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# Rhetorical Literacy and Freedom of Speech: An Intersectional Approach

Gerry Yokota

## Introduction

How can rhetorical literacy serve to protect and advance freedom of speech in the academy and in society at large in this era of extraordinary (if not unprecedented) assault on intellectual autonomy? To explore this question, in this study I examine a selection of writings by Thomas Merton (1915-1968). Merton, an American Catholic monk of the Trappist order, exhibited an exceptionally strong awareness of the function of rhetoric in the shaping of public opinion in his voluminous writings. (He wrote over 50 books in his short lifetime.) He is especially well known for his efforts in the area of interfaith exchange between Christians and Buddhists, and met both the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh before his untimely death in 1968 at the age of 53. He is also well known as an outspoken critic of the American War in Vietnam. What is less known is that he studied the work of scholars such as Michel Foucault and Marshall McLuhan as he contemplated the roots of violence in a way that ultimately made a lasting contribution to the development of effective nonviolent rhetoric. He lived a cloistered life, but he read widely and engaged deeply with diverse thinkers around the world. As I will demonstrate, his writing offers a noteworthy model of rhetorical literacy both at the macro level, with his diachronic eye for larger discursive patterns in rhetorical usage, and at the micro level, with his sensitivity to how images, symbols, and metaphors operate synchronically within specific discursive contexts.

## Why Merton?

As an applied cognitive linguist committed to taking an intersectional approach to the development of effective rhetorical strategies for discursive intervention in contemporary social issues, I was prompted to turn to Merton's work as I sought to formulate a response to the news about the U.S. government intervention in higher education announced in March 2025 ("White House Cancels \$400 Million in Grants and Contracts to Columbia," *The New York Times*, March 7; "Trump Pulled \$400 Million From Columbia. Other Schools Could Be Next," *The New York Times*, March 8). I have been studying Merton's nonviolent rhetoric for some time, and was further compelled to apply my findings to this current event after reading an article by President Christopher Eisgruber of Princeton University, where he stated that the attack on Columbia presents "the greatest threat to American universities since the Red Scare of the 1950s" ("The Cost of the Government's Attack on Columbia," *The Atlantic*, March 19). Judith Butler (University of California, Berkeley), speaking of a civil disobedience campaign cosponsored by Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) and American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in a video on Instagram, stated, "We must oppose anti-semitism absolutely, and we know what its forms are, especially when escalated by Christian nationalist groups." But Butler reiterated their long-held position on "the injustice of the IHRA [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance] definition of anti-semitism" ([https://www.instagram.com/reel/DI\\_-Y8FpvDr/](https://www.instagram.com/reel/DI_-Y8FpvDr/)). Inspired by the sense of urgent responsibility expressed by intellectuals to this historical event, I decided to explore Merton's response to similar conflicts, as one effort in the movement to promote mindful communication on this controversial issue. I hope that this study will serve as a fitting commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the American War in Vietnam, as we reflect upon how far we have come and how far we still have to go.

## Merton's Legacy

Thomas Merton was born in 1915 in France. The family moved to the U.S. when he was still in infant. His mother died when he was six. His father then sent him to boarding school in France, but the family later moved to England, where his father died when he was sixteen. Merton studied first at Cambridge and then at Columbia, where he received his bachelor's and master's degrees but then decided to take religious vows. He entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky in 1941, and Gethsemani remained his home until his death in 1968.

Merton published over fifty books in the space of less than three decades, beginning with *Thirty Poems* in 1944. His first autobiography and most famous prose work, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, was published in

1948. He also wrote many books on contemplation and meditation, both Christian and Asian, and on the monastic life, his own and that of others such as the Desert Fathers. His journals have been published in seven volumes. His letters have been published in five volumes. He eventually published ten volumes of poetry which were later published as a single collection. Finally, he published several collections of essays on social issues such as racism, nuclear war, and nonviolence, one play, and one novel. Much of his work was published posthumously due to church censorship, the sudden nature of his death, and his own stated wishes.

## **The Texts**

Of all these works, for the purpose of this study I will mainly focus on five poems, taking them as emblematic points of entry for reflection on the cultural critique Merton later developed more fully in a group of essays written in the last decade of his life. Viewed in retrospect, these poems presage the concerns expressed in the later essays about the function of rhetoric in war and peace, and the alternating use of poetry and prose is one particularly intriguing aspect in Merton's development of his ideas.

### *Poetry*

"Tower of Babel" (1940-42)

"The Tower of Babel: A Morality" (1957)

"Hagia Sophia" (1962)

"Chant to Be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces" (1963)

"Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll" (1964)

### *Prose*

"A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann" (1964)

"Nhat Hanh Is My Brother" (1966)

"Ishi: A Meditation" (1967)

"War and the Crisis of Language" (1968a)

"Non-Violence Does Not ... Cannot ... Mean Passivity" (1968b)

In the next section, I will begin by briefly introducing each poem with a focus on how they serve as emblems for stages in the development of Merton's lifelong concern for integrity in language. In section following after that, I will expand upon how they fit into the wider context of his later literary and scholarly production. In conclusion, I will indicate how these clusters of knowledge might be applied to shed light on the contemporary issue of freedom of speech in higher education.

## **Emblematic Poems**

*"Tower of Babel" (1940-42)*

I begin with this poem as an early example of Merton's longstanding concern with language. It opens with the lines, "History is a dialogue / between forward and backward / going inevitably forward / by the misuse of words." The poem speaks of "the function of the word" to designate "the machine," "what the machine produces," then "what the machine destroys." It speaks of how words show us these things "not only in order to mean them / but in order to provoke them." It also touches on the idea of words being "meant to conceal" and a view of "our only reality" as "movement into the web."

Merton was born just before World War I and wrote this poem at the beginning of World War II, just as he was entering the monastery in his mid-twenties, having applied for non-combatant objector status. He would soon lose his brother John Paul to the war, in 1943. While his first two decades at the Abbey are mainly characterized by intense religious devotion and intense literary output, as we proceed to observe the development of his social consciousness, it will become clear that his concern with "the misuse of words" expressed in this early work, initially in a somewhat abstract way, underpins his ongoing engagement with specific social issues, namely racism, the American war in Vietnam, and nuclear war.

*"The Tower of Babel: A Morality" (1957)*

In this longer treatment of the same theme in dramatic verse, Merton connects the tower of Babel, symbol of division both in language and in purpose, explicitly with war. In Part One, the Leader sees that "the skies are as full of words as they are of stars," and that "each word becomes an instrument of war." The Leader craves "steel words," "words which divide," as the Chorus offers the suggestion that the most powerful word is "Fear! Fear!" and urges him to "Feel the business that springs / Out of the dark." An invisible Voice calls, "Blow the trumpet of division!" and the Chorus calls on the winds of God to "scatter the seeds of war to the world's end." The Tower falls, and Language is accused of betrayal. But which kind of language? "There is true language, there is falsehood, and there is propaganda." So, all three are called to the stand, beginning with Truth, which is deemed the most dangerous enemy of the State. But a Philosopher speaks up and says there is no Truth; it is rather words who should be put to death as agents of the traitor. And so next Propaganda is called to the stand and asked, "Do you swear to conceal the truth, the whole truth and to confuse nothing but the issue?" Propaganda is found not guilty and given exclusive freedom of speech in every part of the world. Finally, Falsehood is called to the stand, and claims to be Truth. Falsehood demands that all men serve him in chains, as the Chorus intones, "Chains will be your liberty."

In Part Two, the once glorious city has become a desolate wasteland, and "the languages of men have become empty palaces / Where the winds blow in every room." The Prophet declares that "In the last days the Word, strong without armies, will come to the crossroads of the broken universe... Then God will awaken [the dead] from oblivion with his Word, and look upon the Word Whom they have slain." He proclaims that "the shadow of Babylon will be destroyed to give place to the light" and that "Men will indeed be of one tongue." A band of wandering Exiles appears. "One by one we lost our names / Men gave us numbers." An Ancient among them recalls having heard in the past that "words could be true." The Prophet introduces them to a village where people do not kill with the sword or live by the machine. The hills sing "no more war," and the cities sing "no more despair." In the vision of the Prophet, "Those who have taken peace upon their tongue / Have eaten heaven."

In the movement between these two works, a theme may be discerned which will indeed continue to develop throughout Merton's oeuvre: the theme of integrity of word and deed. Merton is a devout Christian, but this is not only a religious play; it is also an indictment of the doublespeak in society that he saw as clearly as did George Orwell; he saw it as infecting Christians as much as anyone. This vision steadily led him to view the monastery not as escape or refuge but as ground on which to stand for all humanity, from which to reach out to other races, nations, and religious traditions. As he wrote in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962), "Let no one hope to find in contemplation an escape from conflict, from anguish or from doubt. On the contrary, the deep inexpressible certitude of the contemplative experience awakens a tragic anguish and opens many questions in the depths of the heart like wounds that cannot stop bleeding."

*"Hagia Sophia" (1962)*

It is no secret that Merton led a wild life as a student at Cambridge, which included fathering a child outside of marriage, a child who he never met. His mother had died when he was six and his father when he was sixteen, and it is presumed that his guardian advised him to move back to the U.S. after this incident and continue his education at Columbia in the hope that it would help him find some new direction in his life. There are various theories about how these early experiences with women may have compelled him toward the priesthood. Some may view the move as atonement for sin; others may see misogyny. Being more interested in effect than cause, for the sake of this study, I introduce this work as emblematic of this chronological stage in his growing concern for the world outside the monastery.

"The Tower of Babel: A Morality" was published in 1957 and "Hagia Sophia" in 1962. Between these two events, in 1958, Merton experienced a sudden, dazzling realization at a busy street corner in the city of Louisville, the corner of Fourth and Walnut. He wrote, "It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world," calling it a "sense of liberation from an illusory difference," "such a relief and such a joy" (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 1966). He expressed this fervent wish: "If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty,

no more greed,” suggesting that this was a major impetus for him to start to open his eyes to issues of discrimination. News of the aftermath of the Holocaust and of racism especially began to infiltrate his isolated sanctuary in the early sixties, and Merton scholarship tends to focus on these two aspects. Less is said about whether it affected his views on sexism and relationship with women.

I find a Jungian approach best elucidates this question, particularly the work of Robert G. Waldron in his 1991 article, “Merton’s Dreams: A Jungian Analysis.” Waldron notes that Merton’s vision at the corner of Fourth and Walnut occurred the same year as his visit to the Lexington studio of his friend, the artist Victor Hammer, who was also a publisher of religious books. There, Merton saw a line-cut engraving of a young woman holding a crown over the head of a young man. When he asked Hammer who the woman was, Hammer said he wasn’t sure himself. Merton was fascinated by the image, which inspired him to compose this poem.

In the poem, Merton speaks of “Unity and Integrity” and “Wisdom, the Mother of all.” He writes of being awakened at the voice of his “Sister,” “like the One Christ awakening in all the separate selves that ever were separate and isolated and alone in all the lands of the earth.” He says, “All the perfections of created things are also in God; and therefore He is at once Father and Mother.” He recalls how Julian of Norwich back in the fourteenth century prayed to “Jesus our Mother.”

Waldron analyzes two sets of dreams that Merton recorded in his journals to support the Jungian view that dreams are compensatory mechanisms attempting to rectify an imbalance in the psyche. He cites other journal entries where Merton explores his despair of ever being worthy of love and wonders whether this despair may also be a pretext for evading the obligation of love. In Waldron’s analysis of Merton’s dreams and his response to Hammer’s engraving, he sees Merton recognizing his anima and experiencing wholeness, just as a woman may recognize her animus. Waldron also analyzes the possibilities for directions in which Merton may have aimed his projections.

The first dream that Waldron analyzes is about a female figure who Merton called Proverb. Merton recorded this dream in 1958, the same year as the vision at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, and later even wrote a letter of gratitude to her. He recorded the second, later set of dreams featuring three women, from 1964-65, after he had started writing extensively about matters of race and war. The group of three women from these dreams exhibits an intriguing diversity: a woman from Harvard who is a scholar of classical Latin; a Chinese princess; and a black mother. Merton is known from his journals to have read Jung in the late fifties, and indeed, it sometimes sounds like he was engaging in some analysis of his own dreams, especially the one about the Harvard scholar; she is mocked by the monks, a dream motif commonly analyzed as a seed of anxiety and fear of rejection. Waldron associates it with the changes wrought by Vatican II.

*“Chant to Be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces” (1963)*

With this poem, Merton returns to the theme of the misuse of language, drawing on Rudolf Hoess’s testimony at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trial. He also wrote both poetry and prose about Adolf Eichmann based on Hannah Arendt’s report on the Jerusalem trial. In later essays, Merton would focus more on government bureaucratism, and his approach was very similar to that taken by George Orwell in his 1946 essay, “Politics and the English Language” which Merton read in 1967, according to abbey library records. At this stage, Merton was focusing more on the use of euphemism for self-deception and self-defense at the individual level, rather than the doublespeak broadcast in mass media that he later critiqued, especially military discourse on the American war in Vietnam. Here I would especially acknowledge the power of the poetic form to accentuate the absurdity of expressions such as “purification,” “improvement,” “conscientious,” “decent,” “passengers,” “travelers,” “guests,” “satisfaction,” “safety,” “bathing,” “faultless,” “perfect,” and “elevation.”

“In my day we worked hard we saw what we did our self-sacrifice  
was conscientious and complete our work was faultless and  
detailed”

*"Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll" (1964)*

The photo was of Carole Denise McNair, one of the four girls killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama on September 15, 1963. The poem clearly indicates that Merton was deeply familiar with the fundamental principles of Gandhian and Kingian nonviolence. He had published two articles and one book about Gandhi by 1965. King and his colleague Bayard Rustin had indicated an interest in the Peacemakers Retreat at the Abbey that Merton was planning for November 1964. But King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in October and needed to prepare for the award ceremony in December, and Rustin would be accompanying King to Oslo, and so they were unable to attend.

The poem, addressed to the child, conveys "our sadness" at the same time that it acknowledges that she "will never need to understand" that sadness. It conveys how much "our empty-headed race ... needed to know love." It asks "how deep the wound" and "how far down our hell," while acknowledging that these are questions "you need not answer now." It abhors how "that silly manufactured head would soon kill you if it could think" and how "others as empty do and will for no reason." And it distinguishes "the need for love" on the part of "our empty-headed race" from the need "which you know without malice."

### **Contextualization**

In this section, I will expand upon how the five poems fit into the wider context of his later literary and scholarly production, primarily through pairing with one or more of the following essays.

"A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann" (1964)

"Nhat Hanh Is My Brother" (1966)

"Ishi: A Meditation" (1967)

"War and the Crisis of Language" (1968)

"Non-Violence Does Not ... Cannot ... Mean Passivity" (1968)

*"Tower of Babel" in context*

The first poem, "Tower of Babel" (1940-42), stands at some temporal distance from the other four, with the second dated 1957 and the last three from a short period between 1962 and 1964. "Tower of Babel" is primarily placed here as anchor as well as emblem, to give a sense of the span of Merton's abiding concern for language. At this early stage, his concern for language is expressed in the abstract; but he gradually comes to expressed it through terms of increasingly concrete connections with real-world social issues.

Merton's major prose work from this decade is his first autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948). His poetic output from this period is organized in his *Collected Poems* (1980) to include his *Early Poems* (1940-42, published posthumously in 1971), *Thirty Poems* (1944), *A Man in the Divided Sea* (1946), *Figures for an Apocalypse* (1947), and *The Tear of the Blind Lions* (1949). This poem is chosen as emblematic because it is an early example of Merton's longstanding engagement with problems of language and because the archetypal nature of the central image clearly cried out for longer elaboration, a demand to which he acquiesces in his 1957 verse drama, "The Tower of Babel: A Morality," Hence I take as this succeeding work as the primary context for the first poem.

*"The Tower of Babel: A Morality" in context*

"The machine" featured in "Tower of Babel" turns out to be a continuing point of focus in this verse drama. It features prominently in Merton's later treatments of Hoess and Eichmann in both poetry and prose. Merton chose to make the question of how the nonviolent pacifist should respond to technology a major theme of the abovementioned Peacemakers Retreat of November 1964. He had read a pamphlet called *The Triple Revolution* in March, which warned of the dangers of cybernetics and weapons of mass destruction and the urgent need for a universal demand for full human rights. Signatories included Tom Hayden of Students for a Democratic Society, King's colleague Bayard Rustin (a Black gay Quaker and conscientious objector who spent two years in prison for his beliefs), and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Linus Pauling. Merton's aim was not to denounce the use of technology. He was no Luddite: he welcomed the electrification of his hermitage,

the agricultural machinery that alleviated the monks' labor, and the tape recorder. But, as detailed by Gordon Zahn in *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (2014), Merton felt compelled to devote considerable time at the conference to studying this document and asking what the religious pacifist should do to counter the alienation and anesthetization that technology engenders and the uncritical belief that it inspires, as well as the way it attracts private and public investors to divert resources away from human needs, tempting investors with the promise of profit. By this time, Merton and his fellow retreatants were well aware of the role that racism played in this allure.

Merton's rhetoric of the machine also gives occasion to remark on the possible degree of Marshall McLuhan's influence on his work. According to Richard Putz (2025), journal entries indeed indicate that Merton read *Understanding Media*, but only in 1966, two years after the peacemakers retreat. And McLuhan's *War and Peace in the Global Village* was only published in 1968, the year of Merton's death. Marginalia in Merton's copy of that book proves that he read it, but only very near the end of his life. The echoes in Merton's writing of ideas that resonate with McLuhan's would suggest not so much direct influence as cultural ambience that managed to breach the cloister walls via Merton's panoptic reading and voluminous correspondence.

The longer verse drama, read in the context of later developments, does not only exhibit Merton's sensitivity to the abuse of the English language, beyond exploitation of ambiguity to outright doublespeak ("Chains will be your liberty") aimed at "the gradual destruction of intelligence." It also presages his concern for the xenophobic fear of the Other, featuring "Children running between the wheels / Watching the foreigner's sandal / Fearing the unknown words of the men with scars."

#### *"Hagia Sophia" in context*

The third poem, "Hagia Sophia," I take as an emblem of Merton's prescient intersectional vision. He sees Wisdom as a Sister; sees God as at once Father and Mother; and prays with Julian to Jesus as Mother. He also speaks of "the One Christ awakening in all the separate selves that ever were separate and isolated and alone in all the lands of the earth," and for Merton, this view of "all the lands of the earth" is not a missionary's perspective. The realization at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in 1958 ignited a spark that Merton had been nurturing since his encounter at Columbia in the late thirties with Mahanambata Brahmachari, the Hindu monk who paradoxically set Merton on his path to Catholicism. In none of his exchanges with members of his ever-widening circle of interfaith correspondents, from the Sufi Abdul Aziz to Czeslaw Milosz, from Rabbi Zalman Schachter to D.T. Suzuki, from the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh to the Dalai Lama, did Merton ever seek to convert. In his *Asian Journal* (published posthumously in 1973), Merton expressed hope that he could "bring back to my monastery something of the Asian wisdom with which I am fortunate to be in contact." In another entry which echoes the concerns about language and technology discussed above, he wrote, "We are witnessing the growth of a truly universal consciousness in the modern world. This universal consciousness may be a consciousness of transcendent freedom and vision, or it may simply be a vast blur of mechanized triviality and ethical cliché. The difference is, I think, important enough to be of concern to all religions, as well as to humanistic philosophies with no religion at all."

And Merton's ideal vision of a universal family was not limited to foreigners on the other side of the globe. As he writes in the 1966 essay "Nhat Hanh Is My Brother," he is aware of the risk of sitting comfortably at a safe distance, "cherishing the warm humanitarian glow of good intentions and worthy sentiments about the ongoing war." He invokes this ideal to bear on social reality in his declaration of hope for new bonds of solidarity "which cut across all political, religious and cultural lines," both domestically and globally.

Merton brings this ideal home to American soil in his 1967 essay, "Ishi: A Meditation." Ishi (d. 1916) was the last known surviving member of the massacred Native American Yahi people. In his appeal to the reader to "see all sides of the question" so that "the familiar perspectives of American history undergo a change," so that the "savages" suddenly become human and the "civilized" whites seem barbarian, Merton continues to employ an abundance of quotation marks that may be either literal quotes or scare quotes or both.

“One cannot help thinking today of the Vietnam war in terms of the Indian wars of a hundred years ago. Here again, one meets the same myths and misunderstandings, the same obsession with ‘completely wiping out’ an enemy regarded as diabolical. The backwoods had to be ‘completely cleaned out,’ or ‘purified’ of Indians—as if they were vermin. I have read accounts of American GIs taking the same attitude toward the Vietcong. The jungles are thought to be ‘infested with Communists.’”

Merton further notes, “This is a real ‘new frontier’ that enables us to continue the cowboys-and-Indians game.” And in an echo of his poem on Hoess, Merton pointedly observes, “the language of ‘cleansing’ appeases and pacifies the conscience.” Ever sensitive to the importance of language, he also notes that Ishi taught his language to the linguist Edmund Sapir.

Finally, the appeal of *The Triple Revolution* that so resonated in Merton, an appeal to awaken to the obscenity of using technology to develop weaponry that cannot win wars but can obliterate civilization, is evoked with a twist in his conclusion to this essay: “In the end, it is the civilians that are killed in the ordinary course of events, and combatants only get killed by accident.”

*“Chant to Be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces” in context*

The last two poems differ from the first three in being firmly situated in historical events, as opposed to the abstraction of “Tower of Babel” or the predominantly timeless atmosphere of “Hagia Sophia.” The verse form employed for “*Chants to Be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces*” might be called the equivalent of scare quotes around nearly every word. The form employed for a related poem, “Epitaph for a Public Servant,” is by contrast typographically customized in a way that seems to point to the difference between Eichmann’s remote position as an office bureaucrat, as opposed to Hoess’s direct command of Auschwitz.

One later prose essay that provides suggestive additional context for “Chants” is “A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann” (1964). It is an extensive treatment of the theme of madness. Merton writes, “One of the most disturbing facts that came out in the Eichmann trial was that a psychiatrist examined him and pronounced him perfectly sane.” It is an ironic presentation of the idea that, in an insane world, insanity is the only sane response, similar to the commonplace observation of “man’s inhumanity to man” that has a long tradition in world literature. Merton extends his exploration of this initial observation to delve into the risk of entrusting positions of authority to such “sane” people, whereas we would be more careful not to appoint a psychotic to a role involving responsibility to make life-threatening decisions. He then explores the slippery slopes, the way the simple obvious binary of sane and insane dangerously expands via language through subtle processes of adaptation and adjustment. “We ought to be able to rationalize a little brainwashing, and genocide, and find a place for nuclear war, or at least for napalm bombs.” He brings the logic home with a reference to an example from contemporary mass media: “The ones who coolly estimate how many millions of victims can be considered expendable in a nuclear war, I presume they do all right with the Rorschach ink blots too. On the other hand, you will probably find that the pacifists and the ban-the-bomb people are, quite seriously, just as we read in Time, a little crazy.”

As with the McLuhan connection, the reader may at this point wonder if Merton’s discussion of Eichmann’s sanity could have been influenced by Michel Foucault. He does not explicitly mention Foucault until his 1968 essay (published posthumously), “War and the Crisis of Language.” In this late essay, Merton cites Foucault’s 1967 *Madness and Civilization*, the English translation of *L'Histoire de la Folie à l'âge classique*, which had originally been published in French in 1961. I assume that, as in the case of the affinity with McLuhan, there is no direct connection but the affinity is rather more of an echo of a broader cultural heritage shared via familiarity with other writers such as Freud and Sartre.

*“Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll” in context*

The last intertextual connection I want to introduce to situate the Birmingham poem is “Non-Violence Does Not ... Cannot ... Mean Passivity.” This essay was written in 1968, after the April assassination of King, and thus in the last eight months of Merton’s own life, as he died in December. The essay was published



posthumously. Merton refers to the case of the Baltimore Nine, who used napalm to burn draft records in an act of civil disobedience. He asks first, whether this act can be considered nonviolent, and second, whether it was effective.

One striking feature of this essay is that Merton does not take the familiar ironic approach of pointing out doublespeak to argue against the general mood of misgiving about the potential of nonviolent protest after King's death. But nor does he fall into despair, although the opening paragraph is tinged with apprehension that the country may descend into violent chaos, and there is a suggestion that mass media manipulation may have something to do with the public's loss of faith in the power of nonviolence.

He repeats some familiar expressions of discouragement, such as the idea that "we are all prisoners of a machinery that takes us inevitably where we don't want to go." But he sounds a little more cynical than usual in statements such as "Most people would rather have war and profits than peace and problems. Or so it seems." He laments that "we speak peace with our lips but the answer in the heart is war" and that some Christians even say that the war in Vietnam is an act of Christian love.

Another striking feature of this essay is the way Merton weighs in on the effectiveness of the Baltimore Nine protest, considering that his own vows prohibited him from ever participating in such direct action. Their use of napalm struck him as "a first step toward violent resistance," bordering on violence. Merton expresses concern about escalation in a world where no one seems to know how to deescalate. He acknowledges to some degree that the Nine followed classic nonviolent principles in their willingness to suffer for their beliefs. But he questions their choice of action considering the "edgy psychological state" of the country. He wonders whether it has "frightened more than it has edified," aggravating Americans' sense of being existentially threatened; whether that feeling is rational or irrational, it is nonetheless real. Finally, Merton sounds unusually resigned to the thought that "it has long ago become automatic to interpret nonviolence as violence merely because it is resistance."

## Application

I will now take the insights accumulated above and consider how they might be fruitfully applied by individuals and organizations to develop effective rhetorical strategies in response to the threat to freedom of speech on the American university campus reported in major mass media in the spring of 2025, a threat with global ramifications. It must be acknowledged that one big technological change since Merton's time is the rise of the Internet and online communication; but it is my belief that any of the fundamental rhetorical strategies referred to here can be adapted to suit various media and genres.

### *Metaphor and other figurative language*

I would argue that Merton's sustained use of the machinery metaphor over a period of nearly thirty years had a cumulative effect of motivating many readers to reflect on their agency. The machinery metaphor draws upon decades of popular history and culture, from Lucy gobbling chocolates on the assembly line in *I Love Lucy* to Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*, from every use of the word "sabotage," which invokes collective consciousness of a French laborer throwing their wooden clog to stop a dehumanizing factory machine, to the French Resistance in World War II. (In his verse drama "The Tower of Babel, Merton uses the word himself to expose the Leader, calling for peace while fretting that "Sabotage / Halts the production of new weapons.") While the machinery metaphor may initially stimulate a sense of frustration and powerlessness, with sustained, carefully calculated exploration it can also tap into a realistically empowering sense that resistance is not futile. Individuals and organizations would do well to examine their rhetoric, both oral and written, and consider adopting such effective metaphors in a sustained branding campaign.

Merton's use of the machinery metaphor is effective precisely because it evokes such vivid, dynamic images of such desensitizing, dehumanizing devices. This stands in stark contrast to the desensitizing use of language, and Merton also frequently expressed concern not only about the use of euphemism (as in his poems and prose about Hoess and Eichmann) but especially about cliché. One particularly noteworthy example of his thought in this regard is "Red or Dead: The Anatomy of a Cliché" (1962). In this essay, he presents a thorough five-step exposition of the "horrible," "absurd" logic of this "reasoning" (Merton's scare quotes), the

assumption that if a Vietnamese person is a Communist they deserve to be killed; if they are innocent and on our side, they should be happy to die for the anti-Communist cause.

Merton's attention to cliché also echoes his poet's concern with the mindless, automatic use of language and indoctrination by language and ideas infinitely reproduced in mass media, as in his poignant comment in "Nonviolence Does Not ... Cannot ... Mean Passivity" about how "it has long ago become automatic to interpret nonviolence as violence merely because it is resistance."

### *Intersectionality*

Merton's attention to the principle of intersectionality, even if he never explicitly used the term, can be accessed to promote awareness that one of the most demoralizing trends in contemporary polarized debate is the "oppression Olympics," a form of victim mentality. Why do you only talk about Ukraine and not about Palestine? Why do you care more for cats than you do for children? Blue Lives Matter! Promoting a thorough understanding of the power of intersectional solidarity to resist the divide-and-conquer effect of such logic, and purging such divisive rhetorical tactics from your own campaign vocabulary, can go a long way toward reducing such dispiriting friction.

### *Nonviolent practice*

Thomas Merton was a genuine unceasing practitioner of nonviolence, and offers a timeless reminder to actively and constantly study the classic nonviolent philosophy of Gandhi and King and how it has been inherited and maintained by their successors, beginning with a solid grasp of the idea that pacifism is not passivism. Peacemaking is not achieved by avoiding conflict but by confronting it, with love. The system of nonviolent communication (NVC) developed by Marshall Rosenberg is also a product of the Civil Rights era, as is the Alternatives to Violence Project. (<https://avpusa.org/>) Many American civic organizations offer training for specific situations employing these skills. For example, the movement to counter Islamophobia in the U.S. after 9/11 developed an effective system of bystander intervention tactics which have since been adapted for sexual harassment intervention, as introduced in *I've got your back* by Jorge Arteaga and Emily May (2022). The Asian American Federation in New York City also partnered with the Center for Anti-Violence Education, for example, to produce excellent resources to counter the anti-Asian violence that rose during the Covid-19 pandemic. (<https://www.aafederation.org/>)

### *Deescalation*

This is actually just one specific skill in the toolbox of nonviolent intervention tactics, but I pay it particular attention here because Merton himself did. The Movement for Black Lives has produced a wealth of material on this skill. In this regard, I especially recommend the work of Layla Saad on optical or performative allies in *Me and white supremacy* (2020). Saad's work is a constructive development of similar problems in other movements variously characterized as the patronizing savior or messiah complex rooted in unhealthy self-righteousness.

### *Intercultural communication*

The R-word, religion, is one of the dreaded taboos in PARSNIPs, the acronym for controversial topics to be avoided in the university classroom that also includes politics, alcohol, sex, narcotics, isms, and pork (Thornbury, 2010). But Merton helpfully reminds us that interspiritual communication is also a form of intercultural communication. (As the full list of his correspondents indicates, he corresponded with many secular peace movement leaders as well as religious, and so I use Teasdale's term "interspiritual" rather than the more common ecumenical or interfaith.) Merton's early efforts to build bridges with Asian spiritual and religious leaders such as D.T. Suzuki, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Dalai Lama have borne much fruit, and the tradition has been carried on, for example, by the Dalai Lama in his friendship with Desmond Tutu, the Anglican archbishop who chaired Nelson Mandela's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa. Intergenerational communication might also well be included here, as many peace activists now involved in efforts to protect freedom of speech are veterans of the civil rights and anti-apartheid movements." They possess a wealth of experience that could be tapped to energize today's peace movement.

## *Education*

Merton was a university professor for three years, from 1938 to 1941, before committing to the monastic vocation. The education system was not a major theme in his writing, but his concern about language use is undoubtedly informed by this experience and indirectly bears upon the issue. Related concerns are expressed in both his poetry and his prose from the time of his “Tower of Babel” works in the forties and fifties. In the earlier poem, he writes, “Words also reflect this principle / Though they are meant to conceal it / From the ones who are too young to know.” In the later verse drama, the Professor echoes a line from the earlier poem about history being a dialogue between forward and backward, but then adds, “Going inevitably forward by the abuse of thought / And the gradual destruction of intelligence,” a reminder of the goal of education under Fascism, as Umberto Eco warns in “Ur-Fascism” (1995): “All the Nazi or Fascist schoolbooks made use of an impoverished vocabulary, and an elementary syntax, in order to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning. But we must be ready to identify other kinds of Newspeak, even if they take the apparently innocent form of a popular talk show.”

## *Trauma and fear*

Merton’s mindful attention to the problem of fear is another theme that is sustained throughout his work, as long and as thoroughly as his attention to the machinery metaphor, from the “Tower of Babel” of the early forties to his last essay penned in 1968 and published posthumously, “Non-Violence Does Not ... Cannot ... Mean Passivity.” The empathy he expresses in that last essay, both for the desperation of the Baltimore Nine and for the existential fear gripping many Americans after the assassinations of King and Bobby Kennedy, is very much part of the classic nonviolent philosophy that he espoused. The unusual tone of this final essay in retrospect comes to sound like it may even be a reflection on his own past practice. I may only be projecting my own animus here, but revisiting this essay has certainly inspired me to reflect on the possibility that my own ironic narrative style may have at times alienated others, to the effect of weakening my critique of the alienating effect of technology and Newspeak. In this regard, I would like to acknowledge another genuine practitioner of nonviolence who carries on the pacifist tradition: Jonathan Kuttub, the co-founder of Nonviolence International, a Palestinian who firmly acknowledges the continuing need for healing from the trauma of the Holocaust (Kuttub, 2024).

## *Accessing the power of art*

In my discussion of the poem “Hagia Sophia,” I only briefly mentioned Merton’s fascination with the line-cut engraving by Victor Hammer. It should actually be noted that Merton was a distinguished artist and photographer as well as a poet. He seems to have somehow gotten permission to decorate his hermitage with the calligraphic art calendar that D.T. Suzuki sent him every year. He left a collection of photographs of the Shaker village Pleasant Hill in Kentucky that was posthumously published as *Seeking Paradise: The Spirit of the Shakers* (2003). His paintings have likewise been posthumously published with text by Roger Lipsey as *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton* (2006). Perhaps his most famous artwork is his illustrations for *Original Child Bomb*, his anti-poem about Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1962).

Extended treatment of ideas for the creative use of visual art in public protest is beyond the scope of this essay, but I hope my use of poems as emblems may point toward the principle and the possibility.

## **Conclusion**

While the above suggestions for application of Merton’s insights are aimed at a wide-ranging audience of peacebuilders, I hope it is obvious that these rhetorical strategies can be localized to fit the particular context calling for the protection of freedom of speech. Merton himself explicitly raised the issue in his verse poem “The Tower of Babel: A Morality,” where Truth is put on trial and found guilty of treason, denounced as an enemy of the State, while Propaganda is judged to be a faithful guardian of Democracy and given “exclusive freedom of speech and worship.”

In the American context especially, awareness of the obscene disparity in public school funding, due to the financial structure that bases local school budgets on local taxes, may dampen sympathy for Ivy League universities with endowments in the billions of dollars. Can these elite schools honestly argue that their appeal for protection of free speech qualifies them as defenders of all levels of the education system? Can they meet the challenge of the Tower of Babel? Gandhi's talisman may serve as a touchstone as we ponder this question.

"I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest person whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to them. Will they gain anything by it? Will it restore them to a control of their own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to *swaraj* for the hungry and spiritually starved millions? Then you will find your doubt and your self melting away."

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