

Thomas Merton Goes to Class: Pedagogy on the Borders of the Short Story

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If there is one voice that might be helpful to students in the university classroom, it is that of Thomas James Merton, known to his Cistercian family as Brother, then Father, Louis. He knows what it's like to try to find a voice, one for writing, another for speaking, yet another for teaching. A case in point from his own life: The predicament of this author of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* is the predicament of many students who read and write in our universities. Do readers encounter a self-consciously written piece, a voice not sure of itself, changing pitch here and there like an adolescent's? Do they meet an author who moves in and out of his identity as monk, author, teacher, a voice both sure yet searching? Does this author ever get out of his own way and let his working voice, his author voice, speak for itself? The answer: all of the above. The so-called predicament of self-conscious authority seeking free-flowing freedom as writer is similar to our students' trying to discover who in the world they are and writing objectively about that world without listening too, too closely to their own voice. Voices work fine often when they're left alone, to themselves, unforced, not performing or trying to fool the reader or the real self.

Like the rest of us, subversives, our students seek to be the true creators of their writing and reading. Showing up and being in the written moment energizes the written text; somewhere, somehow the search for identity includes speaking to the world, maybe even writing to the world, addressing the world with a voice that has something to say. Emily Dickinson found it in the poems that became her letters to the world. Ironically, to surrender self-consciousness is to find the essence of who we are without trying so hard. Finding who we are means finding our voice. Trust the writing; the essence will come on line; the voice will take on the sounds of confidence and maturity. The sounds, coming from the heart, will be true, to themselves, to the reader, to the writer. The best reading is when we don't know we are reading; the best writing is the text in the mind, not the text on paper. The Thomas Merton of *Conjectures*, the Thomas Merton of anything at any time, always desires one essential thing whether one is a reader, writer or a novice hoping to profess monastic vows: that all his readers and writers discover who they truly, essentially are as known and loved by God. He even says so: "At the center of our being is a point of ... pure truth" (*Conjectures* 158). The challenge for Thomas Merton in *Conjectures* is the challenge to our students: learn to write by writing. Get off stage; be the reader; be the writer; speak with the voice that's authentically you.

The writer's task is to state, clearly and convincingly, a pedagogy, a method that illustrates the possibilities for aligning American, monastic themes found in Thomas Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1965) with three works of short fiction. The intended goal is clarity and appreciation of the voices from the fiction, conversing with the voices from the writer; who better to turn to for help than the reader, the writer, the teacher, Tom Merton. The literary works for thematic alignment with Merton's *Conjectures* include these American and

modern European short stories: Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" (1926), Jean Paul Sartre's "The Wall" (1939), and Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" (1948).¹

Literary criticism maintains a solidly based principle that seems not to change with time: let the work speak for itself; allow the work's authentic voice to speak and speak directly to you. That said, any fusion of different genres is readily acknowledged as "forced," and at best, artificial. Why, then, this need to speak about different genres by submitting a forced or artificial connection? Hybrids are not evil in themselves, and, with due respect to Toyota, hybrids can extend the life of nature's energy. I submit then, that Merton's *Conjectures* understood for the historical strength of the author's insights, does indeed enlighten, enliven a reader's sense of being present to, not simply reading, a text, albeit assigned, required and yes, "on the exam." *Conjectures* is an example of the search/struggle for an authentic voice, one that may entice readers; more importantly *Conjectures* teaches readers that when the voice is authentic, experienced, compassionate: people listen.

Thomas Merton knew the American dream; though well-to-do and well-heeled, he was an immigrant; he lived in a city teeming with immigrants, New York, specifically Douglaston, Queens, Brooklyn, Manhattan; he embraced education once he found his way; he knew and eventually spurned economically-driven lifestyles and desires for success. He respected the European world well enough to make it work for him at Columbia University; he also met Europe's Judaeo-Christian God, found in the old world's art, architecture and music: this is the God, to Merton's surprise, who met him in America. God taught Thomas Merton that one can be both rich and poor, poor yet rich; the only good poverty is that which makes hungry the heart and soul. This poverty he knew. This gave Merton a voice for God; a voice for neighbor. Tom

Merton knew a hungry heart and a hungry soul; he wanted a lean mind; a bountiful heart; an infinite soul; a clear-sounding voice. That is so, until one lives the hunger and embraces a mission to serve up large helpings of soul food—for our purposes, of the literary variety: where better to do this than as a reader, thinker, writer and spiritual guide. The authentic voice tells readers where the soul food is.

Our thesis is more finely tuned to Thomas Merton (1915-68) the writer, more specifically, the poet/artist/writer and thinker. These are the components of the “Merton” voice. Merton senses the quality of innocence as the *sine qua non* of the poet or writer’s vocation: “His art depends on an ingrained innocence which he would lose in business, in politics, or in too organized a form of academic life” (*Raids* 156). Simply put: Merton would lose his voice in some work; he would find a way to use his prophetic voice in others. Clearly then, knowing well the ways of the world, its newness and its sins as they touched him personally, Merton claims the monastery as his megaphone, as providing and sustaining that innocence he so explicitly requires as necessary for clear thinking and good writing, clear communication. However, *Conjectures* marks a turn, a change in Merton’s voice in this neatly thought-through process.

Between the years 1956 and 1965, while Merton was tracking changes in the world he thought he left, readers can sense an unintended account of the changes/challenges in his own life, in his authorial voice. The reward is doubled; autobiographically readers sense the development of a writer; socially they benefit from his renewed and renewing perspective on the world. Readers listen to a voice refreshed, yet unfinished. The question of how readers of the modern short story enhance their experience of reading modernity even in a postmodern world can be answered by learning to blend the literary with the historical without falling into the

fallacy of finding autobiography where it is not. Let the work speak for itself; let Merton speak as Merton; let Merton write as a writer; let the reader decide the value of the voice. When it comes to evaluating literary works, it is safe to let Tom Merton voice his say.

How could Merton's thoughts in *Conjectures* enhance one's reading of Ernest Hemingway, specifically his short work "A Clean Well-Lighted Place"? The value of *Conjectures* lies in the sometimes disconnectedness of its thoughts or ideas; his voice is unsettled in an unsettled world; he sometimes writes too self-consciously, mumbling on about something; he writes for the sake of writing and speaks in order to speak. At other times, Merton shows up and engages his true authority—beautifully, unselfconsciously. The streams of consciousness in *Conjectures* are verbal, ideological gold mines providing a perspective on a world becoming increasingly disjointed. The voice flows. Enter: the old man in the café, at first glance, a singularly uninteresting character if there ever was one. An old man? Yes. But it's the café that he wants; not the waiters or even the alcohol; he's got plenty of that, even too much. Some would say Hemingway's old man has made some bad decisions, that he doesn't have much of a say, or a voice: suicide attempts, some addiction, disengagement. So what's up with his coming to the café? And why does Hemingway love to say that word, "*nada*"? Readers of "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" could learn that it's good to discover absurdity; to know it, may help in either challenging, avoiding or embracing the "2 + 2 equals 5" conditions in life. They may eventually learn to voice a dialogue with the nonsense of their own lives. Where then is the life issue, the challenge of the story? The depth of the story does not seem to lie on whether or not the man will stay; nor does it lie in whether the old man will try to commit suicide again; the challenge is what and how will the waiters treat the old man. How the old man is, or is not,

included in the life of the café, and, yes, in the life of each waiter—that’s the crisis, the critical question. Will anyone speak for the man who doesn’t feel he has a social voice? At least one of the waiters begins to voice some possibilities. The answer could determine whether or not the transcendent is “*nada*” not present, not of value, still meaningless or offering all the meaning. If the participants don’t change their view of life and one another, life goes on in the “*nada*.” Life goes on and eventually goes away—not with a bang but with a whimper, not a sound, not a voice. Readers watch life turn off like the artificial electric light of the street lamp.

As students look up after reading “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” the deer usually stare down the highway into the headlights: they are now voiceless before the silence of what the story did to the old man. Their question is the question of the old man: “What was that all about?” This is when it might be advisable to hand them a different text, unannounced, and have them listen to a voice not their own, not of academic authority. Have them read from *Conjectures*: “Love, love only, love of our deluded fellow man as he actually is, in his delusion and in his sin: this alone can open the door to truth” (69). To hear that voice could change how students read the story. Students, have begun, hopefully, reading, thinking and connecting the dots between the Samaritan who redeems his own and his neighbor’s “*nada*” and the furtherance of non-meaning and non-involvement. Merton also offers yet another guideline, another tone, in “Answers on Art and Freedom”: “Freedom consists in something more than merely choosing what is forced upon you” (*Literary* 381).

Jean Paul Sartre’s “The Wall” has a setting in Spain during a dictatorship regime. The “Falangistas” take over, capture three political prisoners; one (Juan Mirabal) blames others and tries, absurdly, to protect himself; he whines and complains about how the whole system is

unfair; after all this is the Sartrean, existential universe; he is the victim of an absurdity, an imprisonment which has its origins more in his mind than in his jail cell. Juan's voice is the voice of complaining, of pointless whining. Another (Tom Steinbok) settles in, resigns, becomes part of the absurdity; his voice makes sounds only from the past; our narrator, Pablo Ibieta, however, has an idea, a voice worth listening to. Now there's a man with meaning, or so it seems; he has a reason to live, a cause, and he can articulate the plan, voice it coherently: he will lie to set another free; he will die, for indeed he will be found out, but Ramon will live, Pablo's voice will live on through Ramon, who knows; it could happen. But this is, after all Sartre's world. Ramon Gris is at large and Pablo will die with the freedom of meaning, by thumbing his nose at the Fascist regime. Sounds like a plan...until readers start to realize: no good deed will go unpunished, and a voiced lie, at least in this universe, is the truth; and, guess what, the voiced truth is as good as a lie. Then, Pablo Ibieta can only laugh at himself, at good deeds, at good Samaritans and what a splendid illusion the search for human freedom really is. The truth will set you free; the people will listen; maybe somewhere else, but not here in Spain, or anywhere for that matter.

Once again, sighs of terrible disappointment from the students: "Why?" "Are you kidding me!" "Why do you make us read these stories?" Each is starting to get a voice. Enter: Thomas Merton with another reading assignment from *Conjectures*: Consider these thoughts; do they not apply to the relationships, a funny word in Sartre's universe, between Pablo and the police? Take it (the discussion about the story) from there: "People are constantly trying to use you to help them to create the particular illusions by which they live...You must renounce and sacrifice the approval that is only a bribe enlisting your support of a collective illusion"

(*Conjectures* 97). Pablo thought he beat the illusionists at their own game. But Sartre always wins; Pablo gets neither to rest, nor die, nor live in peace for his good deed that goes, absurdly, unpunished by the bad guys. We really do want our parents, be they good or bad ones, to discipline us. Punish me; at least then I know you've listened to my voice.

One way to begin teaching Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" is to say, to the students' relief and pleasure: one need only read the story once in order never to forget it. Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" is almost no-keyed rather than low-keyed; the stones seem to sit in innocence as do the townsfolk: stones. Townsfolk. Black box; rather civil conversations; some superstitions, but, after all, this is small-town America—or is it? Perhaps it's the lethal passivity of monolithic, white America that wants the world to remain the way it is; that is, "my way: forever." Lots of conversations in this town, but no real voices. Platitudes, but not ideas; conformity trapped inside the illusion of freedom, the illusion of free speech. That coffin of ideas, of freedom, of other possibilities, is that apparently harmless, black box. The hints of an impending explosion lie, ironically, in the passive attention to it's being June; to it's being always done this way; to the town's disappointment when neighboring towns drop such institutions like the lottery. All that info comes from pre-packaged, robotic voices. This is not Hemingway's "Winner Take Nothing" (Fleming). The story may be more embraced by asking the question: "Is something unfair only when it happens to me, but not when it happens to you?" When it happens to you, I don't need to use my voice; when it happens to me, my voice lacks authority of purpose, just ask Tessie Hutchinson. That's usually the way we read the newspapers, even the online editions. So the black box (coffin of destiny) comes to the Hutchinsons who quickly pass it on to Tessie, who says, "It isn't fair! (302). It's not the lottery

that's bad; it's what the verdict does or doesn't do to us, as we, too, watch someone needlessly die. But we've surrendered our voices, our ways to meaning.

Thomas Merton waxes eloquently about tradition and convention; one (tradition) goes to the past to enliven the present and give hope for the future: try, "Next year, in Jerusalem!" The other (convention) traps us in a robotic universe that forgets why it does what it does, and doesn't understand the reason for its existence. In "The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air" Merton looks at the twentieth century's violence, genocide and racism; these are some of his thoughts: "If society loses its "memory," if it forgets its language of traditional symbol, then the individuals who make it up become neurotic; because their own memories are corrupted by uninterrupted, unused meanings" (*Conjectures* 161). Here there is no need for a voice; save your breath and die. Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" is a *District 9* world. But who's to blame? Who's guilty? The automatic pilot's conscience of the 9/11 world, of the holocaust, of the terrorist must be disarmed, not simply diffused. Our forgetting must be replaced by speaking—"We will never forget!"

Thomas Merton seems, at times, to dismiss his effort in writing *Conjectures*. It is as if he would rather it not be published; this seems not to upset him. His tone of voice seems indifferent. He looks upon his musings, ruminations and attempts at composition as a disjointed stream of consciousness. Yet, it is that same disjointedness that gives true voice to the Merton of *Conjectures*; he doesn't have it all together; but, seemingly, neither does, by its very nature of voiced uncertainty, modern and post modern European and American literature. Each can speak and listen to the other.

Notes

¹All short story references are taken from *The Best Short Stories of the Modern Age*, ed. Douglas Angus (New York: Fawcett, 1974).

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