base Give robes and rest and thrones to the white martyrs
Baritone : Who swore and signed with their own blood:
Contralto “Thy words are true!”

Chorus: Adorate verbum sanctum in aeternum.

Chorus: Lo the Word and the white horse
With the eyes of flame to judge and fight
Power and meekness in His hand
Mercy in His look like wine.
He alone can break the seal
And tell the conquerors His Name.

Alleluia, Alleluia!
Adoremus Dominum!

The Tower of Babel

A Morality

*The whole earth used the same language and the same speech. While men were migrating eastward, they discovered a valley in the land of Sennaar and settled there. They said to one another, “Come let us make bricks and bake them.” They used bricks for stone and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves lest we be scattered all over the earth.” The LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the men had built. And the LORD said, “Truly they are one people and they all have the same language. This is the beginning of what they will do. Let us go down, and there confuse their language so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” So the LORD scattered them from that place all over the earth; and they stopped building the city. For this reason it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the speech of all the earth.- **Genesis 11:1-9***

*Two kinds of love have created two cities: the earthly city is created by the love of self to the point of contempt for GOD: the heavenly city by love of GOD to the point of self-contempt. The earthly city glories in herself only, the heavenly glories in the LORD. The earthly seeks her glory from men, the heavenly, through the witness of a good conscience, finds GOD in herself as her supreme glory. The earthly city loves her own power, but the heavenly turns to GOD and says “I will love thee, o GOD my strength!” . . . – **St. Augustine, THE CITY OF GOD, xiv, 28.***

And a mighty angel took up a stone, as it were a great millstone and cast it into the sea saying: with such violence as this shall Babylon that great city be thrown down and shall be found no more at all. . . . For all nations have been deceived by her enchantments, and in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all that were slain upon the earth. – APOCALYPSE 18:21, 23-24.

PART ONE – THE LEGEND OF THE TOWER

Scene one – The Building of the Tower

RAPHAEL, THOMAS, FIRST BUILDER, SECOND BUILDER, LEADER,
CAPTAIN, CHORUS

[Musical Prelude – the building of the Tower. Enter RAPHAEL and THOMAS.]

THOMAS: Ought we, Raphael, to join
The builders of this city?
We can quickly learn
Their language and their ambition.

RAPHAEL: No, we must stand apart.
If we learn their language
We will no longer understand
What is being said.
If we imitate their zeal
We will lose all sense of what is to be done.

THOMAS: They are clear-minded men
Of one purpose

RAPHAEL: No. They only appear
To know what they are building.
They think it is a tower
That will reach heaven.
They think they speak the same
Language, that they are of one
Mind.

Presently
We shall discover that they are
Only of one voice. Many minds,
Many thoughts signifying nothing.
Many words, many plans
Without purpose. Divided hearts,
Weak hands. Hearts that will be
Closed to one another. Hands
Armed against one another.
There is no agreement.

There can be no tower.

FIRST BUILDER: I believe in the tower.
Therefore I will work longer hours.

SECOND BUILDER: I believe in the Leader.
Therefore I will sacrifice myself
To build this tower.

FIRST BUILDER: I believe in our common language,
Therefore I will serve the Leader.

SECOND BUILDER: I believe in labor without reward.
The tower is reward enough.

FIRST BUILDER: I believe in work without food and sleep
Although it is not yet possible.

SECOND BUILDER: The Leader will make it possible.

FIRST BUILDER: Everyone knows that the Leader
Will make everything possible.

SECOND BUILDER: It is good that we agree brother.
Let us never stop working;
Let us build this Tower for the Leader who loves war.

FIRST BUILDER: Yet, it is good that we agree. Let us
Build this Tower for the Leader who loves peace.

CAPTAIN: Silence! Stop work. Listen to the Leader.

LEADER: The Tower is nearly finished.
It is the greatest of all Towers, in fact
It is the only perfect eternal Tower. There has never been
And never will be another such Tower.
The Tower is inviolable. It will
Be attacked by invisible powers
From above and from below by agents of social corruption.
Are you tired of work, my people?
Then, when the Tower is built,
We shall have war. But the Tower is impregnable.
Do your duty. Soon you will
Taste the excitement of war.

CAPTAIN: Back to work. The Tower must be finished by nightfall.

CHORUS: Grow Babylon, grow,
Great Babylon, touch the stars.

What if the Lord should see you, now?
Grow, Babylon, Grow!

RAPHAEL [*The dialogue continues against the background of the Chorus*]:
They suppose that if they build a high tower very quickly, they will be nearly as strong as God, Whom they imagine to be only a little stronger than themselves. And if the part of the tower is level with the lowest part of heaven, man and God will have to discuss everything on equal terms.

THOMAS: It is therefore a religious tower, and they are men of faith.

RAPHAEL: No, it is a tower of unbelief.

THOMAS: What have they failed to believe in?

RAPHAEL: Two things: First they do not believe in themselves, and because of this they do not believe in God. Because they do not believe in themselves or in God, they cannot believe in unity. Consequently they can not be united. Therefore they cannot finish the tower which they imagine they are building.

THOMAS: Nevertheless they are very busy with whatever they think they are doing.

RAPHAEL: That is a pretense. Activity is their substitute for faith. Instead of believing in themselves they seek to convince themselves, by their activity, that they exist. And their activity pretends to direct itself against God, in order that they may reassure themselves that He does not exist.

THOMAS: Why so?

RAPHAEL: Because if He does not exist, then they do not have to be troubled with the problem of their own existence either. For if they admit they exist they will have to love one another, and this they find insupportable

THOMAS: But surely they love one another! Otherwise how could they unite in a common endeavor? Surely, they are united, and their union has brought them success.

RAPHAEL: No, they have only united in their common, though hidden, desire to fail. Their ambition is only the occasion for a failure they certainly seek. But they require that this failure come upon them, as it were, out of the stars. They want to blame their ruin on fate, and still have the secret satisfaction of ruining themselves.

THOMAS: Why should they do so much work in order to fail?

RAPHAEL: Their hearts seek disaster as a relief from the tedium of an unsatisfactory existence. Ruin will at least divide them from one another. They will be able to scatter, to run away, to put barricades against one another. Since

they cannot stand the pretense of unity, they must seek the open avowal of their enmity.

FIRST BUILDER: What is this thing called war which has been promised us as our reward for finishing the tower?

SECOND BUILDER: It is another work invented by the Leader, more glorious than this one as well as more exhausting.

CAPTAIN: Silence. Stop work! The Leader will ascend to the garden he has planted on the summit of the Tower he has built. He will walk and sing under the exotic trees upon whose branches he will presently hang the heads of our common enemies.

LEADER: Already I see that the skies are as full of words as they are of stars. Each word becomes an instrument of war. Words of the clocks and devils. Words of the wheels and machines. Steel words stronger than flesh or spirit. Secret words which divide the essences of things. Last of all, the one word which strikes at the heart of creation, and dissolves it into its original nothingness. Give me possession of this one word, and I will forget every other.

CHORUS: Fear! Fear!
Feel the business that springs
Out of the dark. Feel fear pass cold
Hands (like wind) over your skin!
Fear talks out of the thundercloud.
Ships fold their wings. The almond trees
Grow pale before the storm.

[CHORUS continues as background to following dialogue]

THOMAS: Raphael, I am scared, I see the tower nodding against the moon. I see the great cranes bending under the cloud.

RAPHAEL: Look at the little boats, Thomas, how they fly down the river. See how the carts topple off the side of the road!

THOMAS: O Raphael, that cloud first came up out of the desert no bigger than a man's fist. Then at once it stood over the tower like a man's arm. The suddenly the burly dark filled the whole sky. Can you still hear me in this wind?

RAPHAEL: Wind with a thousand fingers pulls away the scaffolding. With a thousand invisible fists the wind beats on the battlements of the great Tower.

FIRST WATCHMAN: Blow the trumpets! Blow the storm warning trumpet!

VOICE: It is too late, the storm is already upon us.

WATCHMAN: Blow the fire trumpet, blow the fire trumpet!

VOICE: It is too late, Fire has sprouted from a hole in the Tower!

CHORUS: Hide us from the fall, hide us from the fall!
Hide us in the catacomb, hide us in the well!
Hide us in the ground, hide us from the sky!
Hide us from the Tower's fall!

WATCHMAN: Blow the poison trumpet, blow the poison trumpet!

VOICE: It too late, The captains have already taken poison.

WATCHMAN: Then blow the trumpet of division.

VOICE: Blow the trumpet of division!

THOMAS: This is Babylon's end!

RAPHAEL; No, it is Babylon's beginning!

CHORUS: Now blow upon this plain you winds of heaven.
Blow, blow, you winds of God, upon the sands.
Scatter the seeds of war to the world's end.

Scene two – The Trial

RAPHAEL, THOMAS, SOLDIERS, CAPTAIN, LEADER, PROFESSOR,
PROPAGANDA, FALSEHOOD, LANGUAGE, CHORUS

[Scene – Square in a half-ruined city. RAPHAEL and THOMAS.]

RAPHAEL: Everywhere the great machines of war
Stand face to face. The hunters in the sky
Bargain with life and death.
Babylon, like a great star wandering from its orbit,
Unsettles the universe, dragging nations down into chaos.

THOMAS: Is this the same city? All the cities in the world
Begin to look like the same city.
Wagons come down to the water
Where the crowds stand
After flags have fallen. Angry men
Stand without speech,
Wait for the conquering army.

SOLDIERS *[enter, singing marching song]:*
The bar snake and the zigzag snake

Will bite each other in the head
And drown each other in the river:
Who will reign when both are dead?
The fire bird and the water bird
Have brought good luck to Babylon
But who will reign when both are dead?

CAPTAIN: Gather the citizens in the square
And fill the whole city
With the sound of one voice.
There shall be no other voice. For peace,
Peace is this: only a giant voice.
There shall be one Babylon, fearing the orator.
There shall be one Babylon, hating itself.

[Enter LEADER, PROFESSOR, LAWYERS.]

LEADER: Now we must settle the question of guilt.
The Tower fell. Babylon was dishonored.
Our armies, though everywhere victorious,
Are full of traitors. Sabotage
Halts the production of new weapons.
Who is responsible?

CHORUS: Nothing is light, nothing is dark,
Nothing is defined. Sunlight and darkness
Both bring forth new fear.
Things are beginning to lose their names,
Persons their character. All
Wear the look of death, and become terrible.

CAPTAIN: Silence! Traitors. Salute the Leader!
He brings you life, salvation,
Prosperity, Peace. Can you not see that despair,
Unhappiness, will presently cease to exist?

LEADER: Who has taught these people the lies they utter!
What enemy poisoned their minds?

CAPTAIN: We know the traitor's name,
One who was at first our best friend, one who was
Our most capable officer. One we thought
Would not fail us.

LEADER: Who is it then?

CAPTAIN: Language! He and his regiments, the words,
Have sold out to the enemy.

LEADER: Impossible.

Words have always been our best soldiers.
They have defeated meaning in every engagement
And have almost made an end of reality.

CAPTAIN: No, Majesty. They are in league with sense,
Order and even silence. They are in the pay
Of thought and communication.

LEADER: Then they have been betrayed their sacred trust
For theirs is a mission of division and destruction.

CAPTAIN: Our first witness will explain the functions of language.

PROFESSOR: History is a dialogue
Between forward and backward
Going inevitably forward by the abuse of thought
And the gradual destruction of intelligence.
Now the function of the word is
To designate: first the machine,
Then what the machine produces,
And finally what the machine destroys.
Words have no other function.
They belong by right to the political process:
Doing, making, destroying. Or rather
Being done, being made, being destroyed.
Such is history.

CAPTAIN: This witness can prove that language is the enemy of history and
should therefore be abolished.

LEADER: Let him proceed.

PROFESSOR: The word is a means of locomotion
Forward and backward
Along the infinite horizontal plane
Created by the history
Which words themselves destroy
(Substituting what *ought* to have happened
For what actually happened).

LEADER: But if that is the case, Language is the fulfillment of history. Why
then should it be destroyed?

PROFESSOR: The machine must always destroy
The maker of the machine, for this proves
That the machine is greater than the one who made it
Just as man is more important than God.
Words reflect this principle, in their relation to history.

Words create history. But they, in turn,
Must be destroyed by the history they have created.
The word supersedes the event, as light emerges from the darkness,
Transforming the event into something it was not.
But the event, in turn, supersedes its interpretation as darkness
Replaces light, and in the end it is darkness that wins.
And the words of the historian are forgotten.

LEADER: Which then is real? The light or the darkness?

PROFESSOR: Words create reality as fast as they are eaten by it,
And they destroy reality as fast as they themselves
Come back to life, out of the minds of men.
This is the movement of history:
The backward, forward working of the web;
The plunge forward, into the web,
The struggle backward, but not out of the web.

LEADER: Words, then, are the ultimate reality! Let there never again be any
silence. Let tongues never be still. For if there be silence, our history will
instantly be unmade, and if we stop talking we will cease to exist. Words,
therefore, are acquitted. Let Silence be called to the stand.

CAPTAIN: One moment! It is not so simple. There are three kinds of language.
There is true language, there is falsehood, and there is propaganda. Let us call
all three to the stand, beginning with the most dangerous.

LEADER: Call Truth to the stand!

CLERK: Truth, tell us your name.

TRUTH: My name is Truth.

CLERK: Where do you live?

TRUTH: In things as they are, in minds that see things as they are, in wills that
conform to things as they are.

LAWYER: Truth, you are the enemy of the Mammoth State.
You have pretended to serve us, and you have
All the while poisoned the minds of people
With enemy doctrines. You refuse
To conform your declarations to the pure
Slogans of our Leader. You are therefore
Insubordinate, a saboteur, a spy,
A tool of the enemy.
How many murders, bombings, acts
Of open or hidden violence have you
Not committed against us? You are

The worst of enemies. You are The destroyer of the Tower.

VOICES: To the salt mines! To the salt mines!

TRUTH: You are your own enemies. You destroyed your own Tower.

VOICES: Put him to death.
Shoot him! Down with him!
Kill him. He is the people's enemy.

SECOND PHILOSOPHER: I can defend the truth.

CAPTAIN: Shall we hear his witness?

LEADER: Give him one minute, not more.

SECOND PHILOSOPHER: There is no need to put truth to death.
Truth has never existed, there is no Truth.
Everything is vague. The world, O Leader,
Which only seems to exist,
Needs to be expressed in words which seem to exist.
Actually, nothing has real being.
Seeming is existing. Everything that seems,
Is. It is what it wants to be.
It has no being only wanting.
Truth, then, may seem to exist.
But what is it? If we look too close
We see right through the seeming.
Leader, there is no Truth.

VOICES: He is right! There is no truth!

OTHER VOICES: He is a liar! Truth exists, but it is not true.

LEADER: Truth or no Truth, words are agents of the traitor:
Meaning. Let them be put to death.

VOICES: Death. death, death,
Let words be put to death!

CAPTAIN: One moment!
Not all words claim to be true.
The pure, holy, divine words of Leader,
What are they? Are they true?

[Awkward silence, broken by the LEADER]

LEADER: Send this witness to the salt mines.
I have words of my own. Call propaganda to the stand!

CLERK: Do you swear to conceal the truth, the whole truth and to confuse nothing but the issue?

PROPAGANDA: I do.

LEADER: What is your name?

PRPAGANDA: Legion

LEADER: Where do you live?

PROPAGANDA: In the heads of the people

LEADER: What do the people look like?

PROPAGANDA: Zombies

LEADER: How long have they looked like zombies?

PROPAGANDA: Since we got inside

LEADER: How did you get inside?

PROPAGANDA: By shots in the arm, by beatings over the head, noises in the ear and all the right kind of medicines.

LEADER: Who destroyed the Tower?

PROPAGANDA: The religious warmongers, the clergy, the freemasons, The Pope, The millionaires, The Elders of Zion, The Young Men's Christian Association, The Jesuits and the Legion of Mary.

LEADER: You are a faithful guardian of the Mammoth Democracy, you shall be decorated with the order of the Tower and you shall possess exclusive freedom of speech and worship in every part of the world. Go forth and form the minds of the young. *{Turning to CLERK}* Call Falsehood to the stand.

[Solemn music – enter FALSEHOOD]

VOICE: This must be one of the gods.

LEADER: Sir, who are you?

FALSEHOOD: Why, I am Truth.

LEADER: Ah, yes. We should have known.

FALSEHOOD: I built the Tower.

VOICE: The builder of the Tower, the builder of the Tower!

LEADER: Your worship, will you be so kind as to tell us the function of the language, and indicate whether or not words had anything to do with the ruin of the tower? Are words faithful to our cause, or should they be done away with? Can our empire subsist without language?

FALSEHOOD: I am your strength. Without me you fail. I will give you the only words that will serve your purpose. You should never have listened to anyone but me. Your city is made in my image and likeness. I penetrate reality by destroying it. Those who follow me will be split in half and each one, instead of being one man, will become two angels. If you follow me and listen to my words, you will find this out for yourself.

CAPTAIN: This must be the voice of the creator.

LEADER: Tell us, Majesty, who destroyed the Tower?

FALSEHOOD: The Tower has never been destroyed. Just as I am immortal, the Tower is indestructible. The Tower is a spiritual reality and so am I. The Tower is everywhere. What you call the fall of the Tower was only its beginning, its passage into a new, more active phase of existence. The Tower is not a building but an influence, a mentality, an invisible power. The Tower stands, and I am the King who lives on the summit of the Tower. And because I am everywhere, everywhere is the Tower of Babel.

LEADER: Divine and omnipresent Majesty, forgive us for not having recognized you. What shall we do with the people who resist your authority?

FALSEHOOD: Let all men serve me in chains.

CHORUS: Grow, Babylon, grow,
Serve your Lord in chains.
Chains will be your liberty.
Grow Babylon, grow!

CLERK: There is one more witness!

LEADER: Who is he?

CAPTAIN: His name is Silence.

LEADER: Useless! Throw him out! Let silence be crucified!
{Music, an all-out crucifixion of silence.}

PART TWO –THE CITY OF GOD

Scene One – Zodiac

[SCENE – A river bank.]

RAPHAEL, THOMAS, PROPHET, CHILDREN

RAPHAEL: Once there was a city where these marshes are,
Ships at dockside, barrels on the quay,
Children running between the wheels
Watching the foreigner's sandal
Fearing the unknown words of the men with scars.

THOMAS: Now all its sand, and grass, and water
Where the rank marsh draws down one crooked gull.
Men have gone from this place. There is
Neither cursing, nor praying, nor dancing.
Neither living nor dying, buying nor selling.
No more traffic on the water front
No more pianos in the cabaret.

PROPHET: The city under the sand
Lives everywhere. It is not a buried city.
The westward ships will soon discover
The old city, on another continent
Young and new. The southward ships
Will find that the city was never destroyed.
The northward plane soon sees the sun
Shine on the towers of the same Babylon.

RAPHAEL: The stars pursue their prey.
Across the edge of the sky
Time moves east and west
Covering the land with light and darkness,
Life and death, truth and illusion.
The bills stand where they were before,
The stars pass by.

CHILDREN: Washed in winter's rivers
Ancient seasons come:
Cancer and Orion,
The Bear and Capricorn.

PROPHET: Men were made to be the mirror of God. They were meant to be
one mirror filled with His one light. When will the pieces be brought together
again, and receive the divine image?

CHILDREN: Washed in silent streams
The Lion and the Twins
Come crowned in diadems
With weapons in their hands.

RAPHAEL: Words once contained the silences beyond the stars. Words given us by God, bound minds in agreement, and in agreement made them strong. Because they were strong, men became free. They were free because they thought the same thing. They were strong because they knew the same truth and lived by it, working together.

CHILDREN: The Beast stands in the sky
With poison in his thorn.
The Archer bides his time
And death hangs on his arm.

PROPHET: But the languages of men have become empty palaces
Where the winds blow in every room.
Strange spirits in them The ruined houses are
Hiding-places for men at arms.

CHILDREN: Washed in splendid rain
The Bull, the fishes come,
The Crab, the Waterman,
And put their packages down.

PROPHET: The Word of God, coming from afar,
Is always near: Near in the stillness of the thing that moves,
Near in the silence of the thing that speaks.
Near, not dead, even in the heart of one that lies.
His silence is always near. His word is near.
We cannot listen. We turn away fearing an accuser.

CHILDREN: Washed in silent peace
The Swan and Sirius come,
The Virgin with the Scales,
The wind, and the bone moon.

PROPHET: In the last days the Word, wise without omen, strong without armies, will come to the crossroads of the broken universe. Then Truth will speak to the dead. Then God will awaken them from oblivion with His Word, and they shall sit up in their tombs, and look upon the Word Whom they have slain, and recognize His eyes like wine.

CHILDREN: Storms and tides of spring
Divide their chains and come.
The ram rides in their brine
Stronger than the sun.

PROPHET: Do not think the destroyed city is entirely evil. As a symbol is destroyed to give place to a reality, so the shadow of Babylon will be destroyed to give place to the light which it might have contained. Men will indeed be of one tongue, and they will indeed build a city that will reach from earth to heaven. This new city will not be the tower of sin, but the City of God. Not the

wisdom of men shall build this city, nor their machines, not their power. But the great city shall be built without hands, without labor, without money and without plans. It will be a perfect city, built on eternal foundations, and it shall stand forever, because it is built by the thought and the silence and the wisdom and the power of God. But you, my brothers, and I are stones in the wall of this city. Let us run to find our places. Though we may run in the dark, our destiny is full of glory.

THE ANCIENT, PROPHET RAPHAEL, THOMAS DANCERS, FIRST VILLAGER, SECOND VILLAGER, EXILES, CHORUS

[SCENE – A village on a river.]

THE ANCIENT: By the ever changing waters
We sit down and weep
As if we had some other home.

CHORUS: Lord, when the skies fall down to hell
Who will stop the giant wheel
Who will break the strict machine
Who will save us from the mill?

RAPHAEL: Exiles, where have you come from,
Where are you going?

CHORUS: We found no man to lead us into our own land
Because we found no man to tell us of our own land.
We have forgotten where we come from. How can we tell
Where we might be going?

THE ANCIENT: As long as I can remember we have wandered by these rivers
We have wept by these waters
As if we had some other home.

CHORUS: Who will define movement and rest,
Who will distinguish strength from fear,
Give us a name that tells the mind
More than an echo in the ear?

THE ANCIENT: I have heard my Fathers say that we came from another
country.

FIRST EXILE: One by one we lost our names.
Men gave us numbers.

SECOND EXILE: Words were poured over us like water.
Sentences ran down our necks
Like sand. Sand and water,
Good and evil, truth and lies

All were the same.

FIRST EXILE: There are no actions
Only explanations.
Men give us numbers.

THE ANCIENT: For years there has been found
No man to teach us.

SECOND EXILE: No word to wash our wounded minds.

FIRST EXILE: The words of this land
Are interminable signals of their own emptiness,
Signs without meaning.

SECOND EXILE: Our speeches have ended in exhaustion.

CHORUS: Lord, when the pieces of the world
Melt in the enfolding flame
Who will raise our bones from death,
Who will call us back again?
How shall we hear and understand
A word that we have never learned
A name that we were never told
A cry that man has never made?

PROPHET: If you have not heard your name, it is not because it has not been
spoken. The Lord, Who names you, lives within you. You live by the name he
utters in secret. This is the hope that you are rooted in.

FIRST EXILE: Is there then hope within us?

SECOND EXILE: Are we rooted in something?

PROPHET: If you exist, you exist in hope. To cease hoping is to cease existing.
To hope, and to exist, is to have roots in God. But one can hope and yet be
hopeless: that is, one can exist without believing in one's existence. The man
who does not believe in his own existence is rooted to despair. But he could not
despair if he were not able to hope. Your existence, though you despair, is
rooted in hope.

FIRST EXILE: Why must we despair?

SECOND EXILE: Why must we live in fear,
As if our lives were cursed by stars,
As if the wheel of the sky would, without fail,
Drag us to a bad end?

RAPHAEL: Stars are too wise to think of you,
Too innocent to harm you.

THOMAS: They are the signals of the Christ,
Who holds them in His hand.

THOMAS: You will wait for their light in winter
Learning discipline.
You will work until they come in summertime
When the words of God will be planted among you,
Growing in work and patience.

FIRST EXILE: Is there work for us, somewhere, without slavery?

SECOND EXILE: Is there a discipline that will give us peace?

PROPHET: Christ's mercy heals the regions of the mind.

Blessed by Him our acts are free.

Heard by Him

Our silences bear fruit. All our words become true.

THE ANCIENT: Ah, yes, I have heard in the past that words could be true.

RAPHAEL: They are meant to bind minds together in the joy of truth.

THOMAS: You must discover new words reborn out of an old time

Like new seeds from an old harvest

If you would bless the world with rest and labor,

With speech and silence

And crown your peace with timeless blossoms

When the strong Child climbs quietly to His throne.

THE ANCIENT: Our Fathers told us that before we were made captives we
lived in our own villages and worked the land, worshipped together, held
festivals. There were marriages. There were harvests. Children were born and
the old people were laid to rest in the Church's shadow. Men spoke to one
another quietly in the market place, and one man could agree with another.

RAPHAEL: Villages are slow to forget

The silences of ancient years.

Houses and churches cling together

Fastened by the words of older generations

And by the silences of the dead Fathers.

So windows stare together at the sun.

Smokes of separate houses

Climb the morning sky together.

Meals are made together.

The same swallows twitter together

Under the shutters of the houses.

One clear bell tells all times,

One same small bell

Recalls the silence of the blessed Fathers.

THE ANCIENT: Look, here is a village! Here is a festival!

FIRST EXILE: Houses see their faces I the water,
Dressed in flags and vines. Boats and wagons
Gather. Flowering wagons and crowned oxen!

SECOND EXILE: There are blue and yellow canopies
For flute, fiddle and drum.

RAHPAEL: Singing together, dancing together
Signify that the people are one.

DANCERS: Once a body had a soul
They were in agreement.
Said the body to the soul,
I will be your raiment.
Said the spirit to the flesh
Now we are a person.

RAPHAEL: When hills are dressed in vines and fruit
And houses see their faces in the water,
They send their boats into the noonday sun.

FIRST VILLAGER: Music and dancing signify
That we are one.
So we laugh in the decorated square,
Dancing around the fiddlers under the awning.

SECOND VILLAGER: Those who sing in the boats, trailing their fingers
In the water, echo the dancers on the shore.

DANCERS: Once a person had a friend
They were in agreement.
Said the person to his friend,
Take my heart and keep it.
You and I will live alike
As a single person.

THOMAS: Look, there are two villages. One, on the shore, is the real village.
The other, upside down in the water, is the image of the first. The houses of the
real village are solid, the houses in the water are destroyed by the movements in
the water, but recreate their image in the stillness that follows.

RAPHAEL: So it is with our world. The city of men, on earth, is the inverted
reflection of another city. What is eternal and unchanging stands reflected in the
restless waters of time, and many of the events of our history are simply
movements in the water that destroy the temporal shadow of eternity. We who
are obsessed with movement, measure the importance of events by their power
to unsettle our world. We look for meaning only in the cataclysms which

obscure the image of reality. But all the things pass away, and the picture of the real city returns, although there may be no one left to recognize it, or to understand.

FIRST VILLAGER: In the gray hours before dawn
When horses stir in the stable,
Swallows twitter outside the shutter,
The streets smell of fresh bread,
And when the church door opens
One can see the lighted candles in the shadows,
And listen to the sacring bell.

SECOND VILLAGER: Before the sun was up
We had already milked the cows,
Watered the horses, hitched up the teams.
We worked together in one another's fields,
Bringing home the hay.
Everybody's grapes will redden the gutters
When we make wine together, in September.

FIRST VILLAGER: And now we all unite
To celebrate a wedding. In this festival
We dance together because we are glad
To be living together. We have heard
The same songs before, at other weddings.
That is why we play them now.
We find ourselves made new
In singing what was sung before.

DANCERS: Once a person had a friend
They were in agreement.
Said the person to his friend
Take my heart and keep it.
You and I will live alike
As a single person.

THE ANCIENT: These people do not sit together by the waters and weep, as we are accustomed to. Why is it that they are happy, while we have always lived in sorrow?

PROPHET: These are the men who have never been conquered by the builders of the ancient tower. Because they do not kill with the sword, they do not fear death. Because they do not live by the machine, they fear no insecurity. Since they say what they mean, they are able to love another, and since they live mostly in silence they know what is the beginning of life, and its meaning and its end. For they are the children of God.

THE ANCIENT: How is it that the whole world is not like this?

RAPHAEL: It shall be so, for Babylon has fallen.
[Sound of distant trumpet.]

THOMAS: Listen, I hear a trumpet
From beyond the hills.

RAPHAEL: It announces the great messenger.

VOICE: *[slowly, out of the distance]:* “I will destroy the name of Babylon, and the remains, and the bud, and the offspring, saith the Lord.”

RAPHAEL: Dicit Leo-
It was the Lion of Isaias,
Waking on the watchtower.
The desert-thrasher,
Seeing beyond mountains,
Whole nights upon his tower.

CHORUS: It was the Lion
Who sees in the dark
Who hunts upon the mountains:
By whom the enemy lies killed.

[Trumpets. Sounds of a storm and a distant battle.]

PROPHET: Now is the time when the great city must at last fall
By the power of its own curse. Cursed by God
Because its builders cursed themselves,
They hated peace, refused the blessing.
They hated to be themselves, hated to be men.
Wanting to be gods, they were made less than themselves.
They might have become Gods
If they had deigned to remain men.

CHORUS: In one hour, O Babylon,
In one night hour, after so many years,
After so much blood, and so much power,
In one small hour you lie destroyed.

RAPHAEL: Yours was a long hot day that burned the earth, and now
Your sun goes down in fire and rain
Not without glory. But it is not your glory,
Babylon: destroyed in one hour,
You shall be forgotten forever.

VOICE *[out of the distance]:* Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen
And is become the house of emptiness
And is carried away by the night birds.
The Kings have seen her, drowning in the sea
.

CHORUS: Fire can quench water
Flame can stand upon foam
Blood lies on the rock
When the sea goes home.
Nails can give back thunder
Fire can leap from wood
And mercy from the Heart of Man
Though that Heart be dead.

[Raphael and Thomas speak against the background of the chorus]
THOMAS: I hear the voices of the islands. What do they sing?

RAPHAEL: They sing that Babylon has fallen.

THOMAS: I hear the voices of the hills. What do they sing?

RAPHAEL: They say there shall be no more war.

THOMAS: I hear the voices of the Cities. What do they sing?

RAPHAEL: There is no more despair!

CHORUS: We know the Word of God is spoken
Never to be forgotten
Not to be echoed in the ear,
Printed upon a piece of paper
And forgotten.

THOMAS: How was Babylon destroyed?

CHORUS: By one Word uttered in silence Babylon

THOMAS: But by what one word was Babylon destroyed?

RAPHAEL: By the One Word Who is in the beginning, and
Who sustains all things, and Who shall be in the end. He was, and He is, and He
shall be. He Who Is has only to be mentioned, and all He knows not is no longer
known.

THOMAS: Who is the Word, the Beginning and the End?

RAPHAEL: He is the King of Glory!

CHORUS: In Principio

PROPHET: The Word of God on high
Is the fountain of wisdom.
His ways are eternal commandments.

CHORUS: *Erat Verbum
Et Verbum erat apud Deum.*

PROPHET: The word leaped down in darkness men could touch
Nor did the dark deliver them.

CHORUS: *Et Deus erat Verbum*

RAPHAEL: The Word held open the divided sea
Until the tide drowned kings
The Word spoke on the Mountain.

CHORUS: *Et Deus erat Verbum*

PROPHET: Men who were bitten in the desert
Grew well, remembering the Word
Or seeing His mysterious sign.

CHORUS: *Verbum caro factum,
Verbum sanctum!*

THOMAS: Flesh did not understand
The Word made flesh.
Those who feared the voice of thunder
Scorned to eat the Word made Bread.

CHORUS: *Verbum crucis,
Verbum sanctum!*

THOMAS: Not wheat, nor meat
Nor meal, nor bread:
The Word was given in the desert
Where snow endured the force of fire.
The Word came down upon the wilderness

CHORUS: *Verbum crucis,
Verbum pacis.*

PROPHET: Those who have taken peace upon their tongue
Have eaten heaven:
They have made heaven in the midst of us,
Jerusalem in Babylon

CHORUS: *Verbum crucis*

RAPHAEL: This is the Word the prophet saw:
This is the tender plant
The bleeding root in his despised report:
The Word who would not speak when He was wounded.

CHORUS: *Verbum sanctum.*

PROPHET: Give rest, give rest, O Lord,
To the slain souls who sing beneath the altar.
Give the robes and rest and thrones to the white martyrs
Who swore and signed with their own blood:
“Thy words are true!”

CHORUS: *Adorate verbum sanctum in aeternum.*

ALL: Lo the Word and the white horse
With eyes of flame to judge and fight
Power and meekness in His hand
Mercy in His look like wine.
He alone can break the seal
And tell the conquerors His Name.

ADOREMUS DOMINUM!

(CP 247-273)

Appendix Two: The Tower of Babel:

An Explanation.

The following excerpt is from Thérèse Lentfoehr's text, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton*. (New Directions: New York, 1979). 154-156

The extract consists of Thomas Merton's own explanation of the Morality Play.

The Theme: The basic idea of this philosophic "morality play" is the *unity of man in the charity and truth of Christ.*

Man is made in the image of God. That is to say he is made to be united to God and to his fellow man in the sharing of a common vision of God's truth. This is his true destiny, and in this alone can he be truly happy.

No man can come to perfect happiness by himself. Our salvation is a corporate work: we learn the truth from one another, and we help one another to grow in likeness to God by charity. But for this corporate work of our salvation to take place, we depend on the use of a divinely given instrument: language.

The builders of the Tower of Babel are men who have repudiated God and His Truth. Instead of using their divinely given endowments in the service of God, they pervert His creatures and themselves by turning all things to the worship of themselves. The Tower is the symbol of man's pride and self-sufficiency without God. The building of the Tower is man's worship of his own technological skill, of his own wealth, his own ambitions, his own power to crush other men and make them his slaves. The building of the Tower of Babel

is man's construction of the great illusion that he himself is a god. This is the illusion which lies at the root of all the evils of our time.

Man's true destiny is to build another city – the city of love, and not the city of pride. St. Augustine long ago contrasted the two cities, Babylon and Jerusalem, saying: "These two cities are built by two loves: the first by love of self unto the contempt of God, the second by love of God unto the contempt of self." But the city of love is the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, and it is built by those who renouncing themselves and their illusory pride, love God with their whole heart and love their neighbour as themselves. These are they who, united in Christ, have the truth dwelling in their hearts and manifest it in the darkness of the world of sin.

Part 1-scene 1- ***Building the Tower*** – The apparent unity of the builders in their common purpose is an illusion. The apparent strength of the great tower is only a shadow. Man's pride remakes the world on a foundation of pure falsity. That falsity must inevitably break through, and the world of illusion must collapse. Meanwhile in order to preserve the illusion, three great means are used: a frantic activism, the domination of the masses by fear, and ultimately the use of violence, in war. All these means must fail. The structure must inevitably fall to the ground.

Part 1-scene 2 – ***The Trial***. The fall of the tower does not cure man of his illusion. On the contrary, by means of war, lying propaganda, and false philosophies, the illusion is spread abroad and carried to the ends of the earth.

All men become infected by it. The Leader of Babel puts Truth and Language on trial for their life. That is, he claims the right to manipulate the truth and to make words mean what he pleases. To the men of Babel words are only justified in so far as they can be made to serve the great illusion. Ultimately, the men of Babel are forced to use thought, words, and ideologies in order to destroy all meaning and to keep men from getting in contact with one another and living in unity. Materialistic society is doomed to disintegration and will ultimately collapse.

Part 2-scene 1 – *Zodiac*. In this scene, lyrical and reflective, we meditate on the nature of men, (man), on his need for unity, and on the fact that this unity cannot be achieved unless men can communicate the truth to one another. But for men to be united in the truth, God Himself must intervene, sending into the world His Word, that is His own Truth, in the person of Christ. Men will ultimately find unity and peace only when they are united in Christ.

Part 2 –scene 2 – *The Exiles*. Lonely and disoriented, the victims of Babel wander aimlessly in a wasteland, wondering if life can have any meaning. The Prophet finds them and tells them they must hope for a solution, and seek it with all their power. Life does indeed have meaning. Man's thought and art, and work, and social living can indeed become fruitful and happy once again, since they have been purified of the great illusion. God will send Christ, His Son, Who will redeem man and purify his soul and make him ready to receive the light. United in the light of Christ, man will once again discover unity, and fruitfulness, and joy (The Village Festival). The world is not evil, and man's

city is not itself an illusion. Only Babel is illusion. Man's society united in the peace of Christ, reflects the great ultimate reality of God Himself and foreshadows our destiny to be eternally one in Him. When this has been made clear, the Fall of Babylon is heard: this time the definite fall, that marks the end of time and the final victory of Christ in His Church. The play ends with exaltation of the Church acclaiming the victory of truth over falsity, and reviewing the whole history of salvation: the action of God's Truth in the darkness of falsity and sin.

THOMAS MERTON

Appendix Three :Biblical Commentary: References to Babel.

There are a number of sources, which detail the meaning of the story of Babel and link it to Babylon. A modern commentary that draws together much of the background information to the Old and New Testament is the Jerome Biblical Commentary. It reflects much of the understanding Merton had of Genesis story.

The Jerome Biblical Commentary was published in the year of Merton's death (1968). While Merton obviously did not use it as a reference for his play much of the material it contained had been in circulation long before the tome was published. Merton's references to the encyclical of Pius XII on Biblical Studies in *The Bread in the Wilderness* reveals his familiarity with scriptural studies and the documents associated with it. He quotes a section of the encyclical (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*) supporting his spiritual understanding of scripture.

What was done and said in the Old Testament was ordained and disposed by God with such consummate wisdom that things past prefigured in a spiritual way those that were to come under the new dispensation of grace.^{xxxiii}

This understanding penetrates his Morality. Merton's play is far more about his present than about the past. And it is as much about this century as about the mid-nineteenth century or the pre-history of the Jewish people, as will be seen when the play is discussed in detail.

Merton was also familiar with the work of other scripture scholars ancient and modern. In his work, *Bread in the Wilderness*, discusses thesis of Origen, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Benedict of Nursia, St, Teresa of Avila, St. Augustine and Paul Claudel as well as refuting the work of theologians such as the quietist,

Michael Molino, before presenting his own understanding of the Psalms. With such a range of writers to draw on it seems Merton would have had access to others as well to support his ideas around the myth.

The Jerome Biblical Commentary links Babel to the Yahwist tradition. The Yahwist tradition “presents a remarkably wide sweep of history, beginning with the first man and showing the relevance of all history to God’s specific plan for the chosen people as evidenced first in the patriarchal narratives and more immediately in the events of Exodus. It is this plan as conceived by Yahweh that gives coherence and meaning to the disparate material. Moved by the glorious eminence to which God had brought the tribe of Judah in the period of David and Solomon, J. can present the divine communion with men with a boldness of conviction that is at times disconcerting . . . For the same reason he betrays an optimism that, despite the continuing prevalence of sin, can foresee victory in the moment of defeat. (Cf. Gen 3:15, 4:7).”^{xxxiii}

The commentary on Genesis 11; 1-9 states the significance of the story to the Old Testament. And as Merton recognises the organic unity of the Bible, this significance is also related to the New Testament as well. Thus Merton uses the Pentecostal story in the second act of his work. Throughout the work Merton applies the story to the world situation at the time he wrote because he believed the scriptures spoke not just for the past but for the present and the future also and was grounded in the present reality of human experience no matter the place or time.

(L) The Tower of Babel (11:1-9) (J). An ancient story (or stories) used by J to give the theological reason for the division of mankind described more prosaically in Ch. 10. Primitively only an etiological explanation of the origins of different languages (or of the city of Babel), it now serves to climax the whole prehistory of mankind and introduce the story of the patriarchs. The sin of the first man resulted in the alienation of man from God (3:22-24) and from his fellow man (4:1-16). From sin now results the alienation of all human society from God and men from one another. The prophets will announce the future reversal of this movement (cf. Isa. 2:1-5), fulfilled on Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:5-12).

The commentary continues referring to individual verses in the text:

1-4. Babylonia (Shinar) is the scene of the story, confirmed by the reference to bricks and bitumen, the common building material of Mesopotamia. The Palestinian redaction is revealed in the reference to stone and mortar. The evil is their desire ‘to make a name’ for themselves (cf. 12:2) rather than in their attempt to build a tower ‘with its top in the heavens’. The latter reference is to the ziggurat, a staged tower common in ancient Babylon. **5-7** Human smallness, not divine impotence, is emphasised in the lord’s descent. We have noted before J’s irony (3:22). The plural in verse 7 may reflect the concept of God’s royal court, an early idea in Israel. The punishment had been anticipated in v.4. **8-9** The name of the city, Babel, is here associated with the Hebrew root *bll*, “to confound.” The great city and its (implied) defeat thus become synonymous with man’s revolt against God and its consequences.

The commentary quoted makes use of archaeological and other scientific studies such as those related to anthropology, history and pre-history, literature and sociology as well as language studies. Merton also used his psychological knowledge, derived from his Freudian and other psychological reading at

Cambridge and Columbia. He read for himself and his own needs rather for a course of study but the background served him well when he attempting to present a motivation for the continuing vulnerability of mankind to the abuse of language and the power ploys of dictatorship through the ages and into the twentieth, and twenty-first century!

By linking Babel to Babylon, to the Jewish exile there and by references to astrology, *Quartets Merton* revealed he was familiar with at least the most common studies related to Babel.

The “Encyclopaedia of the Orient” intimates there is actual historical background to the story of the Tower of Babel.^{xxxiii} There is a strong historical movement in the drama of Babel indicating Merton saw the Tower as a concrete reality before he saw it as an image and symbol. He was later to move into ‘concrete poetry’. The morality play may have been a step in that direction while maintaining the strength of metaphor and symbol.

The actual tower is believed to have been a ziggurat – the temples used to worship a god in the Mesopotamia region. The Hebrew Scriptures suggest this particular tower was erected by the descendents of Noah on the plain of Shinar in Babylon. There is, of course, archaeological and Biblical controversy as to where the actual tower existed. It has been suggested it was constructed at Etemenanki and was part of the temple of Marduk in Babylon.

The name “Tower of Babel” comes from the actual name of the temple, *Bab-ilu*, meaning Gate of God. Perhaps in some way this appealed to Merton for whom the metaphor of gate/door had mystical overtones. This door is the door to contemplation, the door to the infinite. It is ironically the opposite of the door/gate of Babel. Babel in the myths is a forced entry into the sacred realm. It is built to overpower the Divine – even the divine in humanity because Babel invites the false self of Merton’s theology to take on the persona of one ‘whose name is great’. Babel is the place of pride not of humility. It does not belong to heaven or earth. It is the place of displacement and Merton understood that.

The building of such a tower was against all Hebrew precedence and against scriptural warnings which forbade the Hebrews to worship what was above them – the sun, moon, stars and so on. (Deut 17:3; 2Kings 17:16; 21:5; Jer 7:18; 19:13; 44:17, 19, 25). Merton’s use of astrology in the play’s second act emphasises the forbidden nature of using the sky for idolatry or as portents of salvation but has a double aspect in that it also indicates that the chaos on earth is reflected in the heavens. What occurs in history can also have a timeless effect on what appears to outside history.

Astrology

Astrology, with its focus on the study of the zodiac was first developed by the Chaldeans and originated in Babylon. They divided the sky into sections and gave meanings to each based on the stars located in that section. Astrology developed in Babylon and then passed to the empire of ancient Egypt where it

mingled with the native animism and polytheism of the Nile. By the time the Jews left Egypt for Canaan astrology infected the population there. Some of the strictest warnings in the Bible against astrology date from this period (Lev. 19:31; Deut. 18.) Later astrology entered Rome. The actual Hebrew text relating to Babel does not contain the words 'to reach'. The text speaks of as 'in', 'on', 'with' or 'by' the heavens. All four are possible translations of the Hebrew text. Boue suggests this could mean that the top of the ziggurat was dedicated to the heavens as a place of worship or possibly the top itself had a representation of the zodiac on it.

The significance of the above lies in the way Merton has incorporated many of the understandings concerning the ziggurat and astronomy into his text. Astronomy as a false prophecy is juxtaposed against the true prophet who speaks to Israel and for the divinity in Act two. The prophet then as well is the antithesis of the leader whose every word is a lie even though it seems straightforward. The true prophet has none of the ambivalence present in astrology. Astrology is expressed in such a way it can justify its predictions no matter what the result. The true prophet names reality as it is. As well the true prophet is linked to the innocence of children. The false prophet, links the future to death only. He manipulates his hearers into accepting such a future.

Edward Babinski has an electronic site possibly to disprove Biblical Fundamentalism. He makes the point that until the reformation "Pagans, Jews and Christians agreed that the stars lay 'above' men and 'nearer' to God, while

the Christians added that the earth was a “sink of impurity” with hell lying at the earth’s centre. Such a belief seems to be a distortion and even disintegration of the Augustine image used as an epigraph to the *Tower of Babel* by Merton.^{xxxiii} It does relate to the, then, popular image of Hell and Heaven (as being places rather than states) enduring even to today. Merton does use concrete images in his work to illustrate the places where God is not e.g. the Hanging Gardens of Babylon where the leader ‘will presently’ hang the heads of his murdered opponents.

Other sources, which support the existence of the tower but place it elsewhere to the *Encyclopaedia of the Orient*, include *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*. The latter states that there are no Babylonian documents yet discovered which clearly refer to the subject. Merton, even in his rare book vault, would probably not have access to such material even though he does state that the quality of the library at Gethsemani was high. At the same time he did have access to other libraries. These supplied him with the work of archaeologists such as the discoverer of the remnants of Neanderthal man at Lake Chad (Leakey and Levi-Strauss). Such archaeologists appear in Merton’s list of readings. Much of his reading in the 40’s and 50’s though related to monasticism, the Desert Fathers, Cistercian traditions and philosophy as well as poetry.^{xxxiii}

There are a number of authorities cited in the above text supporting the non-existence of evidence for the literal existence of the tower. George Smith, Chad Bascowen and Sayce believe there are indications of source reference but other

researchers discount such indications. The most probable reference to the tower of Babel outside the Hebrew Scriptures is to be found in the ‘History of Berosus’ as Abydenus and Alemach Polyhistor hand it down in two variations. The latter is supposed to have drawn the material from Babylonian sources.

The site of Babel

As previously mentioned there has been controversy over the site of the tower. The Temple of Marduk has already been mentioned.

One site named in the Babylonian Talmud (BUXTORT, “LEXICON TALMUDICUM, Col. 313) connects Borsippa, on the right side of the Euphrates, about seven or eight miles from the city proper, with the confusion of tongues. This story is one of the many mentioned by Steiner in the work previously cited. The Catholic Encyclopaedia makes the following reservation:

A long period elapsed from the time of the composition of Genesis to the time of the Babylonian Talmud. Besides the Biblical account seems to imply that the tower was within the city limits, while it is hardly probable that the city limits extended to Borsippa in very ancient times. The historical character of the tower is not impaired by our inability to point out its location with certainty.^{xxxiii}

It is in fact helpful for Merton in discussing the mythic aspects of the story not to be able to point to an exact location – whether Tell Amron, Birs-Nimrod, Babel or Etemenanki. The tower then can sustain its universal symbolism of a quantum alteration in humanity’s existence on the earth and of humanity’s relationship to the sacred.

The Tower

The shape of the tower of Babel has been identified as a ziggurat construction typical of the temples of Mesopotamia. This is important for Merton's understanding of the tower's space. The square base of such a tower equates with the square of the city and is related to the supposedly fixed position of the stars in the heavens. The cosmos is mirrored in this composite image. Control is seen as belonging to whatever Divinity ruled the temple. Their word was both creation and law. In the myth of Babel man attempts clumsily to usurp the function of Yahweh, that is, of the Divine Word itself while at the same time knowing the impossibility of this action. An example of such a structure can be seen in the tower of Birs-Nimrud. The ruins of Ophro still exist today. Cubic blocks of masonry, decreasing in size, are placed on top of each other forming separate stories. People move from one level to another along an inclined plane. The tower at Birs-Nimrud was seven stories high compared to two or three stories at Ur and Arach. As Merton notes astronomy was taken into account as each story was painted a different colour according to the planet to which it was dedicated. Usually corners of the tower faced the four points of the compass:

On top of these constructions there was a sanctuary so that they served both as temples and observatories. Their interior consisted of sun-dried clay, but the outer walls were coated with fire-baked bricks. The asphalt peculiar to the Babylonian neighbourhood served as mortar; all these details are in keeping with the report of Genesis.^{xxxiii}

Suggestions have been made regarding the date at which the tower was constructed. Genesis 11:10-17 contains the name of Phaleg, the grandnephew of

Heber; this places the date after the Flood as can be imagined this dating is somewhere tentative.

The City and Nimrod.

For Merton the city is disconnected from the Divine in many ways.

According to the Hebraic scriptures, Nimrod – the mighty hunter, built cities. According to one translation, his name means, “Let us revolt”. There are echoes here of the original revolution described in the scriptures – the cosmic battle led by Michael the Archangel. According to legend Nimrod becomes a tyrant or a despot. He is the mythical figure behind the abstract figure of the tyrant in the morality, *The Tower of Babel*. In turn that figure looks forward to the tyrannical figures of Hitler, Mussolini and their ilk. Nimrod hunts the souls of men and it is the souls of humanity that are in danger from him. This occurs because, in the drama, humanity loses its focus – God disappears, Babel, the gate of God, becomes Babel, the gateway to confusion. Because of this Babylon becomes in some minds and in history the fountainhead of false religion in the post-flood world.

The city Babylon and Iraq figure in Biblical prophecies connected with the end of the age. “Mystery Babylon” is a theme seen even more in Bible prophecy. Revelation 17-18 depicts God’s final judgement of world religions plus world commerce and trade. Since these man-made systems have sprung from the source rebellion of Nimrod and Babylon.^{xxxiii}

Nimrod is designated then as the first builder of post-Flood cities. These cities were erected in what is now mostly modern Iraq. Nimrod is thus the founder of Babylon and Nineveh. This empire of Babylon under Nimrod was an affront to God and men; an affront to God in that it sought to do without God (Gen 11:1-9). It was also an affront to man in that it sought to rule over other people tyrannically. Barnhouse in *The Invisible War* writes of Nimrod.

Cush begat Nimrod; he began to be a mighty despot in the land. He was an arrogant tyrant, defiant before the face of the Lord; wherefore it is said even as Nimrod the mighty despot haughty before the face of the Lord. And the homeland of his empire was Babel, then Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. From this base he invaded the kingdom of Asshur, and Resin between Nineveh and Calah. These make up one great city.^{xxxiii}

This is the city of sin – “great in its defiance of God. This is man’s city, the secular city. It is of man, by man and for man’s glory”. Merton’s extension of the tower to the idea of cities antagonistic to God thus has a scriptural basis.

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