

# On the Threshold of Silence: Thomas Merton and the Act of Reading

By Gerald J. Schiffhorst

*“[I]n the act of reading and writing one stranger and another go forth to meet in an encounter of the profoundest sort. In this encounter, there are no self-evident truths.”*

Paul Elie <sup>1</sup>

Like Augustine, Newman and many others before him, Thomas Merton read his way into Catholicism. Inspired by Cardinal Newman’s letters to Gerard Manley Hopkins, he was led from one book to the next in one of the most famous literary conversions on record. This was not just an intellectual journey for Merton, since what he read, as much as what he wrote, became part of his contemplative practice. To consider Merton the reader, then, is to come to a new appreciation of his expansive view of prayer, the heart of his spirituality.

Unlike many more recent spiritual writers, Merton offers no formula or program for contemplative prayer other than being quiet. One of the many paradoxes in Merton is that this inspirational advocate of silence spent much of his life immersed in words. This raises several interesting questions. Is writing, along with the related act of reading, a silent activity? How can our absorption with authors, their ideas and characters, be considered a form of contemplative prayer? These are some of the questions I hope to raise, if not fully answer, in the brief reflections that follow.

In examining the vast body of Thomas Merton’s work, we tend to take for granted the importance of reading in the development of his work as a writer and in the growth of his spirituality. The key to this spirituality, as James Finley reminds us,<sup>2</sup> is the transformation of his heart and mind so that every experience can lead one to the love of God. All life, Merton would say, can be understood as prayerful if it is approached with contemplative awareness; this means in part that we empty ourselves of the ego or public self and enter fully the present reality before us, whether it is in nature, in other people, in work – or in the pages of a book.



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Merton managed to reconcile his vocation as a contemplative and his other vocation as a writer by considering writing as a form of prayer, and he sometimes reflected on the spirituality of writing. “[T]o write is to think and to live . . . even to pray,” he noted in his journal on September 27, 1958.<sup>3</sup> In a later entry, for April 14, 1966, he writes, “The work of writing can be, for me, or very close to, the simple job of *being*: by creative reflection and

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awareness to help life itself live in me. . . . For to write is to love.”<sup>4</sup> As we will see, Merton’s sense of prayer and the contemplative life, expressed here, is unimaginable without the written word.

In their introduction to *The Intimate Merton*, Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo provide an excellent overview of the way writing was an integral and inseparable part of Merton’s life: “He would give birth to God in himself by writing about his need for God to be born in him.”<sup>5</sup> Writing provides Merton with both silence and solitude and it helps him to pray and to feel the presence of God. So writing, like silence, can lead to prayer and is analogous to prayer. Writing is a self-conscious act that, paradoxically, creates spaces where we can lose ourselves, where contemplation, free of self-consciousness, can flourish. Can the same spiritual claim be made for reading?

We might assume that most of Merton’s reading (except for Scripture and related texts) was an intellectual exercise, part of his literary work, not necessarily a component of his contemplative vocation. But it seems to me that his reading, whether or not it prompted written reflections, was a form of contemplative prayer in which he could discover the “true self” in the centering practice of reading. Savoring the words and slowly repeating them, as in *lectio divina*, is one obvious way in which a reader is prayerful. This is what Finley calls spiritual reading: it has, he says, “the potential of becoming itself a prayer, a kind of event in which a true transformation of consciousness takes place” (Finley 17). At such times, he continues, this type of reading can have a sacramental power. But I wonder, keeping Merton’s work in mind, if we can go beyond spiritual reading as a source of transformation. If Merton lost himself in the words of his journals, surrendering himself to the love of God, as Hart and Montaldo contend, can we not also say the same about most of his formative reading: that the many texts he consumed with such gusto transformed him and led him to God? If Merton’s readers are themselves transformed and gain, as I have, a deeper sense of prayer, the answer has to be affirmative. Anyone who reads *New Seeds of Contemplation* or one of his other major spiritual works can experience a “resting in God” that is the goal of the contemplative.

Merton was a voracious reader, as every page of his work testifies. The structure of his sentences, his word choice and style are clearly indebted to his sense of language, developed over a long period of reading, as much as from the urgency of the immediate experience or reflection he is recording. In him the twin acts of reading and writing are overlapping and inseparable. He consistently comments on texts that have inspired him to react to them, so the literary groundwork of Merton the writer has to be imagined as prayerful. No doubt the years of reading and study prior to his entering Gethsemani in 1941 prepared him well for a life of prayer, just as his experience of being attentive in prayer made him both a more skillful reader and writer.

Merton, who had a life-long love affair with words, could not possibly record every title or author he read. He did extensive reading on his many train trips in England and America in the 1930s, and on the ten-day ocean crossings. He doesn’t list all the details in his autobiography, but we can assume that this literary young man, with his passion for words and ideas, occupied himself for many hours by reading along with other, less noble pursuits. References to his wide and eclectic taste in books appear throughout his work. While trying to crack Spinoza, the young man depicted in *The Seven-Storey Mountain* “devoured” the fiction of Hemingway, D. H. Lawrence, and Aldous Huxley.<sup>6</sup> In addition to his assigned reading at Cambridge, he pursues on his own Freud, Jung, and Adler. And of course his work as an English major at Columbia is literary in a way that would be typical of an intellectual in 1937 – except for his interest in scholastic philosophy and his reading of

Jacques Maritain. Merton's friendship with Robert Lax and Ed Rice, both writers, and his enthusiastic response when the librarian at St. Bonaventure's offers unlimited access to the college library show how book-oriented he and his circle were.

As every reader of the autobiography will recall, it is the sighting of a book by Étienne Gilson in a Scribner's store window in February, 1937 that changes everything in Merton's spiritual journey: *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* "revolutionize[d] my whole life" (SSM 172). Merton's conversion was enabled in part by reading since he discovered a central insight about God: he saw for the first time that God is not a being but Being itself. The passages he marked in Gilson's text "were to be my first step towards St. John of the Cross" (SSM 173) and, we might add, to a whole treasury of mystical literature that Merton would absorb and reinterpret for modern readers. His reading of fiction, as well as psychology, anthropology, Eastern and Western mystical texts and all the other areas his wide-ranging mind was open to, is also relevant to any consideration of Merton's reading as spiritual activity. So much in Merton, in fact, is stimulated by his reading that to discuss it fully would be impossible.

That Merton thought about the role of the words he read in the construction of contemplative silence is apparent in several passages. In *Thoughts in Solitude*, he comments, "Reading ought to be an act of homage to the God of all truth. We open our hearts to words that reflect the reality He has created or the greater Reality which He is."<sup>77</sup> This would seem to apply to both slow, spiritual reading and to other types of careful reading. In the lines that follow, Merton seems to refer primarily (but not exclusively) to spiritual reading: "Reading gives God more glory when we get more out of it, when it is a more deeply vital act not only of our intelligence but of our whole personality, absorbed and refreshed in thought, meditation, prayer, or even in the contemplation of God" (TS 62). As a monk with a "literary career," Merton was acutely aware of the relation between his activity as a reader and writer and the contemplative life of silence and solitude. As one who opposed any separation of the sacred from the secular, he knew that his unusually wide reading of texts outside the usual monastic canon made sense for him as part of his overall spiritual program.

To consider Merton's role as reader raises many important questions. What exactly happens when we read? The answer is a mystery. How the brain processes the written code of signs that we see before us and gives these words meaning is not fully understood. But one thing is clear from the scholarship: it is the reader who responds to the written text with that particular combination of feeling, intuition, and knowledge that is unique to each individual. As such, then, "the meaning of a text is enlarged by the reader's capabilities and desires. . . . [T]he reader rewrites the text with the same words of the original but under another heading, re-creating it, as it were, in the very act of bringing it into being."<sup>78</sup> If this process, like thinking, cannot be adequately explained, we know from the history of literature that the private act of silent reading, in contrast to the ancient practice of reading aloud, has the capacity to reveal the mysteries of the interior self.

As the Jesuit scholar Walter J. Ong has pointed out, the written word, in contrast to its oral counterpart, "makes possible increasingly articulate introspectivity, opening the psyche as never before not only to the external objective world quite distinct from itself but also to the interior self against whom the objective world is set."<sup>79</sup> Another way of saying this is that as private readers we give more complete attention to what we read than to what we hear since we bring more of ourselves to the reading act. When we listen to the public reading of a text, we follow along; but when we

read such a text privately, silently, we go deeper. We can become more of who we are since we are removed from public scrutiny. Since we give more of ourselves to a deep reading, more of the true self is present.

Reading, of course, plays a key role in the way we define and understand ourselves, and every encounter with an absorbing work of literature helps make us who we are. This also applies to reading fiction, which can provide an experience of total immersion in another world. It has the power to draw us out of our own ego-self, to suspend time, and to be attentive to the inner life. This is the thesis of Nancy Malone, an Ursuline nun, in her fine book on the spirituality of reading, *Walking the Literary Labyrinth*.<sup>10</sup> She would agree with Frederick Buechner, among others, that writers of fiction do not merely bring characters to life; they bring us, the readers, to life as well. They bring to life what might never have been awakened – a sense of the uniqueness and mystery and holiness of life itself. This interplay between writer and reader, like the very activity of reading and writing, usually occurs in solitude and silence. The private, silent act of reading, Malone says,

resembles the meditative techniques we associate with the cultivation of the interior life. The words fix our attention. We pause over them and the thoughts they suggest, comparing them in unbroken silence with our own experience. Sometimes, as can happen in contemplative prayer, *we're taken completely out of ourselves as we read*, and return to ourselves refreshed. In any case, like our own interior conversation, what we read remains totally within us, all the while engaging us in conversation with another human mind, and thus subtly instructing, refining, giving form to the soliloquy that is our interiority (Malone 19; emphasis added).

Of course, not all reading provides such interiority. We read for many different reasons and in varying ways. We cannot expect that skimming a website or newspaper article will provide much sense of interiority, even though we read alone, silently to ourselves. But in Merton and in the work of most other spiritual writers, we encounter an author whose work is the product of what might be called “deep reading” in which readers lose a sense of themselves and experience Malone’s idea of meditative practice. I am reminded of Sven Birkerts’ ruminations, on a secular level, in *The Gutenberg Elegies* about the decline of inwardness produced by reading in the age of the computer. He suggests that the chief value of reading and writing – the subjective experience of depth – is only possible in duration, or “deep time, time experienced without the awareness of time passing.”<sup>11</sup>

To focus on a piece of writing, whether fiction or non-fiction, then, can clearly be a spiritual activity. In the process of writing we listen to ourselves and write for ourselves but then, more and more, become aware of our readers and the way in which our words, heard in our minds and inscribed onto pages, might change someone other than ourselves. In our contact with fictional characters, we are in communion with an author’s imagined re-creation of God’s creation. If I read a novel by Dickens, for example, I am fully present to his imagined time and place, with my own life and consciousness suspended; thus I step outside of ordinary time and reality, absorbed in a different world. That Dickensian world becomes, because of my conscious attention, my present reality while I am reading. That is, I lose awareness of the world around me: time and place cease to matter.

If I were writing fiction, I might begin with observation, looking closely at a scene or person the way a painter does. The French author Colette once advised a young writer to look for a long time at

what pleased him; she believed that to be watchful and open to all the senses was a daily miracle, a reminder of the wonder of life.<sup>12</sup> In these moments of intense watching, we can momentarily escape our self-consciousness. What results is an experience of transcendence, a glimpse of the eternal present, the timeless reality that can be ours – with some attention.

Prayer, like writing and reading, involves paying attention. When the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, working for Rodin in Paris at the turn of the previous century, admired the sculptor's steady concentration, Rodin suggested that Rilke visit the zoo and study an animal in an effort to bring it to life on the page.<sup>13</sup> Rilke found the advice indispensable to reviving his poetic career. Other poets have learned, says Christopher Merrill in *Things of the Hidden God*, the priority of attention over inspiration.<sup>14</sup>

Writing has usually been seen as a silent experience leading to a deeper sense of the interior world; so is reading, yet neither activity may seem strictly silent since words, heard in our mind's ear, are involved. Both activities, though they may *lead* to silent reflection, involve for the reader a whole pattern of ideas, memories, and often excited and conflicted emotions – and voices. In his ambitiously titled book *A History of Reading*, Alberto Manguel talks about the first recorded instance of silent reading: it occurred in 384 AD, when St. Augustine encountered St. Ambrose in Milan reading silently to himself. This surprised Augustine. For the ancients, reading was always an oral-aural skill: the words written on a page were meant to be heard. The fact that Ambrose “never read aloud,” as Augustine recorded in his *Confessions*, was remarkable, and Manguel says that it was not until the tenth century that silent reading to oneself was common in the West (Manguel 43). Until the Middle Ages, writers assumed that readers would hear rather than simply see the text before them, just as the authors spoke their words aloud when they wrote. Punctuation was developed to assist the progress of silent reading. In the sixth century, St. Isaac of Syria described the spiritual benefits of this method in a way that would seem to answer the question of whether writing and reading are silent activities: Isaac says that the pleasure of understanding his prayers silences him so that “I enter a state where my senses are concentrated.” The prolonging of this silence, he says, stills the “turmoil of memories” in his heart (Manguel 49).

Can we apply this to our experience as readers? When I read fiction, especially, I “hear” in my mind the voices of the author, narrator, or quoted characters, so that, while I may be physically silent as an isolated reader and cut off from the noise of the outside world, the concentration involved in reading is similar, but not equivalent, to wordless meditation, which can lead to a truer, deeper silence. Perhaps reading, like writing, is on the threshold of silence. As Nancy Malone says, reading, like meditation, can draw us deeply into ourselves while simultaneously taking us out of ourselves, as we leave behind our everyday lives. In being centered as we read, we become, during the reading, contemplative. In other types of writing, such as biography, she says, the writer faces the problem of the mysterious, inexplicable interiority of his or her subject, whereas the novelist, the omniscient author, “can read the deepest silences in another human being” (Malone 66).

A friend of mine, a physician with little time for reading, told me he must find time to read the Bible each day. But he says that it is not the content that matters so much to him as the quiet act of reading itself, the opportunity to escape the noisy world of ordinary life and focus on a reality outside himself. I understood at once that he was talking about the silence we all need, the silence Merton explored so well. Many creative artists have said that the most important thing they need is silence – not

that they want to hide from the world, but that they need time apart from busyness and conversation when they are just being. Such people have learned to build quiet time into their schedules so their minds can breathe. Whether by walking in the woods or meditating or just daydreaming, writers need to allow the subconscious mind to be heard. Such silence is the source of creativity.

Perhaps silence allows those of us who write to express our sense of incompleteness, our sense that, no matter how many words we use, there remains a core of ourselves that continues to be hidden, even to us. Writing is a way to explore this mystery. Reading, too, brings us close to “the deepest silences in another human being.” Part of what we do in reading Merton is to share in the results of his own reading. As we respond to his reflections on this reading, we are reading ourselves: we discover in our own interiority a place where God can be found in our encounter with the silent, unique, and mysterious “true self.”

1. Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003) 472.
2. James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1978); subsequent references will be cited as “Finley” parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 219.
4. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 371. In his earlier journal, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), Merton makes some important statements about writing as prayer: in his entry for July 20, 1949, he writes: “At the moment the writing is the one thing that gives me access to some real silence and solitude. Also I find that it helps me to pray because, when I pause at my work, I find that the mirror inside me is surprisingly clean and deep and serene and God shines there and is immediately found” (338); see also his comments for Sept. 1, 1949 (365).
5. Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton: His Life From His Journals*, ed. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999) xii.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 91; subsequent references will be cited as “SSM” parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 62; subsequent references will be cited as “TS” parenthetically in the text.
8. Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (New York: Penguin, 1996); subsequent references will be cited as “Manguel” parenthetically in the text.
9. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982) 13.
10. Nancy M. Malone, *Walking a Literary Labyrinth: A Spirituality of Reading* (New York: Riverhead, 2003); subsequent references will be cited as “Malone” parenthetically in the text.
11. Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994) 219.
12. See Robert Phelps, ed., *Earthly Paradise: Colette's Autobiography Drawn from her Lifetime Writings* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1966) 254.
13. See *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. with a commentary by Robert Bly (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 133.
14. Christopher Merrill, *Things of the Hidden God: Journey to the Holy Mountain* (New York: Random House, 2005) 207.