

**Keynote Address – Friday, June 23, 2017**  
Catholic Press Association Catholic Media Conference, Quebec City  
By Michael Higgins

Never have we needed the bracing air, the rich oxygen provided by a robust, honest, transparent and rigorous media than now, for we live now in a time when the word has been corroded, meaning has been sundered, chaos is our common argot.

Ian Brown, investigative journalist, author and friend of the iconic Catholic spiritual master, Jean Vanier, rightly observes of our parlous state of affairs on matters that speak to the heart of a journalist's vocation:

It is important to understand Donald Trump *within the context of the history of facts*. He is not a sophisticated postfactual postmodernist. He's a throwback, not just beyond the rationality of Voltaire to the emotionalism of Rousseau, but way, way, waaaaaay back, to pre-Enlightenment mystical shamanism, to the credulous world of shadows inside Plato's cave, to abracadabra and the wowza flash of fire.

In other words, the Trumpian approach to truth, an approach that has been gestating in the wider culture for decades, an approach that disparages truth and its knowability, trumpets the dismissal of any reliability on factuality, and willfully engages in the easy mockery of that supreme academic value of disinterestedness (the absolute antithesis of uninterestedness), is an approach at variance with democratic values and, for those of us in the Catholic industry, the very integrity of truth.

When discourse is coarsened, then so are we; when words are evacuated of substance, when they become empty vessels, then we are compromised.

Thomas Merton, the much respected poet-contemplative and prolific author, will not let us forget what happens when words are held hostage by those who intend more than mischief for us, when words have become drones of discontent, missiles of madness, surreal sound bites disconnected from reality, lethal weapons in the hands of advertisers, spin doctors, political apologists, apparatchiks of industry, state, and, yes, religion.

For instance, John Morrish in his television column in *The Tablet* of London has this to say about a PR woman who is the stuff of nightmare and yet exquisitely "meaningful" in her linguistic orbit:-- "wildly enthusiastic, usually wrong, always incomprehensible. While giving advice to a client dealing with a crisis in Cornwall she barks: "It's a major brand dropout. If you don't triage this thing now, you are going to be up to your ass in alligators."

Can you imagine Cornwall's Doc Martin worrying about alligators? And he's a worrier.

Language is not only ruthlessly rendered inchoate by wordsmiths in love with neologisms, parasense, and persiflage, these high priests of opacity have become our new comedians.

But there is not a lot to laugh about when, as journalist Stephen Marche reflects in “This American Carnage” on the new reality:

Writing itself, the attempt to make sense, is now a political act. Science, the attempt to describe the world, is now a political act. Whether we want it or not, anyone who observes, and reports is now an agent. Fact-checking and peer review are no longer abstruse functions of professional castes; they are sacred obligations. To check a fact is to preserve a white dove in the heart of the temple.

Facts are foundational; truth is not a commodity; words must represent not misshape reality.

Merton was a model “dove in the heart of the temple.” He treasured the word, he didn’t massage it; he chose the right word because he knew that by so doing he revered it. The word is sacred. The poet exercises a minor mercy in electing the necessary word.

Merton had little stomach for the master manipulators of language. Think of his prose poems *Original Child Bomb* and *Chant to Be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces*. These parodies of justification are Swiftian in their impact. We reel at the monstrous end to which language has been corralled to serve. We have a taste of madness.

Merton scorned the agents of promotion, the advertisers who sell us the pap of falsehood, in such works as his anti-poetic epic *Cables to the Ace*.

But perhaps his most sustained and apposite work, given our current *zeitgeist*, is his less playful and more lyrical 1957 radio play *The Tower of Babel*.

The Leader addresses the assembled in a manner suggestive of any number of twentieth-century demagogues. His name, after all, is Legion: Caudillo, Poglanic, Furher, Duce:

Already I see that the skies are as full of words as they are of stars. Each word becomes an instrument of war. Words of the clocks and devils. Words of the wheels and machines. Steel words stronger than flesh or spirit. Secret words that divide the essences of things. Last of all, the one word which strikes at the heart of creation, and dissolves it into its original nothingness. Give me possession of this one word, and I will forget every other.

David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*, echoes Merton’s spiritual and intellectual dismay half a century after the appearance of *The Tower of Babel* when he observes:

On Inauguration Day, at the Capitol, Trump no longer affected any awe of the task before him or respect for his predecessors. He furiously rebuked the elected officials sitting behind him and the international order that they served.

Using the language of populist demagogues, from Huey Long to George Wallace to Silvio Berlusconi, the new President implied that he, the Leader, was in perfect communion with the People, and that together they would repair the landscape of “American carnage” and return it to its prelapsarian state of grace.

Those gathered to hear the Leader in Merton’s play willingly give him his one word: “Fear! Fear!” It is the same word that is spoken, according to American poet Archibald MacLeish in his pre-World War II verse play *The Fall of the City*.

In the day of confusion of reason when  
all is delusion:  
In the day of the tyrants of tongues when  
the truth is for hire  
In the day of deceit when ends meet.

It is in times such as these that people turn to their gods.

Macleish, in a speech to the Associated Press during the war years, spoke eloquently of a new strategy he saw as a counterweight to the prevailing preference for ardent, unnuanced and aggressive propaganda. What he says has an authentic and urgent ring of truth for our own time:

That strategy, I think, is neither difficult to find nor difficult to name. It is the strategy which is appropriate to our cause and to our purpose—the strategy of truth—the strategy which opposes to the frauds and deceits by which our enemies have confused and conquered other peoples, the simple and clarifying truths by which a nation such as ours must guide itself. But the strategy of truth is not, because it deals in truth, devoid of strategy. It is not enough, in this war of hoaxes and delusions and perpetuated lies, to be merely honest. It is necessary also to be wise.

To be honest and wise in a period of “hoaxes and delusions and perpetuated lies” is a moral imperative for all journalists, but especially for Catholic ones.

Carl Gustav Jung argued that when the word’s link with transcendence is severed the State will use the word as a mechanism of control. The Swiss psychiatrist says in *The Undiscovered Self* that this happens when

belief in the word becomes credulity, and the word itself an infernal slogan capable of any deception. With credulity come propaganda and advertising to dupe the citizen with political jobbery and compromises, and the lie reaches proportions never known before in the history of the world.

Merton's *The Tower of Babel* is about the betrayal of language and the consequences of that betrayal. By the word we are sorely afflicted. Words have become in our time the paid hirelings, the mercenaries of ambition, lust, greed and all other manifestations of Power's will—they are the sacraments of the dead, the spawn of the Tower.

The words of this land  
Are interminable signals of their own emptiness  
Signs without meaning.

Words have become slaves of distortion and servants of deceit. But it was not always so: "Ah, yes, I have heard in the past that words can be true."

The monk-poet knows that Babble-On will not easily be undone and that primary responsibility is to renew the word, to cleanse it, to redeem it. The writer must counter the persuasive logic of the Professor who argues that words

. . . belong by right to the political process.  
Doing, making, destroying. Or rather  
Being done, being made, being destroyed.

It is the Word that will undo the tyranny of the word.

But that Word is the supreme paradox. Enfleshed truth frees language from its demonic servitude. Merton reminds us of the ecstatic power of language, he reminds us that words are remarkable things, and his witness as poet sentinel in a tremulous time gives us hope that a language restored to integrity is the only antidote to *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni's melancholy observation that "when something no longer provokes remark, it becomes unremarkable, and the road from there to acceptances is a short one."

We easily acclimate to the "new normal."

Merton spent his vocation as an artist and contemplative unsettling us with language, probing the frontiers of meaning, de-shackling us from the complacency and conformity that diminish us.

Merton abominated the false unity that comes from the imposition of univocal authority, a unity born of fear of the future, of the Other; he sought throughout his life as a monk and intellectual a multivalent authority, a unity born of communion, a unity sealed in freedom

Merton is a model for contemporary workers in the media; and his writings are especially germane for those of us laboring the vineyards of Catholicism.

The world at large needs to trust its news sources and that trust has been profoundly impaired. Commitment to honest reportage devoid of ideological presuppositions, transparent coverage that eschews extra-editorial political suasion and influence, and the prioritization of conscience over expediency are qualities that need, *must*, be restored and Catholic media professionals can lead the way in that estimable and crucial restoration.

Otherwise, the landscape will continue to darken.