There was a hermit who lived in the woods. He spent his days and nights in prayer, and in peaceful works that gave praise to the Lord. Though his spirit rested always in the heart of his Creator, his hands and feet were seldom idle, and neither was his mind. It might be said that the things he made were useless (he didn’t weave baskets, he didn’t make shoes), or if useful, only to the spirit: only to the soul in its journey toward God.

What were his works? Tracts, translations, poems, fables, drawings, photographs, dancing and drumming. So many works and all of the spirit? So many works, and all from a single source, toward a single end.

His tracts were concerned with mystical theology, both the problems and the glories of the contemplative life: but the language in them was always as simple as possible, and his examples and illustrations clear. No problem ever seemed too complex for him to tackle, and he never dropped one until he had found a solution: an insight, at least, that he was capable of explaining.

* HARPO is a pseudonym which Merton used in writing his “anti-letters” to Robert Lax.

Editors’ Note: This paper was written originally for “The Maritain/ Merton Symposium” held in Louisville, Kentucky, 25-26 September 1980. It was not presented at the symposium and is published here for the first time.
His translations: some were from Latin, from the writings and sermons of the early Church fathers; but just as many were from French, Spanish and even Chinese: poems and fables he'd found and admired and wanted to put into English so others could read them.

His own poems and fables, dramas and songs were works of the spirit, praise of the Lord, particularly of His mercy: sometimes directly, sometimes by inference; sometimes simply by the fact of their being. Ever creative, seldom didactic, they were always superabundantly alive.

The drawings, the photos? Filled with that same joy (the joy of David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant): a cause for rejoicing.

The dancing, the drumming? New dancing, new drumming: new song for the Lord. And (once when he travelled) the hermit and his friends, all dancing, all drumming, all rejoicing in His love.

Did he write letters, too? He wrote them and wrote them. Some light, some heavy. Some addressed to problems in the world, others purely to matters of the spirit: some only to include a song, some only for laughter. Yet all from a single impulse of the heart.

Where find the time for so much writing? He rose early and had no other work but to praise the Lord.

A new kind of life, and a classic one, too. In all the ages of Christianity there have been at least a few joyous hermits who have filled the world about them with divinely inspired joy. And this hermit, without at all forcing his way, is of their number. A dolphin-like personality with a lively approach to all matters divine is not new in the Christian tradition, yet each time one appears it's as though a new star were in the sky.

How did his work relate to his prayer? The work took its rise from prayer and returned to prayer. The work itself was prayer and was informed by prayer. There was no conflict between work and prayer: if conflict arose it was resolved by prayer. It was resolved (turned from conflict to creation) in the poet's -- the hermit's -- full dedication to contemplative prayer: to union with God.

Drumming: surely it's possible to pray without drumming; but not (for this hermit) to drum without praying.

Dancing, the same.

Singing, the same.

Preaching, photographing, drawing: the same.
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Dancing, the same.

Singing, the same.

Preaching, photographing, drawing: the same.
And so with the employment of all his gifts and talents. He might, and often did, pray without visible movement. But none of his outward actions were ever unaccompanied by prayer. Nor was the final purpose of any one of them less than the ultimate goal of his whole life of prayer.

It was the force, the strength, the weakness, too, of this whole life of prayer that gave life to the works, and gives life still, even though the hermit appears, at least for the moment, to have left the woods.

being given over entirely to the love of the Lord
he did what he did with joy and energy
he did not doubt, since there was only one goal in mind: to serve the Lord
and who is the Lord and how should he serve Him?
he learned more and more each day
he learned to express himself more and more clearly
on the nature of this love, on the meaning of the life
he had entered upon, as a river runs into the sea
(when a river runs into the sea it stops being a river: its molecules are invaded by the molecules of the sea, and while it loses nothing, it gains new being in the sea)
the closer he came to knowing God, the closer he came
to knowing himself, his true self
the closer he came to knowing God and himself, the more clearly he saw how they were related: how like they were, and how unlike
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being given over entirely to the love of the Lord he did what he did with joy and energy he did not doubt, since there was only one goal in mind: to serve the Lord and who is the Lord and how should he serve Him? he learned more and more each day he learned to express himself more and more clearly on the nature of this love, on the meaning of the life he had entered upon, as a river runs into the sea (when a river runs into the sea it stops being a river: its molecules are invaded by the molecules of the sea, and while it loses nothing, it gains new being in the sea)

the closer he came to knowing God, the closer he came to knowing himself, his true self the closer he came to knowing God and himself, the more clearly he saw how they were related: how like they were, and how unlike
Robert Lax

Harpo

FINDS

The Lord

his work was work
his play was play
did he play
seriously?

he played
seriously

his work was work
his play was play
lightly and
seriously
at once?

his work and play
were prayer

his prayer was
work and play

did he play
lightly?

he played
lightly

he looked for him
and found him

found him
living
within his
own heart

he hadn't gone
to see him
to steal
fire

he had gone
to see him
because he
knew he
should

if he is the
ruler

it is the
ruler

i must
find

all the skeins
that had been
twisted

now came straight
for him

all the knots
that had been tied
now came
undone
HARPO
FINDS
THE LORD

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all the skeins
that had been
twisted

now came straight
for him

all the knots
that had been tied
now came
undone

did he play
seriously?

he played
seriously

lightly and
seriously
at once?

lightly
and seriously
at once

his work was work
his play was play

his work and play
were prayer

his prayer was
work and play

did he play
lightly?

he played
lightly
he knew he had
found
the one he
sought
and now
could speak
quite
freely
could point out
a path
that others
might take
to find
the one
he had
found

the road moved
in only
one direction
(once one
had found it)
the paths
through the
woods
which led
to the road
were
wandering
one needed
a guide
for every
step
of the
way
he knew he had found

the one he sought

and now could speak quite freely

could point out a path

that others might take

to find the one he had found

the road moved in only one direction

(once one had found it)

the paths through the woods which led to the road

were wandering

one needed a guide

for every step of the way
whom would he have gotten along with in history?

with rabelais?
surely

with donne?
yes

with blake?
yes, yes

with augustine?
surely

chaucer, shakespeare?
yes

louis armstrong?
yes

how would he have felt about the abbey of theleme?

he might not at all have disliked it
whom would he have gotten along with in history?

with rabelais?
surely

with donne?
yes

with blake?
yes, yes

with augustine?
surely

chaucer, shakespeare?
yes

louis armstrong?
yes

how would he have felt about the abbey of theleme?

he might not at all have disliked it
not by wanting
but by doing

not by doing
but by being

not by being
but by growing

he grew to be
the person

he knew
he was

he chose
& kept
choosing

chose &
stood firm
by his
choices

took on
the jobs
he was meant
to do

took on,
and carried
them through
not by wanting
but by doing

not by doing
but by being

not by being
but by growing

he grew to be
the person

he knew
he was

Harpo's Progress

he chose
& kept
choosing

chose &
stood firm
by his
choices

took on
the jobs
he was meant
to do

took on,
and carried
them through
Robert Lax

sees
& can say
what he
sees

the closer
he comes
to the
center
of the
circle

the better
he sees
the whole

Harpo's Progress

with speed &
direction
certainty
& joy

he bowls
down the
hall

like a
ball
of light

or, sitting
at ease

his back
erect

he plays
the bongos
between his
knees
sees
& can say
what he
sees

the closer
he comes
to the
center
of the
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with speed &
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he bowls
down the
hall

like a
ball
of light

or, sitting
at ease

his back
erect

he plays
the bongos
between his
knees
hands hover, 
fall & fly

his fingers 
fly
on the white paper

his thumbs 
beat out
the rhythm

what do his 
 drawing brushes 
do?

fly, too

flight &
control

they leave
a character

that of the
moment

What of his dancing? His dancing was a dance of grace and wit: a ritual that consumed itself in performance. Not just anyone's dancing, but his own: own limbs and sinews responding to the music of his spirit: a celebration and a cause for joy.

And so, in all he did, he praised the Lord; in all he did, rejoiced in the gift of living.
Robert Lax

hands hover, fall & fly

his fingers fly

his thumbs beat out the rhythm

what do his drawing brushes do?

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Harpo's Progress

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And so, in all he did, he praised the Lord; in all he did, rejoiced in the gift of living.
A four-year-old child is seated at a desk, his feet planted squarely before him. He is writing or drawing; absorbed in his work. His sitting posture is erect; his expression serious. He is engaged in a work he enjoys. Events will interrupt this moment, but it will be resumed years later, when seeds of this early planting flower.

he rejoices
in the Lord

rejoices in
the liberty
of the children
of light

rejoices in
it and turns
it to song

rejoices,
and turns it
to light

he draws
his song

from the
wells
of contemplation

and the song
leads back
to the
source

his world
is just like
the one
we know

but it has
more dimensions

his world
contains
discoveries
and wonders

news, good
news, that
rings
with joy
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he rejoices in the Lord
rejoices in the liberty
of the children of light
rejoices in it and turns it to song
rejoices, and turns it to light
he draws his song
from the wells of contemplation
and the song leads back to the source
his world is just like the one we know
but it has more dimensions
his world contains discoveries and wonders
news, good news, that rings with joy
a child of light
rejoicing in light

he lives, not he, but Christ lives in him;
in praising him,
we praise the Lord