Sweet Irrational Worship

By **David Rensberger**

I learned to imitate the whistle of a bobwhite quail as a boy growing up on a farm in northern Indiana. From that background, and from having spent some time in rural Kentucky, a couple of hundred miles east of Thomas Merton's monastery, I can easily picture the scene that Merton sketches at the beginning of his poem "O Sweet Irrational Worship."[1] There are hills and valleys with fields where various kinds of crops grow; strewn among the fields are pastures and patches of woodland. The crops in the fields are corn, wheat and oats. Perhaps one of them is alfalfa, mowed to make hay, and the sweet smell of the hay drying in the warm sun drifts on the wind down the meandering country road. There are cows in the pastures and dogs in the farmyards. In the woods some wildlife still remain. The quail live in the pastures and fields as well as on the edges of the woods.

A couple of years ago I took a weekend class on Christian poetry taught by Victor A. Kramer at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, and not surprisingly Merton's poems, including this one, formed a large part of our reading.[2] Some weeks later, preparing to preach a sermon at the Atlanta Mennonite Fellowship, I found the lectionary texts for that Sunday peculiarly difficult to work with. I decided to be adventurous, and took "O Sweet Irrational Worship" as my text instead. I did choose some scripture passages that I thought would connect with it, in particular Romans 12 (I'm a progressive Mennonite, but I couldn't cut a sermon loose from the Bible altogether!), and then set the poem and the biblical texts to interacting with each other. The reflections here, on the poem itself and on how the poem and scripture texts shed light on one another, are drawn from that sermon.

"O Sweet Irrational Worship" was first published in a collection of Merton's poetry in 1963, so it was presumably written sometime in the early 1960s.[3] By that time, Merton had been a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani for twenty years, having arrived there in 1941 with a great deal of enthusiasm for the contemplative life. He soon became famous, owing to his 1948 autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*,[4] his further essays, poetry and books on the contemplative life, and his activism for peace and social justice. "O Sweet Irrational Worship," then, takes us to one particular moment in the paradoxical "career" of a would-be hermit known worldwide, an articulate and voluble man committed to silence.

I'll begin with a simple exposition of the poem – bearing in mind, of course, that no good poem can really be fully explained, especially one like this, which concerns mystical experience and claims that the experience defies explanation! Nothing substitutes for reading the poem and just letting it have its effect.

"O Sweet Irrational Worship" opens with three specific details – "Wind and a bobwhite / And the afternoon sun" (ll. 1-2) – suggesting something

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like that simple, easily pictured scene I described above. Merton doesn't yet mention any plant life (which is introduced only very gradually to build up an ever more detailed landscape). First comes a bit of spiritual autobiography. The speaker asserts that he has "ceas[ed] to question the sun" (l. 3), meaning, I think, that he has learned to *be in* the world rather than constantly interrogating it. This is a major step in the spiritual life, especially for people who have been trained in critical or scientific thinking. Educated into incessant questioning about why things are the way they are, or about who is behind the way things are, into taking things apart and only sometimes putting them back together, we find it no easy or obvious task to begin simply *being present* to things as they are. This does not mean that we quit asking questions altogether – Merton certainly didn't – but it does mean, especially with regard to the natural world, leaving ourselves open to other creatures in their identity without demanding that they serve our purposes or answer our curiosities.

Not surprisingly, then, this is where the poem starts to get really hard for literal-minded and rationalistic readers. As a result of his openness, his "ceasing to question the sun," the poet now *identifies* himself with the other creatures that he observes, with light and bird and wind (ll. 4-5), and even with the earth itself (l. 7). Plants begin to appear as well – the speaker now has leaves (l. 6)! The creatures lit by the sun grow from the heart of the poet, the earth (ll. 8-9). What this suggests to me is that the contemplative speaker, having come to recognize and know the divine image in himself, finds there a surprising unity with everything else that divine Wisdom has made – the Wisdom that, in Merton's thinking, underlies and lives within all creatures. As he says in his prose poem *Hagia Sophia*, published in the same volume:

> There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all . . . . It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being . . . . This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom. (*ESF* 61; *CP* 363)

Likewise he writes in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

> Therefore each particular being, in its individuality, its concrete nature and entity, with all its own characteristics and its private qualities and its own inviolable identity, gives glory to God by being precisely what He wants it to be here and now, in the circumstances ordained for it by His Love and His infinite Art. The forms and individual characters of living and growing things, of inanimate beings, of animals and flowers and all nature, constitute their holiness in the sight of God. Their inscape is their sanctity. It is the imprint of His wisdom and His reality in them.[5]

Having encountered the imprint of divine reality in himself, the speaker finds himself joined to the hidden wholeness expressed in all the creatures under the afternoon sun.

Another of these creatures that the poet observes, a pine tree, leads into a longer and deeper autobiographical reflection. That the pine tree "Stands like the initial of my first / Name when I had one" (ll. 11-12) implies that in pursuing the contemplative life, the speaker has passed beyond a separate, nameable self to a deeper identity in God. Now, perhaps, he no longer "ha[s] a spirit" (l. 13) but simply *is* spirit. On his youthful arrival at the monastery, he "was on fire" (l. 14) for his new life, and the abbey's valley was a breath "of fresh air" (l. 16) for him. Precisely then, "You spoke my name" (l. 17), his true name, his identity in God. That is to say, God *called* the speaker, gave him his vocation; to receive this vocation was to hear his name spoken out of divine Silence. This is the encounter with God that the poet hails as "sweet, irrational worship" (l. 19).

In the two decades since his coming there "on fire," the Abbey of Gethsemani has become the "appointed place" (l. 24) of Merton's vocation, where he lives out his Benedictine vow of stability. By the time he wrote this poem, Merton had apparently found his name transmuted into namelessness, and could know himself as earth and sky ("a lake of blue air" [l. 23]), both giving forth and reflecting the monastery and the other creatures in the valley. The quail ascends from his "grass heart" (l. 28); he has saved the word "grass" for now, having slowly filled in the landscape with tree, valley, hay, flowers and field. The contemplative's namelessness echoes that of the random plant life that shelters the bobwhite. Likewise his worship has become as "irrational," as "foolish" (l. 31), as drained of names and logical structures, of hierarchy and system, as the quail's.

Given a reading of the poem such as this, what might we take from it for our own worship and our own life with God? First, we might notice the importance of names. The speaker used to have a first name, which implies that he doesn't have one now, any more than the "nameless weeds" (l. 30). On the other hand, though, he speaks to God about the time when "You spoke my name / In naming Your silence" (ll. 17-18). Merton's name – his real name, his inmost identity, the image of God within him – is given to him by God as a name for God's own Silence.

In Merton's understanding, all speech and knowledge emerge ultimately from silence:[6]

> The dialectic between silence and utterance. We have to keep silence for two reasons: for the sake of God and for the sake of speech. These two reasons are really one; because the ultimate reason for speaking is to confess our faith in God and to declare His glory. . . . We should realize very clearly when to speak and when to keep silent. It is important to speak seven times a day, in praising God. It is above all important to confess Him before men at Mass. . . . But it is terribly important to keep silence. When? Almost all the rest of the day. . . . Preaching the word of God implies silence. If preaching is not born of silence, it is a waste of time.[7]
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> The solitary life, being silent, clears away the smoke-screen of words that man has laid down between his mind and things. In solitude we remain face to face with the naked being of things. . . . The world our words have attempted to classify, to control and even to despise (because they could not contain it) comes close to us, for silence teaches us to know reality by respecting it where words have defiled it. When we have lived long enough alone with the reality around us, our veneration will learn how to bring forth a few good words about it from the silence which is the mother of Truth. . . . Truth rises from the silence of being to the quiet tremendous presence of the Word. Then, sinking again into silence, the truth of words bears us down into the silence of God.[8]
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> When I am liberated by silence, when I am no longer involved in the measurement of life, but in the living of it, I can discover a form of prayer in which there is effectively, no distraction. My whole life becomes a prayer. My whole silence is

> full of prayer. The world of silence in which I am immersed contributes to my prayer. . . . Let me seek, then, the gift of silence, and poverty, and solitude, where everything I touch is turned into prayer: where the sky is my prayer, the birds are my prayer, the wind in the trees is my prayer, for God is all in all. (*TS* 93-94)

The truth of God is beyond our naming or discussing, and so, to us, it is silence. To say that we are made in the image of God is to say that in us too, underneath all our wordiness and logic and analysis, there is a depth of silence. It is in this depth that God speaks to us, and so it is to this depth that we must go in order to hear God's voice calling our name, giving us our real identities and our vocations. Contemplative prayer, silent reflection, centering prayer, meditation, *lectio divina*, dwelling in the word[9] – all of these are practices we can use to find our way toward that simple silence.

In that silence, our worship itself becomes "irrational." The worship of God, who is beyond our words and comprehension, must ultimately go beyond reasoning and explaining, analyzing and identifying. This is where poetry comes in; this is where singing comes in (these too emerge out of silence and lead back into silence); this is where *faith* comes in. Faith is trust and confidence in God even when we cannot explain or even fully grasp who God is or what God is doing. Our irrational worship is "sweet," in Merton's term, because it is true and joyful and direct in its encounter with the living God. In this adoration, which is profound and yet light (in both senses), Merton the worshipper-poet finds himself at one with the Creator in whose image he is made, and so at one with all the other creatures as well. He is the bird, and the light shining on the bird, and the earth in whose grass the bird shelters and from which it flies forth. This experience of unity is sweet indeed, and it is irrational – not crazy, not raving mad, but glad and serene in a way that beggars our powers of explanation and classification.

I get something else as well, however, from the phrase "sweet, irrational worship." It calls to my mind a startlingly similar yet apparently antithetical expression in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. In Romans 12:1 the Apostle writes, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."[10] The key phrase is that last one, which could also be rendered "your *rational* worship."[11] Paul seems to be urging the exact opposite of Merton's "irrational worship"; or Merton seems to be pulling in the opposite direction from Paul; either way, I am intrigued. Whether or not Merton was playing on Romans 12 or playing against it, the two ideas could turn out to enrich one another. Investigating their possible relationship, though, must take us on a brief detour through the interpretation of Paul.

The word that can be translated both "rational" and "spiritual" in Romans 12:1 is *logikos*, from which we get the word "logical." In Hellenistic Greek, this term commonly referred to the nature of humanity as being endowed with reason (*logos*). The ancients considered reason or rationality (including the power to express reasoning in speech) to be the attribute that connects human beings to the divine. Jewish philosophers and theologians like Philo of Alexandria associated *logos* with the image of God in which, according to Genesis 1:26-27, humanity was created. It is this link between *logos* and the divine that leads many Bible translators today to render *logikos* as "spiritual." Of course, in a modern context we might think of the "logical" or "rational" as *opposed* to the "spiritual" rather than equivalent to it. But in New Testament times rationality and language, the attributes that differentiate humanity within the creation, were considered marks of our spiritual nature. Logic and rationality might have been seen as opposed to emotions and desires, but not to the spirit.

What Paul means by "rational" or "spiritual worship," then, is the kind of worship that is appropriate for humans to offer as beings who have this *logos*-connection to God. Presenting our bodies to God – not only our minds and spirits but our day-to-day physical existence as well – is how we rational/spiritual beings ought to worship; it is our "rational worship." In this, Paul seems to follow a specifically Jewish way of understanding human nature: as beings made entirely by God and in the image of God, our *whole* being, body included, is of concern to God and is capable of forming part of our service to God and our worship.

What follows from this offering of our entire selves to God in worship is a call to radical transformation: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2).[12] "The renewing of . . . minds" implies a *change* in our ideas about "the will of God": what *is* actually good, pleasing to God, "perfect" (in the sense of being completely in tune with God's desires for humanity)? Paul calls for "discernment," but the connection with nonconformity, transformation and renewal suggests that what is discerned as God's will must in any case be different from the values and ideas that are current in human culture, no matter how widespread or appealing or powerful they may be. "The will of God" is to be found in patterns that are not conformed to this "world" or age.

In Romans and elsewhere (see Rom. 6:4, 7:6; 2 Cor. 4:16, 5:17; Gal. 6:15; Col. 3:9-11), Paul associates renewal and newness with resurrection, the Holy Spirit and new creation. "The renewing of . . . minds," then, must mean having one's thinking transformed by the startlingly new, fresh and unprecedented action of God in raising Jesus from the dead, pouring out the Holy Spirit on believers, and thus inaugurating the re-creation of the cosmos. The new way of thinking is not brought about by study and analysis. Rather, it is a transformation of our ideas, convictions and conceptions made possible by the Holy Spirit. So while the "rational worship" and renewed thinking that Paul encourages do clearly involve the mind, they are not really what we would call "rationalistic" or even "intellectual" today. Instead, they have their roots in the supernatural work of the Spirit of God within us, individually and as a worshiping community.

After this exegetical excursion, we can return to the possible relationship between Thomas Merton's "sweet, irrational worship" and Paul's "rational worship." Given what Paul actually means by the latter, I suggest that the two are not so far apart as they might seem. The experience of calling that Merton evokes, of having his name named out of the depths of God's silence, is an experience of renewal and transformation, a pure gift from God. It is a rebirth, a re-creation, wrought by the Holy Spirit. In characterizing this experience as "irrational worship," Merton, if he was indeed thinking about Romans 12, would be nudging us away from an overly rationalistic reading of the Pauline text. Our "rational worship" is indeed *spiritual* worship; it results from a transformative renaming that takes place deeper within us than our rationalizations about God or ourselves. "Spiritual worship," the adoration that *logos*-endowed beings offer, surrenders everything to the renewing power of new creation unleashed in Easter and Pentecost. *Logikos* because it is offered from the *logos*-image of God, it nevertheless appears irrational to "this world," the present unrenewed age that is dominated by self-centeredness, false identity and sin. It is "God's foolishness . . . wiser than human wisdom," known in the crucified and risen Messiah (1 Cor. 1:18-25), worship as foolish as the bobwhite's own.

Reading further in Romans 12, we find another way in which Paul's spiritual worship aligns with Merton's. For Merton – certainly by the time this poem was written – the notion of "spirituality" came to include action in the social and political spheres outside the monastery walls. Paul too urges the Roman believers toward a unified Christian life that transcends the distinctions between "active" and "contemplative" that we tend to perpetuate. He specifies what nonconformed, transformative renewal means by listing a variety of gifts of divine grace.[13] Most of these gifts are what we might call "active" (even if some of the activity is verbal): prophecy, service, teaching, preaching, leadership, acts of giving and compassion (Rom. 12:3-8). Yet there is clearly room for the "contemplative" as well: an exhortation to "persevere in prayer" appears just before "contribute to the needs of the saints" (Rom. 12:12-13).

Paul expects that the Spirit's renewal of our minds will lead us to discern the actions that God desires of us; but the "spiritual" is not merely a prologue to the "active." Rather than being a preparation for something else, prayer is a *constant inner condition* in Paul's spirituality. "Persevering in prayer" means practicing prayer with a tenacious steadfastness, a persistent attentiveness (see also Col. 4:2; Eph. 6:18). We might well compare Merton's description of prayer in relation to discerning the will of God:

> The ever-changing reality in the midst of which we live should awaken us to the possibility of an uninterrupted dialogue with God. By this I do not mean continuous "talk," . . . but a dialogue of love and of choice. A dialogue of deep wills. In all the situations of life the "will of God" comes to us not merely as an external dictate of impersonal law but above all as an interior invitation of personal love. (*NSC* 14-15)

In Romans 12, joyful hope and constant prayer are the steadfast companions of sharing in other people's needs and showing hospitality to them. Since the renewing work of the Spirit underlies all these gifts and qualities, "spirituality," for Paul, encompasses prayer and contemplation, service and hospitality side by side. Every believer has some part in all these things; no one can say that others are taking care of the prayer or the service for him or her. Yet Paul does clearly envision different people exercising different kinds of primary gifts. Each believer has her or his own configuration of these and other spiritual gifts; God calls each of us by our own name. We become persons renewed in the image of God (Col. 3:9-11) as we hear that call and open ourselves to growth that takes us, distinctive as our various sets of gifts may be, beyond the things that separate us toward unity with others. It takes all of Christ's body to do all the things that Christ is about; it takes the gifts God gives all of us to be truly the community of Jesus' disciples.

For Paul as for Thomas Merton, growth into this diverse yet unified practice of God's will is not something accomplished in an instant. It happens through much prayer, through mutual encouragement and teaching, through personal willingness to be transformed by the Spirit's ongoing action. There may be days when we are able to see our oneness with God manifested in our embrace of all creation, and rejoice in this "sweet, irrational worship." Other days, we may be too grumpy or distracted or just too wrapped up in ourselves to offer our whole beings to God as a living sacrifice. But always we must be leaning into the depths of relationship with God.

Long before Merton, other poets, the ancient psalmists of Israel, explored this leaning. Consider Psalm 16, for example. Here we find a dedicated relationship, in which the psalmist has taken God as sole source of security and has been blessed by this choice:

> I have no good apart from you. . . .
> The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.
> The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage.
> (vv. 2b, 5-6)

Yet beyond any specific blessings, it is God's *presence* that gives the speaker ultimate and complete security:

> I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.
> I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.
> Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. . . .
> You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand
> are pleasures forevermore. (vv. 7-9, 11)

Here too we sense that "sweet, irrational worship," that glad encounter with the presence of God deep within the poet's being. Merton heard God naming his name out of divine silence and came to find in his appointed place a unity, beyond names and naming, with everything that God had made. So also the psalmist names God as sole protector and guide, and finds a dependable voice speaking within and a joyous wholeness in the goodly heritage of divine presence.

With this Presence in mind, let me make one more connection among poem, scripture and worship – specifically, an aspect of our worship that both unites and divides Christians. "The Lord is . . . my cup," sings the psalmist; and in our eucharistic cup, as we proclaim in our varying ways, we "keep the Lord always before" us. In "O Sweet Irrational Worship," Merton wrote, "I am earth, earth // My heart's love / Bursts with hay and flowers. . . . / Out of my grass heart / Rises the bobwhite" (ll. 20-22, 28-29). In the Eucharist, out of things that once were grass and flowers – ripening wheat and the blossoms of grapes – the beautiful bird of divine Presence bursts forth upon us. In this our sweet, irrational, foolish worship we encounter the Silence that God names with our names. For what worship is more foolish than the one that says, "This is my body. This is my blood"? Out of the earth, we say, something comes that God empowers to speak to us spiritually, to be for us Presence. And when it speaks, then at last may the glad unity of poets and apostles join us together and send us forth arm in arm, renewed and transformed, nonconformed and made one, glad of heart, becoming light.

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1. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 42–43 (subsequent references will be cited as "*ESF*" parenthetically in the text); Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 344-45 (subsequent references will be cited as "*CP*" parenthetically in the text).
2. However, all the comments on and interpretation of "O Sweet Irrational Worship" offered here are mine, and are not the responsibility of Victor Kramer or anyone else.
3. See Merton's July 10, 1962 letter to John Wu: "I also enclose a poem, landscape, especially with a quail in it. The quail, as I seem to remember, is also a bird loved by Chuang Tzu. The quail is called, popularly, 'bobwhite' around here. I thought you might like this" (Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985] 623).
4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).
5. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 30; subsequent references will be cited as "*NSC*" parenthetically in the text.
6. Pointers to these and others of Merton's many reflections on silence came from Christopher Page, "Thomas Merton on Silence," *In A Spacious Place* (blog: 8 May 2013) https://inaspaciousplace.wordpress.com/2013/05/08/thomas-merton-on-silence/; and from Fernando Beltrán Llavador, "Brother Silence, Sister Word: Merton's Conversion and Conversation in Solitude and Society," http://thomasmertonsociety.org/fernando.htm (originally an address to the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, Southampton, England, May 1996) [accessed 8 March 2016].
7. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 266.
8. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 85–86; subsequent references will be cited as "*TS*" parenthetically in the text.
9. See Pat Taylor Ellison and Patrick R. Keifert, *Dwelling in the Word: A Pocket Handbook* (St. Paul, MN: Church Innovations, 2011).

10. Unless otherwise noted, scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version. The New American Bible renders Romans 12:1 similarly.
11. The Greek is not easy to translate or to understand. The phrase is *logikēn latreian*, rendered in the Latin Vulgate familiar to Merton as *rationabile obsequium*. The King James and Douay-Rheims rendering "reasonable service" is more literal than the modern translations' "spiritual worship," though not necessarily any clearer. "Reasonable service" means "service that is appropriate to beings who possess reason"; today we would probably say "*rational* service." Put "rational service" and "spiritual worship" together, and we get "rational worship."
12. In the Protestant traditions that are heirs of the radical Anabaptist Reformation (the Mennonites, Brethren, Amish, Hutterites and others), this passage is a classic. In these communions the call to nonconformity, to a way of life distinctive from the ordinary run of human society, identified specifically as discipleship to the teaching of Jesus, has been crucial. Unfortunately, Paul's further call to transformation by *inner* renewal has not always been as significant, at least in the recent era. Instead, there has been a tendency to codify "nonconformity" not only by reference to the Sermon on the Mount but in terms of material lifestyle – by active and visible characteristics more than by inward or spiritual renewal. See Harold S. Bender, "Nonconformity," in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia: A Comprehensive Reference Work on the Anabaptist-Mennonite Movement*, vol. 3, ed. Harold S. Bender et al. (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1957) 890–97; for an updated version, see Harold S. Bender, Nanne van der Zijpp, John C. Wenger, J. Winfield Fretz and Cornelius J. Dyck, "Nonconformity," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1989 (http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Nonconformity&oldid=113555) [accessed 9 March 2016].
13. We must be careful not to see this list (and the ones in 1 Cor. 12:4-30 and Eph. 4:7-13) as all-inclusive and therefore limiting. All these lists are descriptive, not prescriptive. Paul is not offering strict catalogues of all the gifts that the Spirit ever can or ever will give to believers. Instead, he seems to work with the specific graces present in the particular congregations to which he writes. For Paul, *everything* that believers do to build up, guide and strengthen their congregations in carrying out "the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect" – is a gift of God's grace.