

Thomas Merton's Critique of Language

By Robert E. Daggy

In 1968, Thomas Merton remarked, "The abuse of language really blocks thinking and is a substitute for it."¹ As a significant part of his growing vocation as cultural critic in the 1960s, Merton, a crafter of words himself, considered this abuse a debasing of language in which language becomes literally meaningless, a kind of cultural opiate that inures us to real meaning and leads us to illusions and false images about ourselves, our culture, and our God.

The sources of power, both political and economic (whom he sometimes called the "mandarins"), aided, indeed abetted, by the media, abuse language so that a vicious circle results: abuse leads to spiritual vacuity and emptiness, and this spiritual void in turn leads to further abuse. Merton elaborates this theme in several essays, and his critique examines many of our cultural ills in light of the abuse of language – war, violence, racism, sexism, alienation, anxiety. Words are twisted or used so often they lose all meaning. Benign phrases become ugly. Normal words hide insidious intent. This abuse "is an impurity of language and of spirit in which words, deliberately reduced to unintelligibility, appeal mindlessly to the vulnerable will."² Though we search for "packages of meaning" we end up, in Merton's terms, with question marks, and we end up not really knowing who or what we are.

He uses different words to describe what he means – lingo, jargon, officialese, glossolalia, jounalese, doubletalk, unthink, even just plain "noise" – but it all comes to the same thing: "In our mechanical age, all words have become alike, they've all been reduced to the level of the commercial. To say 'God is Love' is like saying 'Eat Wheaties.' Things come through on the same wavelength" (SC 9). And this happens whether we are in the work-a-day world, the business world, the academy, or the monastery. He noted:

The monastic life . . . is a hot medium. Hot with words like "must," "ought" and "should." Communities are devoted to high definition projects: "making it all clear!" The clearer it gets the clearer it has to be made. It branches out. You have to keep clearing the branches. The more branches you cut back the more branches grow. For one you cut you get three more. On the end of each branch is a big bushy question mark. People are running all around with packages of meaning. Each is very anxious to know whether all the others have received the latest messages. Has someone else received a message that he has not received? Will they be willing to pass it on to



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him? Will he understand it when it is passed on? Will he have to argue about it?³

We are a culture of “the word.” We are taught how to live our lives by direct speech, but, when we add to that the “masses and masses” of what Merton called “mechanical words” – those printed by machines and those spoken to us by machines – the messages become more and more confused. We may think that we can argue. We may think that we have a choice, but, to Merton, we really do not. The “packages of meaning” for which we search are often “packages of unmeaning.” We can sit around bandying words to the point of stupefaction, and this can become a distraction from our real purpose and concern. I am reminded of a committee meeting I attended about a year ago. Those in the academic world will quickly grasp my meaning here. It was a “task force” (jargon for committee that is supposed to make us feel we have a job, something pertinent to do). We were discussing the “mission” of a liberal arts college. High sounding words and phrases were tossed about. I remember one – “overarching principles” – but I have no idea what it means. Everyone sat there, looks of pious and intent interest on their faces. My mind drifted. In fact, my eyeballs threatened to roll back in my head and I think I stopped listening. (I am reminded here of a story a colleague told me of his experience in a similar meeting. He had been talking for some time about a “mission statement” or some such thing – actually I believe he said he had been “droning away” for some time – and he noticed that his fellow committee members, though carefully appearing to pay attention, had drifted away. Without missing a beat or changing the tone of his voice, he said: “And then my head fell off.” No one in the room seemed to notice as he continued with his prepared report!) In any case, someone asked me as we left the task force meeting what advice Merton might give us in preparing a mission statement. I replied that I felt Merton would have quickly grown impatient with the word games we’d been playing, that he might well say: “If you know what your mission is, why are you sitting around talking about it? If your mission is to teach, get out there and teach!”

Merton based much of his critique on his reading of Erich Fromm, Marshall McLuhan, and Herbert Marcuse. All felt that the exercise described above is one in which the mandarins keep us diverted and divided. Words become a bombardment that hinders and impedes action. Merton quoted Marcuse as saying that language is “compressed into little capsules so that it cuts down on any length or development of thought.” He goes on: “You get the facts through the impact of these small packets thrown at you” (SC 153). We look for meaning, we hope for meaning, but things become so incoherent, so denatured, so banal and trite that what we accept as having meaning frequently has no meaning at all. Merton found this particularly true of the language of advertising. One of his favorite examples came from an advertisement in *The New Yorker*:

For the love of Arpège . . .

There’s a new hair spray!

The world’s most adored fragrance now in a hair spray.

But not hair spray

as you know it.

A delicate-as-air-spray.

Your hair takes on a shimmer and sheen

that’s wonderfully young.

You seem to spray new life and bounce

right into it. And a coif of Arpège has
one more thing no other hair spray has.

It has Arpège!

Merton found this piece of tautology beyond parody, standing “inviolable in its own victorious rejection of meaning.”⁴ He later used the same advertisement in conferences he gave to contemplative nuns at Gethsemani, pointing out that, while the ad may be “stupid,” it is also “hypnotic,” giving a sense of identity, persuading us to youth and beauty and all the good things that divert us from reality. If we have the proper coif, we are a person, we are told, of worth and substance. But to Merton, such thinking means we’ve been “had” (SC 155).

We’ve all been “had” if we allow ourselves to be stupefied, drugged, dispirited with the false meanings created by the meaningless images of advertising. Even a word like “love” can become so distorted that when we use it what we actually mean has little to do with love. If we accept the messages bombarding us from the media, we ourselves become “packages” in a human meat market – goods and commodities to be appraised commercially. “Love” itself becomes a “package” in a commercial sweepstakes we are playing.⁵ We are “commodities” in a giant language game that pervades our whole life. The mandarins of power – bankers, politicians, prelates – use language in such an ambiguous way that we become trapped in it. “Scenarios,” “task forces,” “interim reports” are developed as the mandarins “prioritize,” “strategize,” “legitimize.” In our personal lives, in our social lives, in our professional lives, in our spiritual lives, “language is at hand as an instrument of manipulation” (NA 241-42).

When language is perverted to support violence and war, it becomes even more dangerous and frightening. Merton discussed the “word sickness” of 1940 in France and later the “denatured prose” of the Vichy government in which “peace meant aggression and liberty meant oppression” (NA 234). With others, Merton pointed out that the German language was a casualty of Nazism and World War II. In his essay “Auschwitz: A Family Camp,” he said: “Language itself has fallen victim to total war, genocide and systematic tyranny in our time. In destroying human beings, and human values, on a mass scale, the Gestapo also subjected the German language to violence and crude perversion” (NA 155). By calling the death camps “special housing” and “recovery camps for the tired” and the deadly gas “disinfectant” or “Ovaltine substitute,” the Nazis betrayed a shocking disregard for truth and an appalling hatred for life itself. Yet Merton cautioned us not to think that the Nazis and the German language were unusual. We must recognize that “people like them are in fact all around us. All they need is the right kind of crisis, and they will blossom out” (NA 158).

Think back to Merton’s play, *The Tower of Babel*, one of his first statements on language abuse. In “The Trial,” words are first tried in court, but words, “the ultimate reality,” are acquitted because the people think they will cease to exist if they stop talking. That is why Silence is crucified in the end. Truth, Propaganda, and Falsehood are tried. Truth is found guilty and sent to the salt mines because he tells the people that they destroyed their own tower, a concept they reject. Propaganda is next asked, “Who destroyed the Tower?” He replies: “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.” The people liked hearing this and Propaganda was sent forth to form the minds of the young. Then Falsehood took the stand and told the people:

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.⁶

Merton saw this same glorification of propaganda and falsehood going on in the doubletalk about the Vietnam War. Like the Nazis, the U.S. cloaked its intentions in Vietnam in a rhetoric of falsehood. It could not admit that “overwhelming atrocities” were committed in the name of “liberating” a people who didn’t want to be liberated. We could not hear ourselves, as in the statement that Merton found particularly appalling – that villages were destroyed in order to save them (NA 238-40). One can imagine what Merton would have thought of George Bush’s verbiage during Desert Storm when he insisted we went to the Gulf to “liberate” the Kuwaiti people. Those people wait for liberation, but we have oil and are persuaded that “liberate” is a valid and acceptable term for the freedom to drive our cars.

How do we overcome the abuse of language? For the purposes here, I will discuss three of Merton’s suggestions: 1) reducing language to nonsense; 2) evoking a creative silence; and 3) realizing that all words are part of the Word.

Reducing words to nonsense may be Merton’s most immediately practical suggestion. He said: “We have to learn to write disciplined prose. We have to write poems that are ‘Poems.’ But that is a relatively unprofitable and secondary concern compared with the duty of first writing nonsense.” Merton attempted this himself, especially in his late poems *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, in other anti-poems,⁷ in “anti-letters” to his friend Robert Lax. Part of his purpose was to convey the stultifying effects of the media. In “(Newscast)” from *Cables* the cadence, if read aloud, is precisely that used by TV anchorpersons (to whom Merton claimed people seldom listen in any case). The first stanza reads:

Children of large nervous furs
 Will grow more pale this morning
 In king populations
 Where today drug leaders
 Will promote an ever increasing traffic
 Of irritant colors
 Signs of this evident group
 Are said to be almost local (CP 427).

Reducing words purposely to meaninglessness may help to restore meaning. One can try to take away meaning from words and make their impact the same. Merton admired Lenny Bruce whom he called a “disconcerting and perhaps prophetic comedian” who tried to “restore to language some of its authentic impact.” But it was “a service despairingly offered to a public that could not fully appreciate it.” Merton found Bruce’s obscenity less obscene than the “horrifying platitudes of those who persecuted him” (NA 242). One wonders how Merton would react today to the plays of, say,

David Mamet or the films of Oliver Stone and Martin Scorsese which use four-letter words with such frequency that people are not only not startled by them, but no longer really hear them. They have been reduced in impact to any other innocuous word.

Secondly, Merton felt we go a long way toward restoring meaning to language when we don't hear it, when we are silent. He felt that silence "really does speak to people" (SC 9). But we, Merton feels, are afraid to be silent, unable to be silent.⁸ Like the people at the Tower of Babel, we are afraid that we will cease to exist if we stop talking. But it is only in silence that we hear the "One Who is the Word of God, the perfect manifestation of God's love, Jesus Christ" (HR 118).

Merton loved language and he loved words. They were to him "signs and sacraments," "partial manifestations of the Word, Who is the splendor of God's Truth."⁹ If we can see that words have their justification in love and that they come from God, we will not abuse and debase language, for in so doing we not only distort language, but we distort God's truth. We trivialize God when we reduce language to banality. We must see that words "have their justification in love," God's love.

Merton, always the writer, often addressed himself when he wrote, as in a fragment called "The Angel" (possibly a deleted passage from *The Tower of Babel*). In it he stated how he as a writer and we as readers can find authentic packages of meaning:

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 of
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 free-
dom is found where men and angels sing forever in God's own public language.¹⁰

1. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) 155; subsequent references will be cited as "SC" in the text.

2. Thomas Merton, *Literary Essays*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981) 373; subsequent references will be cited as "LE" in the text.

3. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) 37, 39.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980) 237; subsequent references will be cited as "NA" in the text.

5. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone & Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 25-37.

6. Thomas Merton, *The Tower of Babel*, in *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 255-60; subsequent references will be cited as "CP" in the text.

7. See, for example, Merton's anti-poetry in *Monks Pond*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989).

8. Thomas Merton, "Preface to the Japanese Edition of *Thoughts in Solitude*," in "*Honorable Reader*": *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 115; subsequent references will be cited as "HR" in the text.

9. Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953) 68-69.

10. Thomas Merton, "The Angel" (fragment in the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky).