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Fire Watch When the Web Goes Down

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The night, O My Lord, is a time of freedom. You have seen the morning and the night, and the night was better. In the night all things began, and in the night the end of all things has come before me.

Thomas Merton, "Fire Watch"[1]

This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless,
Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done,
Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing, pondering the themes thou lovest best,
Night, sleep, death and the stars.

Walt Whitman, "A Clear Night"[2]

These brief moments when day trembles into night must swarm with secret signs and calls to be so closely linked to Algiers in my heart. When I have been away from this country for some time, I think of its twilights as promises of happiness. On the hills looking down over the town, there are paths among the mastic and olive trees. And it is toward them that my heart turns then. I can see sheaves of black birds rising against the green horizon. In the sky, suddenly emptied of its sun, something releases its hold. A whole flock of tiny red clouds stretches upward until it dissolves into the air. Almost immediately afterward appears the first star, which had been taking shape and growing harder in the thickness of the heavens. And then, sudden and all-enveloping, the night. What is so unique in these fleeting evenings of Algiers that they free so many things in me?

Albert Camus, "Summer in Algiers"[3]

1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 349; subsequent references will be cited as "*SJ*" parenthetically in the text.

2. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Norwalk, CT: Easton Press, 1977) 430.

3. Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1968) 84-85.

Introduction

While I was attending the conference on contemplation and technology at Bellarmine University in September, 2011, where Albert Borgmann, author of *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology*, presented the keynote address, one of the other presenters made passing reference to Thomas Merton's "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952." Shortly thereafter I scribbled in my notebook the title for this review essay. While I did not understand what it could possibly mean, it brought to mind memories of those times when the electricity failed and with the sudden darkness came an opening into the night that everyone seemed to oddly enjoy. It was as if we were surprised by an unexpected presence in the absence of light that drew us closer to the center of our lives.

The above lines by Walt Whitman and Albert Camus invoke memories of those nights that provide, as they both note, a flight into the wordless, enveloping and liberating darkness. It is the evocative qualities of Merton's "Fire Watch," however, that draw the imagination into the mystery of the silence and solitude of the night where the longing of the heart is free to wander like a child at play among the stars (see *SJ* 350).

Merton's account of his walk on the fire watch through the abbey at night is, as all are aware, a narrative of an interior journey into the question of his vocation as a monk who, like Jonah, was carried along in the belly of a monstrous labyrinth of staircases, hallways and rooms in the Abbey of Gethsemani (see *SJ* 349). The account becomes for the reader (see *SJ* 357-58) a prose-poem that maps the *via negativa* into the night where we are alone with God and the "unutterable murmurs" (*SJ* 354) of our hearts that speak the "most terrible" of questions (*SJ* 357) that do not have the luxury of an answer,[4] but provide an opening within those who live the question to that Presence that is beyond all concepts, all images, all names (see *SJ* 355).

Invited into the order of the night, we immediately become aware of how the night contrasts with the day that is occupied with seemingly endless activities, tasks and responsibilities that turn our attention outward and our hands to use of tools from hammers to computers. The order of the night is distinctively different. The darkness of the night turns us inward to the ponderings of our

4. See Thomas Merton, "Untitled Poem," *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985) n.p.

hearts and outward into the night where we discern the "semblance of order [of the day] before all things disappear" (*SJ* 349), and become enchanted by the sounds of "the eloquent night" (*SJ* 350); we are led into "this inexplicable night" (*SJ* 352) and "fecund darkness of the soul"[5] that disperses all light and defeats all desire, dissolving all the illusions of the day so that what is hidden and real might be discovered. It is in the silence and solitude of the night that the heart is purified and all the senses become refocused to see now in darkness what was previously hidden (see *SJ* 361-62) and where all questions become resolved in communion with God.

With the testimonies of Merton, Whitman and Camus to the wonders of the night, I am puzzled by our preference for the bright lights of computer and television screens that glow into the late hours from the homes in my neighborhood. Perhaps Czeslaw Milosz was correct when he noted in *The Captive Mind* that because we are afraid life is meaningless, we will buy into whatever totalitarian system appears to provide some sense of order and purpose, regardless how illusory it might be.[6] The images projected by the lights of technology are, I must admit, hypnotic and seem to satisfy a modern need. According to Ronald Srigley,[7] it is the need for illusion created by the silver screen, an early form of the prevailing technology that has been amusing many of us for most of our lives. If this is true, the modern world with its technology has successfully provided an escape from the dark night of the soul. Even so, the modern world has not be able to eliminate the nightmares of the day that haunt us: war, poverty, global warming . . . .

These thoughts on Merton's "Fire Watch" became the lens through which I read the books and articles for this review, returning time and again to the question implied in the title: what is it that the night and the night alone reveals and that technology, all technology, from the electric light bulb to the latest invention, hides?

Primary Publications

Merton, Thomas. *The Way of Chung Tzu*. Preface by the Dalai Lama. New York: New Directions, 2010, pp. 159.

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5. Ross Labrie, "The Unanswered Question in Thomas Merton's 'Fire Watch,'" *Christianity and Literature* 52.4 (Summer 2003) 557.

6. Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind* (New York: Knopf, 1953).

7. Ronald Srigley, *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011) 3.

When a writer says that the book you are about to read is one "that I have enjoyed writing" more than any other that he can remember (9-10), it is clearly an indication that you are holding in your hands something worth long hours of thoughtful reflection. Merton's personal appreciation of his "spiritual interpretation" (9) of Chuang Tzu's humorous and ironic thoughts on the way of Tao is shared by others, as noted on the back of the book – comments by Alan Watts, Robert Thurman and Thich Nhat Hanh who recognized that here is the work of a Zen artist that offers an enchanting bridge for Western minds to journey East. This new edition of *The Way of Chuang Tzu* comes with a preface by his Holiness the Dalai Lama that like the brief comments just noted indicates the significance of this work for not only opening conversations between contemplatives of different religious traditions, but opening, for the "great benefit of the world" (7), the richness of silence and solitude offered in monastic life represented in the writings of Thomas Merton, whom the Dalai Lama here calls "one of his Buddhist brothers" (7).

As one may guess by now, looking back to the conference on contemplation and technology, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* would have had much to offer. For this reason, the new edition comes at the right time as we are faced with finding our way in an age defined by technology. Merton's anthology of Chuang Tzu's "shattering insights into the true ground of being" (back cover) awakens the reader to the wonders of the night when the mind is at last free – free, as Merton notes, from the "arbitrary secular presuppositions, dictated by social convention, and dedicated to the pursuit of temporal satisfactions which are perhaps only a mirage" (10). Merton points out that "Chuang Tzu, surrounded by ambitious and supposedly 'practical men,' reflected that these 'operators' knew the value of the 'useful,' but not the greater value of the 'useless.'" Then turning to the work of his friend, John C. H. Wu, Merton digs a little deeper into the problem:

> To Chuang Tzu the world must have looked like a terrible tragedy written by a great comedian. He saw scheming politicians falling into pits they had dug for others. He saw predatory states swallowing weaker states, only to be swallowed in their turn by stronger ones. Thus the much vaunted utility of the useful talents proved not only useless but self-destructive. (25)

In order to narrow our focus on the problem of the modern preoccupation with the useful and the loss of an awareness of and

appreciation for the useless, several selected texts from this book will be helpful. Note how in "Active Life" it is suggested that we become caught in and crushed by compulsive movement of endless activity that results in the loss of our "right" mind:

> Those who are caught in the machinery of power take no joy except in activity and change – the whirring of the machine! Whenever an occasion for action presents itself, they are compelled to act; they cannot help themselves. They are inexorably moved, like the machine of which they are a part. Prisoners in the world of objects, they have no choice but to submit to the demands of matter! They are pressed down and crushed by external forces, fashion, the market, events, public opinion. Never in a whole lifetime do they recover their right mind! The active life! What a pity! (142)

By contrast, observe how in the following short story, the Tao opens before us as expansive as the night that Merton entered in the fire watch. With that opening, there is regaining of the "right" mind. Note, however, that it can also serve as a warning. The Tao and the Night of which Merton speaks are forever closed to us if we allow the bright light of technology to define the only reality that we know – a virtual reality and a very small space for us to occupy.

Hui Tzu said to Chuang Tzu:
"All your teaching is centered on what has no use."

Chuang replied:
"If you have no appreciation for what has no use
You cannot begin to talk about what can be used.
The earth, for example, is broad and vast
But of all this expanse a man uses only a few inches
Upon which he happens to be standing.
Now suppose you suddenly take away
All that he is not actually using
So that, all around his feet a gulf
Yawns, and he stands in the Void,
With nowhere solid except right under each foot:
How long will he be able to use what he is using?"

Hui Tzu said: "It would cease to serve any purpose."

Chuang Tzu concluded:
"This shows

The absolute necessity
Of what has 'no use.'" (153)

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Merton, Thomas. *Monastic Observances: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 5. Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell. Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2010, pp. lv + 335.

If Chuang Tzu shatters preconceptions of the modern world with the hope of opening us to the deeper dimensions of Tao, monastic practices provide a model for reconnecting that deeper dimension with the demands and needs of daily life. While *Monastic Observances: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* may appear at first glance a book for academics, it is one that will provide the general reader an opportunity to explore monastic life as a novice under Merton and thereby discover with his guidance ways in which to integrate the graces of the contemplative life into our active lives. By "integrate" I do not mean simply adding another task to be completed in the course of the day but the very ground from which all those tasks may flourish. Note, for example, how Merton says as much in his talk to novices on *lectio divina*, a talk that speaks to us as well as it did to the young men entering Gethsemani:

> Having now discussed communion and thanksgiving, we come to the first long period of silent, recollected reading or study in the monk's day. Understand the very great importance of *lectio divina* and particularly of this early morning interval of reading. We have used the word "interval," which was formerly customary among Trappists, for a time. *But it is misleading*. If the time of *lectio divina* is referred to as an "interval" one gets the impression that it is something of relative importance only, a *negative* time, when one is "not doing anything else" – not in choir, not working, therefore, practically speaking, "doing nothing." To regard *lectio divina* as something incidental or unimportant is *to miss the whole point of the contemplative life*. One who thinks of "intervals" instead of *lectio* – of blank spaces between things that "really matter" – will in fact never really understand or appreciate the divine office, and will furthermore not work with the proper monastic spirit because he will *lack a true monastic perspective*. (149-50)

This passage comes at the beginning of a wonderful section (149-

59) that represents one of those texts that we long to find and share with others. So if you don't do anything else, borrow the book from someone and read Merton's skillful weaving together of his reflections on Lazarus, Mary and Martha as the integration of penance, work and prayer; St. Bernard's message to Pope Blessed Eugene III that the responsibilities of the papacy come second to the interior life; the builders of the Tower of Babel who, in marked contrast to monks, are motivated by ambition in their construction of a noisy world; and, finally, the finishing touch to the lesson, the relation of silence to *lectio*:

> *lectio divina* means, ideally, reading and meditating and praying in *the silence of the cloister*, or of some other monastic and solitary place. The silence is part of the reading, a *positive element* in *lectio divina*, a factor that makes a very fruitful and positive contribution to our reading and prayer. Silence is not just negative – the absence of noise, the absence of talk. If we think of silence merely as a negation, we will naturally be very restless in it, and will not be able to settle down. Silence is a *positive presence*, the presence of Him Who is not heard, so that when all confused sounds and trivial noises are hushed, then the eloquent voice of reality, of God Himself, makes itself heard in peacefulness and silence. Notice that the silence is *not absolute*. The silence of *lectio divina* includes the presence of good natural sounds, the song of birds, or {sound} of rain, or wind; but it excludes useless or inordinate or artificial noises (radio; inane chatter; the agitation of many machines; the general atmosphere of restless noise and confusion that belongs to a place of business). We should be very much aware, as monks, of the value and meaning of silence, and of the significance of confused noise and chatter which is characteristic of "the world." The noise of "the world" is something inevitably flowing from the inane mentality of the world, that seeks flight from reality and from God into its own artificial chaotic atmosphere. (155-56)

It takes little on my part to point out the relevance of the above to our interest in discovering a way for the contemplative life in the age of technology. While much of our daily work will require the use of technology and as a consequence involve us in the noise of the world, that work and our lives must be grounded in something deeper that maintains our relationship to technology as makers and users rather than as mere extensions, wired and buzzing, cre-

ated in the image of the machine. That deeper dimension is once again seen as entered through and in silence. As with monks, so also with us, our days, perhaps more than ever before, must begin in and return to the silence of the night, the presence of God in whose image we are created.

It should also be noted in passing that Merton's inclusion of the natural sounds of birds and wind in *lectio divina* hints at *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* that will be considered in due course in this essay as we are again reminded of the creative rhythm of night and day, the silence of stars and the songs of birds at dawn, and the devotion of the heart at prayer and the commitment of hands at work in the soil whereby the proper balance is maintained and the grace of God received in silence will make of all our work a sacrament of His presence in our lives (152).

Before we move on, however, let's return to Merton's reference to the "true monastic perspective" in the passage preceding the one just considered. This is the perspective that is at the heart of all the observances. The observances are intended to transform the way the monk sees and lives in the world, and it is the same observances, modified to life beyond the walls of a monastery, that when practiced, can change the way we see and order our days – including the way we see and order our use of technology.

During my last sabbatical, I entered the residency program at St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts. This program allows priests and laypersons an opportunity to fully participate in the life and work of the monastic community with "temporary vows." Before leaving, I asked Jonathan Montaldo, who had entered the same program a year or two earlier, for advice. He said, "Move into and live out of the Horarium." While there, I discovered what this meant. Beginning with vigils and the dark hours that followed for *lectio* I discovered that these were not parts of the day and that work and community were other parts of the day but that here was the beginning, the ground of the day, the day's work, and life in the community – with the little hours calling me back to the night, the readings – and compline returning me to the night. So when I read in *Monastic Observances* Merton's directions for those early hours, I again recalled the importance of the night for the day:

> Vigils are followed by the morning meditation. This is the best time for mental prayer. It is a time of silence, darkness. The whole monastery is at peace. There is nothing for anyone to do

> (among the choir monks) except to pray. It is a time free from distractions, and furthermore the monk is already recollected; he has been chanting the psalms; he has heard the word of salvation; he is in the presence of God. This should normally be an ideal time for mental prayer, {for the} *cultivation* of the divine seed in our souls. (75)

There was technology in the monastery, primarily for business. But before turning to the business of the day, the cultivation of the divine seed had been tended and would be fed and watered throughout the day. Perhaps most important for our interests here, it should be noted that technology was being discussed as it should be outside the monastery. The problem, however, may be that our one-dimensional world, our one-dimensional way of seeing the world where, as Milosz points out, the "second space has been lost," does not provide an alternative perspective to view technology. As I write this I wonder if we should have invited someone from a monastery to talk about technology in the monastic community – the concerns that they may have, the problems that they anticipate, as well as the ways in which they see technology enhancing monastic life.

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Merton, Thomas. *Hidden in the Same Mystery: Thomas Merton and Loretto*. Bonnie Thurston, General Editor; Sr. Mary Swain, SL, Loretto Editor; Br. Paul Quenon, OCSO, Gethsemani Photography Editor; Peg Jacobs, CoL, Loretto Photography Editor. Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010, pp. xv + 108.

Hidden in the Same Mystery: Thomas Merton and Loretto provides further insight into Merton's vocation as a night watchman committed to integrating the necessary activities of the day with the presence of God that is found in the silence and solitude of the night. The title of the book comes from Merton's essay commemorating the one-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the Founding of the Congregation of the Sisters of Loretto:

> We are not only neighbors in a valley that is still lonely, but we are equally the children of exile and of revolution. Perhaps this is a good reason why we are both hidden in the same mystery of Our Lady's Sorrow and Solitude in the Lord's Passion. We cannot understand our vocation except in the light of that

> solitude and that love, in which we are as inextricably one as the bones of the founders of two Gethsemanis in one grave: the first Lorettine nuns who dedicated the place to Mary and the first Breton Trappists who took it over from them. All who were buried in back of the Dant house, the log cabin that was the first Gethsemani, are now together under the nameless concrete cross behind the Abbey Church. Their anonymity, their community in death, is eloquent: but probably most of us have ceased to notice it, or have never even been aware of it in the first place. (40)

Throughout this book, that which was hidden, beautiful and, as Merton says here, *eloquent*, is shared in such a way that the photographs, talks and reflections express the gentle, kind, and compassionate Spirit of the Christ that dwelt and continues to dwell full of grace and truth in these two communities. Note, for example, the focus on another talk by Merton:

> There should be in our relation a feeling of tender love which implies a sense of tenderness toward the littleness of God in everyone. As Sisters you have a tremendous amount to do with a child's becoming aware of the presence of God in him. The worst thing that can happen to a child is to be led out of that spontaneous relation with God's power in him that he possesses in his innocence.
>
> Today we are bombarded with appeals to be aggressive. However, it is not aggressive that we have to be. You have to be humble, that is the Gospel. Our Lord has said not to assert self. Every time you do you create crosses for yourself and others.
>
> The world today is full of people who are scared to death. We are in danger now because no one can settle down. We felt that we had to stay tough after something like the Atomic Bomb. But it is not being tough and laying down the law that matters. It is rather a question of appreciating the value of littleness. And you must begin by doing this among yourselves. Appreciate your own weakness; don't get mad at yourself for a failure. We are supposed to do things wrong (not on purpose!). Our mistakes give us the power of appreciating others' mistakes. We can more easily forgive one another in the knowledge, realization and appreciation of the weakness in all men.

> The greatest of all powers is to be little and small and weak. For was not the manifestation of God in the world that of weakness – the Cross? God willed so to manifest His power. Power is made perfect in failure. The good that is in the world is not coming from great people but from very small people. I am quite sure that if Mary were to appear in our country it would most certainly be among the Indians, or Negroes, or Puerto Ricans – not on Park Avenue. (8-9)

The wisdom embodied in the life and work of Loretto and Gethsemani, however, is hidden from the world and, as Merton points out in a talk to second-year novices at Loretto, it is hidden at least in part by technology that has become the bazaar of worldly goods that promise happiness:

> We are totally ignorant of life today. People have no sense of what life is about any more. Probably one of the reasons for that is that, in a society where there is so much advertising, and where people are always constantly presented with a funny image of life, and in which people are always supremely happy because they have just bought a new car, or just bought a new TV or something, you get that image that happiness is very easy to have; you just buy *this*. And therefore, happiness is accessible to all, and if there is the slightest unhappiness or something so radically wrong that you can't do anything about it, except buy something else (and you can't really do it by buying things), and so they give up trying.
>
> People are led to despair by the so-called "advertising industry" because of the image that it creates of this false happiness. And so marriages are probably wrecked in many cases by the picture that a husband and wife gets, the image that is created in their minds of these mythical people that are always happy, that are created by these advertisements. (15)

One of the common misconceptions of the world is that monks and sisters live in perpetual darkness of a sort that requires little if any "meaningful" work. Of course nothing could be further from the truth. The lives of the monks of Gethsemani and the sisters of Loretto represent a balanced composition of day and night, daily work and nightly rest, and human community during the daylight hours and divine communion during the dark hours of the night; a composition that weaves together day and night in such a way that

the night nourishes the day, providing what the work of the day needs to flourish in praise of God and as a blessing to the world. The account of Sr. Luke Tobin's visit to Merton's hermitage shows how the interior design of that space witnessed to the harmony of the workings of the intellect and the prayerful musing of the soul. Here in a place set aside for silence and solitude, set in the forest, set before the open cosmos, a place of and for prayer, we also find a bookcase full of books and a writing desk – day and night integrated (xi).

It should also be noted how Sr. Luke's course on Merton replicated the dialogical process whereby the reasoning of the day is integrated into – or should I say out of – the contemplative movement of the heart at play among the stars at night (38).

The unity is significant and necessary for understanding the nature of the relationship between Merton and Luke and between Gethsemani and Loretto – a unity of silence and social discourse, solitude and solidarity, so significant that it can be referred to as that "unity business" (31) and understood in contrast to "false unity" that fails to integrate all aspects of reality (44).

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Day, Dorothy. *All the Way to Heaven: The Selected Letters of Dorothy Day*. Edited with an Introduction by Robert Ellsberg. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2010, pp. xxiii + 456.

Jim Forest remembers Dorothy Day opening and reading aloud letters in a large dining room of an old farmhouse with friends gathered around a pot of tea and a pile of letters – letters representing a correspondence that included Thomas Merton, Clare Boothe Luce, Eunice Shriver, Allen Ginsberg, Catherine de Hueck Doherty, Daniel Berrigan, Cesar Chavez and many others.

Reading Dorothy's letters to Merton caused this reader – and most likely anyone else interested in their correspondence – to pick up Merton's letters to Dorothy in *The Hidden Ground of Love*.[8] The titles of these two books represent opposite yet intersecting worlds of Merton and Day. Note however, how the title for Day's collection of letters, *All the Way to Heaven*, oddly sounds more

8. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 135-54; subsequent references will be cited as "*HGL*" parenthetically in the text.

appropriate for a cloistered nun than a social activist. With that said, one must also take note of the title of Merton's letters that at one time may have struck many readers as odd. The coincidence of these opposites draws our attention back to the interest of this essay in the importance of the relationship between the activities of the day and the silence of the heart at night. It is the dynamic between the day and night that offers an integral spirituality that is able to in-form our world and thereby restore a balance that the modern world lacks and desperately needs.

In both collections, one sees the creative dynamic of contemplation and action, the solitary life of a monk and public life of a social activist. But don't be too quick to label the monk as the solitary and the public figure as an activist – the letters reveal that each, Merton and Day, embodies the complementary contradictions of silence and voice, solitude and solidarity, prayer and action. For example, look at Day's letter sent on June 24, 1965, where she expresses once again her appreciation for Merton's life as a monk and his work as a writer and then moves as she always does to the many challenges that she faces in the world:

> I have been intending to write you for some time, just to thank you for your writings. You will never know the people you have reached, the good you have done. You certainly have used the graces and the talents God has given you. I am afraid I lack the discipline to do the work I ought to do, being occupied with many Martha-cares. Right now we are having a retreat for priests, a small affair, ten of them, and Fr. Hugo remains afterward to give a laymen's retreat.
>
> As usual during retreats there are great distractions. One of our family, who had spent a good many years of his life in prison, in Sing Sing and Dannemora, who had broken his parole and was threatened with a life sentence, who had sanctuary with us for the past ten years, died after much suffering with emphysema, if that is how you spell it. (311)

Day was greatly appreciative of an essay on Pasternak that Merton had sent to her (260; 268). With regard to the Pasternak essay, Day wrote, "Your beautiful and profound essay on [Boris] Pasternak kept me awake from midnight until four in the morning, thinking about it" (260). I can only imagine what she may have thought when reading from that essay:

> He embodied in himself so many of the things modern man pathetically claims he still believes in, or wants to believe in. He became a kind of "sign" of that honesty, integrity, sincerity which we tend to associate with the free and creative personality. He was also an embodiment of that personal warmth and generosity which we seek more and more vainly among the alienated mass-men of our too organized world. In one word, Pasternak emerged as a genuine human being stranded in a mad world. He immediately became a symbol, and all those who felt it was important not to be mad attached themselves in some way to him.[9]

Whatever she may have thought, we would most likely agree that she was correct to identify this essay as "profound," speaking as it does to the problem of freedom, integrity and truth in the modern world that is "too organized" with "mass-men" – a world even more organized/wired than when the essay was written. Of course there is nothing wrong with being organized, unless of course the organization shuts out what is basically human in an effort to create one-dimensional men and women created in the image of a system they are trained to serve. For this reason, in Merton's letter to Day on December 20, 1961, he writes:

> Persons are known not by the intellect alone, not by principles alone, but only by love. It is when we love the other, the enemy, that we obtain from God the key to an understanding of who he is, and who we are. It is only this realization that can open to us the real nature of our duty, and of right action. To *shut out* the person and to refuse to consider him as a person, as an other self, we resort to the impersonal "law" and to abstract "nature." That is to say we block off the reality of the other, we cut the intercommunication of our nature and his nature, and we consider only our nature with its rights, its claims, its demands. And we justify the evil we do to our brother because he is no longer a brother, he is merely an adversary, an accused. (*HGL* 141)

What Merton says here has significance for our work on contemplation in a technological age since it is not only war that threatens humanity but everything that *shuts out* the other, reducing the

9. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 5.

other and ourselves to mere abstractions; every and any thing that intentionally or unintentionally fails to see with the wisdom that only love can offer.

Secondary Publications

Sheldrake, Philip. "Thomas Merton and Twentieth-Century Spirituality: Seeking an Authentic Self," in *Explorations in Spirituality: History, Theology and Social Practice.* Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2010, 124-37.

Philip Sheldrake, William Leech Professorial Fellow in Applied Theology at the University of Durham, has taught and written extensively on spirituality. *Explorations in Spirituality: History, Theology and Social Practice* addresses the connection between contemplation and social action and the ability of spiritual traditions to transform society. Consequently, we are not surprised to find a chapter on Merton. As the title indicates, Sheldrake sees Merton's search for the authentic self as an essential dimension of his integration of prayer and social concern.

This chapter traces Merton's "countercultural stance" that led him at first to flee the world into Gethsemani and later to return to the world at the corner of Fourth and Walnut. From this intersection Merton returns to monastic life with the awareness that true holiness meant participating in the "mysterious designs of God for the human race" (130). This turn of events resulted in a new understanding of *fuga mundi*. No longer did it mean a rejection of the world. Rather it became for Merton a way of standing on the edges of society in solidarity with all who live there.

Sheldrake identifies three significant consequences of Merton's matured countercultural stance. First, such a stance led to the discovery of an authentic self that only exists in communion with others. Second, by re-entering the human community, Merton became aware of the importance of the "vulnerable self" that no longer needs the protection of walls that separate. Third, standing in solidarity with others and open to their struggles, Merton found not only his authentic self but his prophetic voice as a monk and writer.

It should also be noted that Merton's integration of contemplation and action is set within the historical context of Augustine and Descartes, who separated the two, and of Underhill, Bernard, Ruusbroec and others who affirmed the essential connection be-

tween them. The chapter concludes with a comment that is relevant for this essay, suggesting as it does that we need to find a way for contemplation and technology to work together in the creation of a world in which life might possibly flourish:

> Contemplation cannot construct a new world by itself but without contemplation we cannot understand the significance of the world in which we must act and finally without contemplation, without the intimate, silent, secret pursuit of truth through love, our action loses itself in the world and becomes dangerous. (137)

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Weis, Monica, SSJ. *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*. Foreword by James Conner, OCSO. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011, pp. xv + 197.

This book is an excellent example of what the previous books reviewed in this essay are saying. Focusing on the connection between Merton's spirituality and his ecological consciousness, Monica Weis, SSJ brings to our attention the necessity to "see" the world in a direct and immediate way that is characteristic of contemplatives and poets like Merton. With regard to the connection between Merton's spirituality as a Trappist monk and his social concerns regarding the environment, Fr. James Conner in his foreword writes:

> "*Caeli enarrant gloriam Dei*": "The heavens proclaim the glory of God; and the firmament shows forth His handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). Thomas Merton chanted these words from the psalms almost every week for the twenty-seven years of his monastic life. These, along with many other expressions found in the psalms, served to deepen Merton's awareness of creation as a manifestation of God in the world. Long before he entered the monastery, however, Merton showed a profound perception of creation and its message to all who are attuned. (ix)

Fr. Conner also draws to our attention the way in which technology is one of the main obstacles to contemplation and the ability to see the world clearly, beyond abstractions and illusions – abstractions and illusions that result in the degradation of the natural world:

> Merton shows that it will be impossible to take part in this dance [of creation] so long as we view creation and other people simply

> as objects; doing so removes the seer from direct contact with the reality he or she sees. Merton illustrates this by contrasting the way a child views a tree – a vision "which is utterly simple, uncolored by prejudice, and 'new'" – with the lumberman's vision "entirely conditioned by profit motives and considerations of business." He says that "this *exaggeration of* the subject-object relationship by material interest and technical speculation is one of the main obstacles to contemplation." (ix)

While both points made by Fr. Conner clearly articulate the relationship between the way in which the contemplative life opens the eyes to a clear and direct vision of the world as it is in its own right, the second paragraph once again brings to our attention the potential problems presented by technology to view the world and all that is in the world, including other humans, as an object for material gain. Therein lies the problem that *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* addresses, thus making this book not only a significant contribution to Merton studies but to all those interested in the environmental crisis of the twenty-first century.

As a contribution to Merton studies, the book focuses on three "touchstone" moments in Merton's life that awakened him to the world in which he lived: the Fourth and Walnut experience where he realized that he loved all the people crossing the streets and that they were an essential part of who he was; his reading of Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* that extended that oneness discovered at Fourth and Walnut to all of nature; and his pilgrimage to the Buddha statues of Polonnaruwa where he was drawn even deeper into the Oneness of all that is and is not. These moments in time, clarified by Weis, are recognized as transformative "flashes of vision" and "spurts of spiritual growth" (3) for Merton and thus essential for understanding and appreciating his life and work.

As a contribution to the ongoing effort to address the environmental crisis of our times, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* is equally important. Merton and Weis challenge us to see "life itself, fully awake, fully alive, fully aware that it is alive" and thereby rediscover within ourselves "spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being" (5). Consequently, while the book is about Merton's environmental vision, it is also a book able, intentionally or unintentionally, to improve our eyesight so that our interior spiritual landscapes might become one with the outer landscape in which we daily walk. In order to illustrate the way in which

Merton accomplished this unity of landscapes, a unity that we are encouraged to discover within our own lives, Weis records one of Merton's reflections on the season of Lent (or is it on the season of Winter/Spring?).

> The first Sunday of Lent, as I now know, is a great feast. Christ has sanctified the desert and in the desert I discovered it. The woods have all become young in the discipline of spring, but it is the discipline of expectancy only. Which one cut more keenly? The February sunlight, or the air? There are no buds. Buds are not guessed or even thought of this early in Lent. But the wilderness shines with promise. The land is first in simplicity and strength. Everything foretells the coming of the holy spring. I had never before spoken freely or so intimately with woods, hills, buds, water and sky. On this great day, however, they understood their position and they remained mute in the presence of the Beloved. Only His light was obvious and eloquent. My brother and sister, the light and the water. The stump and the stone. The tables of rock. The blue, naked sky. Tractor tracks, a little waterfall. And Mediterranean solitude. I thought of Italy after my Beloved had spoken and was gone. (105)[10]

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Lotz, Ezekiel, OSB. "Thomas Merton and the Looming Ecological Crisis: Paradise Regained Re-lost" in *Green Monasticism: A Buddhist-Catholic Response to an Environmental Calamity.* Edited by Donald W. Mitchell and William Skudlarek, OSB. Brooklyn, NY: Lantern Books, 2010, 15-35.

In May, 2008, Buddhist and Christian contemplatives met at the Abbey of Gethsemani to discuss the present ecological crisis and ways in which their respective traditions might contribute to the resolution of this problem. From that conference, *Green Monasticism* was published. One of the articles, the one being considered here, addressed Merton's interest in the environment from his earliest years to the end of his life. Fr. Lotz begins with the following observation that places his thoughts on the subject in the context of Merton scholarship and from there indicates the direction in

10. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 412.

which he intends to go:

> one major theme that Shannon [in *Something of a Rebel*] fails to note and that many Merton critics seemed to neglect or to ignore up until about a decade or so ago, even though it is a seminal component throughout the rest of his writings (journals and letters included) right up until the time of his death, is Merton's ongoing concern with what historian Peter Laslett has referred to as "the world we have lost." That is to say, a world operating on a natural and balanced level, untrammeled and not held captive by a technology and science that seem to have all but surpassed the control of its creators and finally and very frighteningly run amok. (16)

While unaware of *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (since it had not as yet been published at the time of the conference) or of Monica Weis' work in this area that led up the book's publication, the article fits nicely with what Weis has provided. Lotz traces Merton's environmental interests from his childhood in the rural area of Long Island to his life at Gethsemani in the knobs of Kentucky. It is an interesting account that includes not only memories of the simple, honest and rustic life of French peasants and Trappist monks, but contrasting years at Cambridge that Lotz summarizes as Merton's "confrontation with an increasingly frenetic, technologically advanced, albeit emotionally and spiritually bankrupt society while a young man at Cambridge and Columbia universities" (16). It is this contrast of worlds, one lost and other sought, that is the focus of this article that summarizes Merton's thoughts on the environment from earliest reflections in *The Seven Storey Mountain* to "an occasional piece written for *Center Magazine* in July 1968, five months before his untimely death in Bangkok" (29). With regard to this article,[11] Lotz writes:

> One would be hard pressed to call this Merton's "mature" thought on the themes discussed in this book [i.e. *Green Monasticism*], but it does demonstrate that Merton was far from finished with the matter and that some of his original propositions had changed and developed in the years since his letter to Rachel Carson. In what is ostensibly a review of Roderick Nash's book *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Merton delves

11. See above, pages 15-28, for the complete version of this article, "The Wild Places."

> more deeply than ever before into the questions of technological society and ecology and religion's – most especially a contemplative religion's – role in the uniting and balancing of these two elements. (29)

It is from here that Lotz's article dovetails with Weis's book. As with *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, so also here, the focus is on the harm that comes when technology operates without the in-sight of wisdom and is thereby allowed to blindly direct the course of human progress.

Journal Articles

O'Connell, Patrick F. "The Traditional Sources of Thomas Merton's Environmental Spirituality." *Spiritual Life* 56.3 (Fall 2010) 154-71.

While Lotz in 2008 noted that although there had been some interest in Merton's thoughts on the environment during the preceding decade, significant work in this area had been neglected, by 2010 O'Connell is able to begin his article with a reference to the emergence of significant scholarship in this area:

> Recent studies of Thomas Merton's social thought have focused on his growing awareness during the final years of his life of the need for environmental responsibility, particularly after reading Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1963 and Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* in the last year of his life. (154)

Lotz and O'Connell, with Weis, witness to the fertile ground within Merton's writings from which their work has produced much for our consideration. The two articles and book work well together for anyone interested in this pressing issue and Merton's thoughts on it. While Weis and Lotz, as we have seen, trace Merton's interest in the environment and the way in which his monastic life provided a much needed perspective on the problem that would open possibilities for regaining the world that is on the verge of being lost, O'Connell proceeds in a different direction:

> While the sense of urgency [i.e. for ecological consciousness] was new, Merton's recognition that a commitment to cherish and protect the environment is an integral dimension of the Christian life was rooted in his deep appreciation of the sacramentality of the natural world, of creation as a sign of the Creator, that was already developing at the time of his conversion

> in 1938 and continued to deepen as he immersed himself in the resources of the Christian theological and spiritual tradition throughout the course of his monastic life. (155)

As is evident here, O'Connell sets out in this article to excavate Merton's understanding of the relationship between the environment and spirituality by digging into texts that had informed his thinking. Beginning with Gerard Manley Hopkins and proceeding to the influence of the Franciscans Bonaventure and Duns Scotus and of the Greek Fathers, the article articulates a clear exposition on ideas (*inscape*, *vestigia Dei*, *haecceitas*, *theoria physike*, *sophia*) that Merton was incorporating into his environmental spirituality.

As a consequence of his inquiry into Merton's environmental spirituality, O'Connell is able to conclude: "In response to and articulation of the environmental crisis, Merton emerges as a witness that the Christian tradition contains and provides significant resources for a contemporary effort to defend and promote the integrity of creation" (168).

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Lipsey, Roger. "The Monk's Chief Service: Thomas Merton's Late Writings on Contemplation." *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 45:2 (2010) 169-98.

Both the title and the passage quoted beneath the title quickly caught my attention. In the age of technology, what is the monk's chief service? And what to make of the passage from Merton regarding the reality of "deep down" things "which we would do even if everything else collapsed"? Is it another way of asking the underlying question of this essay? However these questions may be answered, Lipsey explains at the outset the purpose of this intriguing article – one that could perhaps only be written by someone like Lipsey with the eye of an artist that discerns "context and color" in the "cries and growls" of Merton's unending quest as a monk into the deepest dimensions of the human experience (170).

> Approaching the topic of Thomas Merton's late writings on contemplation, I am acutely aware of the scholarly and religious authors, and countless devoted readers, who have explored this material and borne witness to it. These are among the things we all read. This is where he showed us, one last time, the grandeur of spiritual tradition and the map of his path

> within it. The intrinsic importance of these writings and their context in Merton's life, in the church stirred by Vatican II, and in the culture at large make it worthwhile to look again. We will be exploring a calm accomplished surface and underlying unrest, a journey from the dark night of the soul to the dawn of a sunnier but no less dedicated contemplative discipline, a search through East-West encounters for the original face of Christian spiritual practice. (169-70)

Lipsey skillfully guides us through his inquiry into four major documents: *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, "A Letter on the Contemplative Life," "Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue" and the *Asian Journal*. Along the way, journal entries and letters will be added to enrich and expand our understanding of Merton who is in Lipsey's judgment "a true and full heir to the sixteenth-century Spanish spirituality of Saint John of the Cross" (170-71).

At the end of Lipsey's journey into the final years of Merton's life, including his relationship with M. that Lipsey beautifully explores, we come at last to the question of the chief service of the monk to the world which is also the value of contemplation in the age of technology – silence, listening and questioning into the Presence of God:

> Silence, listening, questioning had carried him far. We have followed Merton through four years. Those years began with a persuasive and eloquent witness to the value of the path of Saint John of the Cross, entered a time of consuming love and doubt [i.e. with M.], and emerged into the light with a new vision and new friends who could ably work toward it with him. That vision is now in the care of other men and women, many of whom know their debt to him. (198)

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Labrie, Ross. "Asceticism in the Writings of Thomas Merton." *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 13:1 (Winter 2010) 160-81.

Labrie, Ross. "Thomas Merton on Art and Religion in William Faulkner." *Religion and the Arts* 14 (2010) 401-17.

While the titles of these two articles by Ross Labrie may not appear to fit within the context of the present survey, each in its own way makes a significant contribution to this essay and future work on

Merton's environmental spirituality.

With regard to the first article where Labrie provides a study of Merton's understanding of asceticism, we discover that for Merton the perfection sought through ascetic practices was the restoration of "the original integrity and beauty of the self" (160) that is liberated from "fragmentation and dividedness" (161), including the separation of the whole person into body and soul (163), the extension of which would be the separation of humans from nature.

Merton's understanding of asceticism has implications for contemplation in a technological age. By simplifying our material lives, asceticism establishes a relation to things that frees us to direct our ability to love towards God (164). It is easy to see how our fascination with the continuous production of new gadgets can result in ensnaring and diverting the soul from seeking God (164) and the need for an asceticism that addresses the prevailing presence of technology in our lives. Labrie's inclusion in his study of Merton's writings on nature is important to note here. For it is here in Merton's references to winter and night that we find symbols that reveal the hidden dimensions, experiences and graces of the contemplative life – dimensions, experiences and graces necessary to restore life in a world where technology has eclipsed wisdom.

With regard to the second article, I will limit myself to one point most relevant to our present interest. In Labrie's study of Merton's work on Faulkner, he notes:

> The liturgy of natural religion Merton took to be the symbols and mythic phenomena that are available to anyone stirred by the beauty and power of the creational world. Such symbols and myths are continuous, Merton understood, with those of revealed religion and especially of revealed Christianity. As with the Greek tragedies, the wilderness myth that formed the basis of Faulkner's religious drama in "The Bear" leads one to an awareness of one's place in the scheme of things, a necessary vantage point from which to see the God-made universe. The wilderness myth in Faulkner prompted Merton to see the universality of religion and in particular to see that even for those for whom there is no contact with formal religion God is present. This conviction, which Merton affirmed in reading Faulkner, is consistent with his overall tendency in the 1960s

> to abandon the hard and fast divide between the natural and supernatural. (412)

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Pramuk, Christopher. "Milosz and Merton: Poets of Hidden Victories." *Cross Currents* (December 2010) 487-94.

This article provides a fine conclusion to our essay. Pramuk compares and contrasts the different yet complementary voices of two poets, Merton and Milosz, who addressed the seemingly endless "contradictions" (487) of our age – contradictions that must be included in any language of faith entering into conversation with a world that is preoccupied with the manufacturing of weapons rather than plowshares (492-93) and yet longs for peace and prosperity. Pramuk observes that both poets, while acknowledging "our bondage to the world of new refrigerators and flights to other planets," were nonetheless able to see "hints of victory . . . woven into the fabric of the human story" (488). Even though their interpretations of the world and the tone of their words differed, both poets, each in his own way, witnessed to that which is able to renew life in the midst of death. Pramuk explains:

> If Milosz's hermeneutic in this task was suspicion, Merton's was trust (both writers had sharp elbows!). If Milosz in his old age wondered why there should be any love in the world rather than destruction, Merton seemed more determined than ever on the verge of his death to affirm that humanity belongs to God, and can attain to genuine holiness – this even in "the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest." (493)

For Merton, this "hint of victory" that affirms that "humanity belongs to God" is the hidden ground of love, or as Pramuk prefers, *le point vierge* that "describes that hidden spark (moment? Place?) in which all creation, inclusive of every human being, embraces the invitation *to be*, to fully participate in the unfolding life story of God" (489). From here Pramuk leads us to what he knows best, Merton's thoughts on Sophia, and recalls a few lines from *Hagia Sophia* that allow us to glimpse the intersection of heaven and earth in the simple act of waking from a night's sleep:

> When the helpless one awakens strong at the voice of mercy, it is as if Life his Sister, as if the Blessed Virgin, (his own flesh, his own sister), as if Nature made wise by God's Art and Incarnation were to stand over him and invite him with unutterable sweetness to be awake and to live. (490)[12]

Before we can awake, however, we must sleep. But that has apparently become something of a problem for our society that suffers from sleep-deprivation – a deprivation that may be *the* sign of our times, like a dying canary in a mineshaft.

12. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 365.