

SEEING THROUGH LANGUAGE:

*Thomas Merton's Contemplation of Hidden Wholeness
With a Perspective from Ludwig Wittgenstein*

—by **Willie Yaryan**

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness.

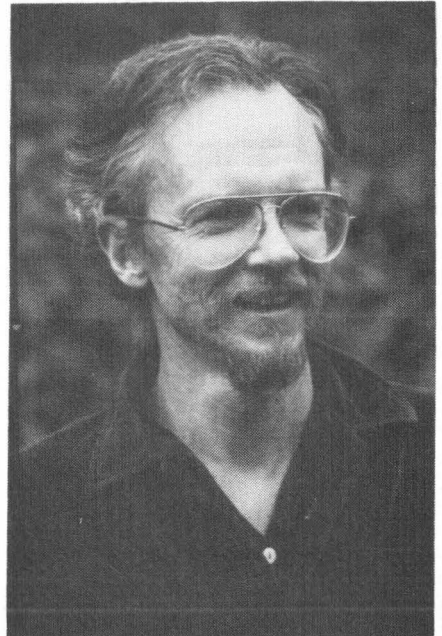
—Thomas Merton, "Hagia Sophia"¹

In an essay on Zen Buddhism, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton quotes, approvingly, Ludwig Wittgenstein, as saying: "Don't think: Look!"²

Rather than advocating a kind of mindlessness, Merton is concerned with uncovering the Buddhist notion of "mindfulness," an "awareness which in its most elementary form consists in that 'bare attention' which simply sees what is right there and does not add any comment, any interpretation, any judgement, any conclusion. It just sees."³

Zen was congenial to Merton because mindfulness corresponds to "contemplation," the Christian analog to that Buddhist intuition which sees to the heart of things, and, in fact, sees through "thingness" altogether. Like Wittgenstein, Merton was aware of the "bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language,"⁴ and his prophetic calling, as well, was to point out the illusions created by our linguistic construction of reality, and to point to that "hidden wholeness" which is invisible to our false self.

The human dilemma of communication is that we cannot communicate ordinarily without words and signs, but even ordinary experience tends to be falsified by our habits of verbalization and rationalization. The convenient tools of language enable us to decide beforehand what we think things mean, and tempt us all too easily to see



WILLIE YARYAN

Willie Yaryan has been a newspaper reporter, press agent for rock-and-roll singers, and business manager for magazines, and is currently a data processor for the University of California at Santa Cruz. He lives with his wife and two children in the Northern California mountains. A friend introduced him to Merton's writings five years ago and, inspired by Merton as well as monastic spirituality, he became a Roman Catholic at Easter 1985. He describes himself as a closet academic who recently returned to university study, particularly drawn to Merton's interest in Sufism.

things only in a way that fits our logical preconceptions and our verbal formulas. Instead of seeing *things* and *facts* as they are we see them as reflections and verifications of the sentences we have previously made up in our minds. We quickly forget how to simply see things and substitute our words and our formulas for the things themselves, manipulating facts so that we see only what conveniently fits our prejudices.⁵

Merton testified in countless essays, books and poems to contemplation as a way of seeing, an experience of union with God, and a completion of the project of living, which carries a certitude far deeper than the certainties of superficial faith and reason. For Merton, contemplation precipitates the death of the false self and the rebirth of the true self.

To the philosopher, Merton's call for the death of the self might look like suicide of the intellect. Yet, outwardly, he never abandoned his intellect, and tirelessly sought new ways to express what he considered forgotten wisdom. The assent of faith is only the first step toward experiencing the reality of God. What stands between the existing individual and that experience is our false self, that form of life, in Wittgenstein's terms, that tries to "say...more than we know."⁶

Nothing could be more alien to contemplation than the *cogito ergo sum* of Descartes. "I think, therefore I am." This is the declaration of an alienated being, in exile from his own spiritual depths, compelled to seek some comfort in a *proof for his own existence* (!) based on the observation that he "thinks." If his thought is necessary as a medium through which he arrives at the concept of his existence, then he is in fact only moving further away from his true being. He is reducing himself to a concept. He is making it impossible for himself to experience, directly and immediately, the mystery of his own being. At the same time, by also reducing God to a concept, he makes it impossible for himself to have any intuition of the divine reality which is inexpressible. He arrives at his own being as if it were an objective reality, that is to say he strives to become aware of himself as he would of some "thing" alien to himself. And he proves that the "thing" exists. He convinces himself: "I am therefore some *thing*." And then he goes on to convince himself that God, the infinite, the transcendent, is also a "thing," and "object," like other finite and limited objects of our thought.⁷

God can only be a subject and never an object. As inheritors of the Cartesian point of view, however, we cannot conceive of a subject other than as an object looked at subjectively. The tangibility of God forever eludes our grasp. The subject/object structure of our language lures us into thinking it reflects reality, while, in fact, it constructs reality in its own image, a false reality because it excludes God.

Original sin, for Merton, is to be born self-centered. That self we are born with, which grows through distinguishing self from not-self, is destined to be shed like a butterfly's cocoon. Due to the objectification of reality we have become prisoners in the cocoon of our false self, unable to see beyond ourselves. Contemplation, is achieved in the self-annihilation of humility, allows us to see through the illusions and become what we are.

"Humility alone can destroy...self-centeredness," Merton believed; "Humility contains in itself the answer to all the great problems of the life of the soul," the key problem being despair, "the absolute extreme of self-love."⁸ Humility, for Merton and for the monastic tradition he represents, is that self-emptying, or *kenosis*, which makes way for the presence of God.

Despair...is reached when a man deliberately turns his back on all help from anyone else in order to taste the rotten luxury of knowing himself to be lost.⁹

Merton saw despair as "the ultimate development of a pride so great and stiff-necked that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God." His leap of faith was one in humility; for "the humble man there is no longer any such thing as self-pity,"¹⁰ indeed the self as we know it no longer exists.

Humility is the shedding of the cocoon of the false self, a necessary step beyond the initial intellectual assent of faith. It has been variously described as divestment, disattachment, renunciation, resignation. To the monastic tradition it was a rejection of the world of the “flesh” — not, for Merton, bodily life but rather “mundane life” — in exchange for the spirit.

The spirit speaks to us from a deep inner sanctuary of the soul which is inaccessible to the flesh. For the “flesh” is our external self, our false self. The “spirit” is our real self, our inmost being united to God in Christ.¹¹

Humility is central to the monastic Rule of St. Benedict. Through humility, St. Benedict writes, the monk “will find that perfect love of God which casts out fear, by means of which everything he had observed anxiously before will now appear simple and natural.”¹² The selflessness of humility is the way to peace where all problems disappear.

“It is a great temptation to try to make the spirit explicit,”¹³ Wittgenstein believed, and that temptation was the source of illness caused by our “misuse of language.” “The philosopher is the man who must cure himself of many sicknesses of the understanding,”¹⁴ he said, which can only happen through an “alteration in the mode of life of human beings...a changed mode of thought and of life, not through a medicine invented by an individual.”¹⁵

The early Wittgenstein aimed in his philosophy at “the logical clarification of thoughts,” and concluded that “what can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.”¹⁶ Thoughts and speech necessarily exclude the “inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical.”¹⁷ The imperative of silence was, for Wittgenstein, so important that, following the completion of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he gave up philosophy as well as his inherited fortune to become a school teacher in the Austrian Alps. His mysticism was one of action and deeds not theory.

Wittgenstein told Bertrand Russell that he had considered becoming a monk, and he worked for a time as a gardener in a monastery. “I know there have been times in history when monks were nothing but a nuisance,” he told a friend, “but monasticism does correspond to a real need of some human beings.”¹⁸ He admired the monk in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, and said “you know there really have been people like the Elder Zosima who could see into people’s hearts and direct them.”¹⁹ In the 1930’s he visited Russia and considered moving there, and it is possible that he thought of looking for an Elder Zosima to help him wrestle with the problems that obsessed him.

Merton did leave the world of flesh to become a monk. If, in the beginning, he was intent on rejecting the world, in time Merton came to affirm what was good in the world while maintaining that solitude was necessary for him. He believed that “people are called to the monastic life, so that they may grow and be transformed, ‘reborn’ to a new and more complete identity, and to a more profoundly fruitful existence in peace, in wisdom, in creativity, in love.”²⁰ That call, however, is not limited to potential monks or even Christians, Merton discovered, and the recognition of the universality of this “aspiration to growth and rebirth” led him to appreciate the paths to sanctity in other religions.

The notion of “rebirth” is not peculiar to Christianity. In Sufism, Zen Buddhism and in many other religions or spiritual traditions, emphasis is placed on the call to fulfill certain obscure yet urgent potentialities in the ground of one’s being, to “become someone” that one already (potentially) is, the person one is truly meant to be. Zen calls this awakening a recognition of “your original face before you were born.”²¹

If the linguistic construction of reality is a necessary means to growth in the developing individual, there comes a time when language becomes a hindrance to further growth, a block to that rebirth which Merton and others see as the prelude to “final integration”; in Christian terms, membership in the Kingdom of God.

We should let ourselves be brought naked and defenseless into the center of that dread where we stand alone before God in our nothingness, without explanation, without theories, completely dependent upon his providential care, in dire need of the gift of his grace, his mercy and the light of faith.²²

The abstract philosopher troubled Wittgenstein. “What is the use of studying philosophy if all that it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic, etc., if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life?”²³ Though he taught philosophy at Cambridge during the 1930’s and 1940’s, he always advised students thinking of becoming academic philosophers to take up other careers, preferably ones which helped people practically, and during the war he stopped teaching to work in a hospital.

Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistably tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness.²⁴

Wittgenstein’s method, or therapy, of philosophy, was to investigate thinking that darkens our vision, that makes language opaque rather than transparent. “The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to,” he writes, “one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself into question.”²⁵

Our world is limited by the language we use, and the Cartesian categories of thought imbedded in our language restrict our world to one that is immediate and imminent. Though language itself is “the right expression...for the miracle of the existence of the world,”²⁶ Wittgenstein believed, particular language games, or forms of life, limit what we see and can know.

Just as Wittgenstein believed that “A book on ethics, which really was a book on ethics...would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world,”²⁷ Merton thought that contemplation had the power to burst the limits of language that blind us to transcendental reality.

“Contemplation...is the experiential grasp of reality as *subjective*, not so much ‘mine’ (which would signify ‘belonging to the external self’) but ‘myself’ in existential mystery. Contemplation does not arrive at reality after a process of deduction, but by an intuitive awakening in which our free and personal reality becomes fully alive to its own existential depths, which open out into the mystery of God. For the contemplative there is no *cogito* (‘I think’) and no *ergo* (‘therefore’) but only SUM, I Am.”²⁸

The way to peace for the contemplative is through what St. John of the Cross called “the dark night.” The “rebirth which precedes final integration,” Merton points out, “involves a crisis which is extremely severe.”²⁹

Contemplation is no pain-killer. What a holocaust takes place in this steady burning to ashes of old worn-out words, cliches, slogans, rationalizations! The worst of it is that even apparently *holy* conceptions are consumed along with all the rest. It is a terrible breaking and burning of idols, a purification of the sanctuary, so that no graven thing may occupy the place that God has commanded to be left empty: the center, the existential altar which simply “is.” In the end the contemplative suffers the anguish of realizing that he *no longer knows what God is*. He may or may not mercifully realize that, after all, this is a great gain, because “God is not a *what*,” not a “*thing*.” That is precisely one of the essential characteristics of contemplative experience. It sees that there is no “*what*” that can be called God. There is “no such thing” as God because God is neither a “*What*” nor a “*thing*” but a pure “*Who*.”³⁰

Wittgenstein hoped to persuade people “to change their style of thinking”³¹ so that their “way of seeing is remodeled.”³² He even expressed the wish that “God grant the philosopher insight into what lies in front of everyone’s eyes.”³³ He was driven by a vision of what lies beyond the limits of our world, an intuition inexpressible in words, which can only be hinted at and pointed to by analogy with physical perception.

And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then nothing gets lost. But the unutterable will be—unutterably—contained in what has been uttered.³⁴

For Merton, contemplation is

a kind of spiritual vision to which both reason and faith aspire by their very nature, because without it they must always remain incomplete. Yet contemplation is not vision because it sees 'without seeing' and knows 'without knowing.' It is a more profound depth of faith, a knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words or even in clear concepts. It can be suggested by words, by symbols, but in the very moment of trying to indicate what it knows the contemplative mind takes back what it has said, and denies what it has affirmed. For in contemplation we know by 'unknowing.' Or, better, we know beyond all knowing of 'unknowing.'³⁵

What can the conventional philosopher think of Merton's epistemology of contemplation which makes an advance beyond both the twin certainties of faith and reason, and which purports to apprehend reality by stripping away all the consolations of apparent reality, from the empirical "self" to objective "things"?

Philosophy that is not poetry, or fragmentary such as that published by Wittgenstein, is forced linguistically to reconstruct reality and to express itself in propositions, hypotheses and theories, according to the standards of a particular point of view. This kind of philosophy is always systematic, for the grammar of our language is systematic. Philosophy to be read will always differ dynamically from philosophy that is lived. The philosophy of Wittgenstein and Merton was a reflection, often poetic and passionate, of the way they lived.

Writing to a friend about the Lord's Prayer, "the most extraordinary prayer ever written," Wittgenstein said that "the Christian religion does not consist in saying a lot of prayers, in fact we are commanded just the opposite. If you and I are to live religious lives it must not just be that we talk a lot about religion, but that in some way our lives are different."³⁶ It was his belief that "only if you try to be helpful to other people will you in the end find your way to God."³⁷

"The whole aim of Zen," Merton noted, "is not to make fool-proof statements about experience, but to come to direct grips with reality without the mediation of logical verbalizing."³⁸

When we in the West speak of "basic facts of existence" we tend immediately to conceive these facts as reducible to certain austere and foolproof propositions—logical statements that are guaranteed to have meaning because they are empirically verifiable. These are what Bertrand Russell called "atomic facts." Now for Zen it is inconceivable that the basic facts of existence should be able to be stated in any proposition however atomic. For Zen, from the moment fact is transferred to a statement it is falsified.³⁹

The inability of language used literally to express the fullness of reality leaves philosophers in a double-bind in which certainty is uncertain and truth quite often a lie. Perhaps literalness is our contemporary myth and the incompetency of language to function mechanically is its Cartesian downfall. Zen, with its paradoxical *koans* which push language into absurdity while opening the inner eye to another perception of reality, might point the way to alternate uses of language, "Zen uses language against itself," Merton said, "to blast out these preconceptions and to destroy the specious 'reality' in our minds, so that we can see *directly*."⁴⁰

The metaphors used by Merton and Wittgenstein to express the labor pains of the self's rebirth are violent and painful. The language of Zen "blasts" our preconceptions, the "explosion" of Wittgenstein's real book of ethics which "destroys" all other books. Each thinker followed the Socratic method in equating true knowledge with ignorance. Knowing comes with the elimination of error rather than with the accumulation of false truths. The sword of truth is two-edged; it saves only by cutting away.

Merton saw that the transformation of contemplation involved the destruction of idols: "The 'Holy Object' must be destroyed in so far as it is an idol embodying the secret desires, aspirations and powers

of the ego-self.”⁴¹ All affirmation of our cultural identity is suspect, and this explains why in “higher religious traditions the path to transcendent realization is the path of ascetic self-emptying and ‘self-naughting’ and not at all a path of self-affirmation, of self-fulfillment, or of ‘perfect attainment’.”⁴²

Though Wittgenstein does not speak of growth, as does Merton, the discontinuity between what he called “sickness of the understanding”, on the one hand, and his “sound human understanding” where problems disappear, on the other, is a transition, a leap, by which the human individual matures. Wittgenstein was pessimistic about his “sketches of landscapes” being understood. While he suffered distress in the process of expressing himself in words, he was more successful in the project of his life. His final words to friends as he lay dying were: “Tell them I’ve had a wonderful life.”⁴³

As a convert to Roman Catholicism and a monk who chose the strict Cistercian observance, Merton embraced fully the conceptual formulas of dogma and enthusiastically accepted obedience to the authority of the institutional Church. His point of view was that of Biblical revelation as interpreted by the tradition of the Church. Like the young Wittgenstein, Merton’s earliest writings were self-assured and even dogmatic. Wittgenstein felt that he had solved all problems in philosophy with his *Tractatus* and Merton confidently explicated the wisdom of tradition from within the cloister of his monastery.

In his studies of tradition, Merton uncovered hidden wisdom in the sayings of the desert hermits, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the mystics like St. John of the Cross and the anonymous author of “*The Cloud of Unknowing*,” that spoke in a tone antithetical to the accepted formulas of 20th century Christianity. Although mostly orthodox, these mystics and early theologians shared a different way of looking at accepted truths, a point of view unknown to most contemporary church-going Christians. Like Soren Kierkegaard before him, although in a gentler manner, Merton called Christendom to re-examine the faith it takes for granted.

Too often our notion of faith is falsified by our emphasis on the statements about God which faith believes, and by our forgetfulness of the fact that faith is a communion with God’s own light and truth. Actually, the statements, the propositions which faith accepts on the divine authority are simply media through which one passes in order to reach the divine Truth. Faith terminates not in a statement, not in a formula of words, but in God.⁴⁴

Though he never severed his ties with his monastery or institutional Catholicism before his death in 1968, Merton, through his studies outside of Christian tradition, came to see revelation as “transcultural,” and to believe that “the path to final integration for the individual and for the community lies, in any case, beyond the dictates and programs of any culture, ‘Christian culture’ included.”⁴⁵ The “holy conceptions” consumed in the fires of contemplation include the dogmas of his own tradition, leaving in the ashes of our false self and linguistically-limited culture only “God alone,” to whom the path of the monk has always led.

It is finally beyond the ordinary level of religious or spiritual experience (authentic experience of course) in which the intelligence and “the heart” (a traditional and technical term in Sufism, Hesychasm and Christian mysticism generally) are illumined with insight into the meaning of revelation, or of being, or of life.⁴⁶

If on the esoteric level contemplation is paralleled by mystical intuition at the heart of other religions, on the exoteric level of external practice Merton remained a Christian, firmly Christocentric in his approach to the ultimately transcultural Mystery. His vision of “hidden wholeness” was a vision of the Kingdom of God.

“When one breaks through the limits of cultural and structural religion — or irreligion — one is liable to end up, by ‘birth in the Spirit,’ or just by intellectual awakening, in a simple void where all is liberty because all is the actionless action, called by the Chinese ‘wu-wei’ and by the New Testament the ‘freedom of the Sons of God’.”⁴⁷

Final integration was for Merton, as it was for the apostle Paul, that existence where “the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me.”⁴⁸

NOTES

- ¹ Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1974), p. 506.
- ² Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite (ZBA)*, (New York: New Directions, 1968), pp.49, 139. The original quote is: "Don't think, but look!" in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations (PI)*, Trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, (Oxford Basil Blackwell, 1976, p. 31.
- ³ *ibid.*, p. 53.
- ⁴ *PI*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
- ⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 48-49.
- ⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books (BB)*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960; Harper Torchbooks, 1965), p. 45.
- ⁷ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation (NSC)*, (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 8.
- ⁸ *ibid.*, p. 181.
- ⁹ *ibid.*, p. 180.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 180.
- ¹¹ Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness*, (New York: Doubleday Image, 1964), p. 67.
- ¹² St. Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Trans. by Anthony C. Meisel and M.L. del Mastro, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1975), p. 61.
- ¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value (C&V)*, Trans. by Peter Winch and Edited by G.H. von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 8.
- ¹⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics (RFM)*, Edited by G.H. von Wright, R. Rhees and G.E.M. Anscombe; translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956), p. 157.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 57.
- ¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Trans. by C.K. Ogden, (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 27.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 187.
- ¹⁸ M. O'C. Dury, "Conversations with Wittgenstein," in *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, edited by Rush Rhees, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 113.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 86.
- ²⁰ Thomas Merton, "Final Integration: Toward a 'Monastic Therapy'," *Monastic Studies*, 6, 1968, p. 90; reprinted in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, (New York: Doubleday Image, 1968). This important article by Merton is a review of A. Reza Arasteh's *Final Integration in the Adult Personality* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965), reissued as *Toward Final Personality Integration* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975).

- ²¹ *ibid.*, p. 89.
- ²² Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, (New York: Doubleday Image, 1971), p. 69.
- ²³ Letter to Norman Malcolm in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, (Oxford University Press, 1958).
- ²⁴ BB, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
- ²⁵ PI, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
- ²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics," *The Philosophical Review*, 74, 1965, p. 11.
- ²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 7.
- ²⁸ NSC, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.
- ²⁹ "Final Integration," *op. cit.*, p. 95.
- ³⁰ NSC, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
- ³¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures & Conversations*, Edited by Cyril Barrett, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 28.
- ³² RFM, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
- ³³ C&V, *op. cit.*, p. 63.
- ³⁴ Paul Engleman, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein*, (New York: Horizon Press, 1968), p. 7.
- ³⁵ NSC, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.
- ³⁶ "Recollections," *op. cit.*, p. 94.
- ³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 114.
- ³⁸ ZBA, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
- ³⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 36-37.
- ⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 49.
- ⁴¹ ZBA, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
- ⁴² *ibid.*, p. 76.
- ⁴³ As reported by Norman Malcolm in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir.*, (Oxford University Press, 1958).
- ⁴⁴ NSC, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-129.
- ⁴⁵ "Final Integration," *op. cit.*, p. 99.
- ⁴⁶ ZBA, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
- ⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 8.
- ⁴⁸ Gal. 2:20, *New American Bible*, (New York: Thomas Nelson, trans. 1970).