different modes of expression. After reading Waldron's book and other considerations of Merton's love for M., I can't help thinking Merton is better served by our reading the poems and the journal first-hand.

Waldron's book makes it possible for us to do just that. To do justice to Merton's poems, I would recommend reading each poem through from start to finish before reading Waldron's explication and commentary. I would also encourage readers to take the time to read the journal passages that Waldron paraphrases. Certainly, he is intent on being faithful to Merton's meaning. Nevertheless, paraphrasing has its limits and, often the journal context—what precedes or follows the passage—is integral to understanding Merton's meaning. One additional example from the book may serve to make my point. Reflecting on a promise Merton makes to Abbot James Fox, Waldron writes: "To understand the extent of the power Gethsemani and its abbot had over Merton, Merton allowed himself to be coaxed into writing and signing, on 8 September 1966, a commitment that he would never live anywhere but Gethsemani, and that he would continue to live the life of a hermit and never marry." Waldron adds: "We [*sic*] cannot help feeling, since Merton at the time of this signing was studying the absurdist Albert Camus, that Merton's signing of this written vow is absurd: absurd for the abbot to suggest it, and absurd for Merton to agree to it" (89). In his journal, Merton put it this way:

> Thursday the 8th I made my commitment—read the short formula I had written (simplest possible form). Dom James signed it with me content that he now had me in the bank as an asset that would not go out and lose itself in some crap game (is he sure—? The awful crap game of love!). A commitment "to live in solitude for the rest of my life in so far as health may permit" (i.e. if I grow old and get too crippled an infirmary room will count as solitude??).

Merton's tone is sardonic to be sure but the next line is not: "After that I was at peace and said Mass with great joy" (*LL* 129). Reading Waldron's words and then Merton's helps me to appreciate just how difficult it is put what Merton writes into our own words—and this is as true of Merton's poems as it is of his journals.

Christine M. Bochen

THOMPSON, Phillip M., *Returning to Reality: Thomas Merton's Wisdom for a Technological World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), pp. xxi + 112. ISBN 978-1-62032-252-9 (paper) $17.00.

Once, during shared *lectio divina* in the hallowed Merton Hall of Genesee

Abbey, a Trappist monastery in Piffard, New York, Brother Anthony told me that the monks were open to new technologies as long as they passed one crucial test. If the technology facilitated their journey toward God, they kept it; and if it didn't, they let it go. Thomas Merton, as we're reminded in Phillip Thompson's provocative new book, had similar thoughts: "Technology can elevate and improve man's life only [if] it remains subservient to his real interests; that it respects his true being; that it remembers that the origin and goal of all being is in God" (53). If Merton were to sit down and trace out the complex weave of influences on his technological thoughts, from the Desert Fathers and Mothers to space-age physicists, if he were to use his piercing insights to name the modern idolatries and twisted psychologies that lead to harmful digital media addictions and the looming specter of deathless transhumans, if he were to teach us his methods for nurturing that inner solitude that's beyond the noise of even the most torrential digital deluge, then Thompson's book is the nexus for that coherent Catholic vision.

Indeed, that Thompson provides a *coherent* vision of Merton's nuanced contemplative response to technology is one of the most remarkable aspects of the book because Merton, as Thompson reminds us, never—outside notes and novice lectures—wrote a comprehensive essay or a book-length project explicitly dealing with his critique of technology. Gathering Merton's comments interspersed throughout articles, books, letters, lectures, unpublished essays and poems, Thompson creates a complex mosaic of Merton's ambivalent reaction to mechanized modernity, always bringing us back, after explicating Merton's response and advice, to a central contemporary question: "how do we pursue our daily lives in this technological world?" (74).

In pursuit of that question, Thompson divides his book into five chapters, the first one serving as an overview of Merton's thoughtful response to modern technology and the communities—both sacred and secular—that helped form his conscience. The next three chapters represent the analytic center of the book, in which Thompson transitions from past to present to future in order to explore how Merton's beliefs relate to three types of technologies: Cold War nuclear capabilities (past), the blooming, buzzing confusion of always-on digital media (present), and the transhumanist agenda of biotechnology (future). Each of these three chapters has a bifurcated organizing structure, in which Thompson first defines the implications of the problem at hand, and then details Merton's contemplative critique and advice. The final chapter shares specific methods Merton's writings provide for developing what Merton called a "mental ecology," a vibrant consciousness of solitude amidst

our technologically mediated lives. Throughout, Thompson expertly handles the tension inherent between extracting useful Mertonian guidelines and portraying Merton's dynamic, developing, always-questioning and in-dialogue process of grappling with technology, which is the kind of mentality that led Merton in 1967, referring to his tape recorder and camera, to assert "that he might need to 'take back some of the things that I have said about technology'" (80).

The first chapter represents a highly textured tapestry of Merton's heuristic beliefs, the intellectual terms and ways of seeing technology that he borrowed and made his own, and the community of like-minded individuals—from novelists to Zen Buddhists—that provided Merton a sense of solidarity. Thompson locates the fount of Merton's technological critique within one question: how will this technology affect my connection with God, the source and summit of my existence? At the center of Merton's contemplative wisdom, Thompson explains, are the two foundational ways in which Merton connected with God: the simplicity of the early Christian desert community's movement toward "purity of heart" and the seventh-century Eastern Christian theologian Saint Maximus the Confessor's concept of *theoria physike*, or contemplation of nature. The problem for Thompson and Merton isn't about challenging some reductive technology-is-inherently-bad view, but about challenging what Thompson calls a "technological mentality," in which mechanistic efficiency and expediency are reified above everything else, and true community degrades into false collectivity, which Thompson aligns with the desire for pleasure, wealth and power (xx, 15). Although Thompson makes the admirable distinction between technology and the technological mentality, this is a distinction that, unfortunately, becomes quite tenuous later on—and even appears to disappear altogether—at certain places within the text. One cannot help but think that Thompson could have more explicitly revealed the distinction between community-building forms of technology and the Taylorist scientific labor management philosophy of standardization. Frederick Winslow Taylor, whom Thompson uses for an epigraph to the first chapter (1), championed a philosophy of labor in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that sought to reduce humans to machines who churned out products in a regularized fashion, and it's specifically Taylor's philosophy that looms unacknowledged behind much of Thompson's technological bugbear. And yet, despite at times erasing the distinction between technology and the technological mentality, Thompson commendably always returns to the idea that, rather than some essential perversity within technology itself, it's what we *do* (or choose not to do) with technology that counts.

The second chapter is the most historically concrete and least speculative chapter in the book because it deals with a problem—the threat of nuclear war—that Merton directly contemplated in its fullness, as opposed to the increasingly hypothetical language in chapter three, about the contemporary communications glut, and chapter four, about the transhumanist future. From the start, when Thompson compassionately retells the story of John Paul Merton's tragic death during World War II, which Thompson frames as the source of Merton's visceral reaction to war, we receive the image of Merton engaging with the wider world, whether that means his conscientious objection in 1941, his ongoing dialogue with nuclear scientists, or his willingness to challenge the Church's concept of the "just war," a heuristic from a pre-nuclear era. Thompson adroitly weaves all these strands together to uncover the spiritual meaning of a world forever subjected to the threat of total, technologically mindless annihilation: "This state of affairs regarding nuclear weapons was a direct denial of our humanity, of our vocations as children of God" (34).

The third chapter applies Merton's twentieth-century insights on technology to the twenty-first century tsunami of digital communication technologies. Coalescing statistics about technology use, Thompson argues that the modern flood of Tweets, emails and other digital media might create a culture of mental instability and shallowness. "[A] case can be made," says Thompson, "that the new communication technologies are on balance detrimental to our cognitive capacities" (42). Extrapolating from Merton's views on communication technologies, Thompson then offers some useful and reasonable methods for nurturing spiritual vitality, such as moderating the time we spend using digital media, developing a prayer life, seeking supportive allies and making time for exercise and relaxation. The main limitation with this chapter is that, in order to apply Merton's twentieth-century advice to our twenty-first-century digital deluge, Thompson has to frame the contemporary technological explosion as a difference in degree, rather than a difference in kind, which, at times, leads to some shaky hypothetical statements, such as: "If Merton skewered the idols of television, imagine what he would think of the current flood of superficial messages coursing from a host of information technologies" (47). It's important to remember how active (as opposed to the passivity of television) and radically new (a difference in kind, not just degree) such phenomena as the rise of open-source programming and commons-based peer-production are, which see large groups of people collaborating online on projects for the benefit of many. Although Thompson acknowledges that "There are wonderful instances of charity and human connection" with modern digital media, the two paragraphs he devotes to

that subject seem rather peremptory, and one is left wishing that he had provided more instances of a vibrant, supportive, multi-modal Catholic online community (39). (In full disclosure, I should admit that Thompson critiques my professor and sometime co-author, Cathy Davidson, a digital pedagogy expert and Duke English professor, arguing that "there is little to no social or biological science to support" her claims that "Our brains are being rewired to capture . . . rich diversity and multiple possibilities" [42].) Despite a limited sense of the possibilities of a genuine Catholic online presence, Thompson's reflections on the harmful over-use of digital media and the contemplative methods to deal with this flood of digital data are both compelling and tremendously helpful for anyone looking for a Catholic response to our contemporary digital environment.

The fourth chapter explores how the bio-industrial complex is actively working to transform humans into transhumans. Focusing on the eugenics side of transhumanism, Thompson defines transhumanism as "a wide range of biotechnologies that will enable a radical evolution of human biology beyond its current capacities and limitations," such as nanotechnology that seeks to render humans immortal (57). Thompson allows Merton to weigh in on transhumanism by focusing on Merton's conception of death as a reminder of the human/divine barrier, which means that the transhumanist goal of the deathless human represents the reification of human experience (à la "Atlas and the Fat Man"[1]) and a rejection of our reunion after death with the source of our being. This is a highly compelling, imaginative and provocative chapter in which Thompson skillfully applies the roots of Merton's wisdom to a potential future reality.

The final chapter is a distillation of some of the most important ways Merton suggests that we can reintegrate our humanity and avoid technological overload. Thompson provides five suggestions for cultivating what Merton calls a "mental ecology": (1) practicing sane forms of work; (2) embracing small-scale technology; (3) learning a craft; (4) rejuvenating ourselves in nature; and (5) living a "philosophy of solitude" in which we seek "a 'spiritual and simple oneness' in ourselves" (85). If you're looking for a Catholic way to thrive amidst technology, this is a perceptive, smart and decidedly practical list. Although Thompson is wonderful at taking Merton's beliefs and turning them into practical suggestions, a major limitation in this chapter—and throughout the book—is his tendency to not explore specific ways in which *technology* can help us avoid technological overload within our contemporary data-driven lives. He certainly

1. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 91-107.

gestures toward the possibility of using technology to help us deal with the digital deluge, such as when he says that "technology is not only part of the solution but also part of the problem" (73), or that "Some experts on communication technologies offer additional tips" for balancing our digitally-mediated lives (54). Thus a useful supplement to Thompson's elegant book would be Howard Rheingold's *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online*, in which the famed Stanford and Berkeley social-media lecturer explains how one can use Buddhist meditation techniques to successfully navigate the flood of digital media, outlining five fundamental digital literacies: attention, critical consumption of information, participation, collaboration and network smarts. Aside from fostering the essential digital literacy of attention, or mindfulness, Rheingold's book can show how to set up the appropriate filters, dashboards and news radars that would enable the computer to handle the digital deluge, providing both time for solitude and the opportunity to create a meaningful, community-based, Catholic online experience. If Phillip Thompson's book is essential for any Catholic seeking to discover Merton's practical advice for dealing with our always-on digital media, then Howard Rheingold's book is essential for any Buddhist; and as Merton said before leaving for his fateful Asian trip, "I intend to become as good a Buddhist as I can."[2]

Patrick Thomas Morgan

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Thomas Merton was a monk on the edge of the monastery, on the edge of the Church as well as on the margins of society. The edge motif was one that Merton cultivated and promoted. Long before it became fashionable to be marginal he had confronted the monastic appellation known as singularity and its overtones of being marginal, special or peculiar. Imagine walking around a Trappist monastery with a best-selling autobiography under your name, at the age of thirty-three. Things began to get complicated. Merton entered Gethsemani in 1941. By 1948 he had published *The Seven Storey Mountain*. By 1955 he was novice master, a job he held for ten years. By 1965 he was a hermit, and by the end of 1968 he was dead at the age of 53. During this short span he achieved an enormous amount of writing and publishing. He also happened to live at a time of rapid and unprecedented change. How he fitted himself into all

2. David Steindl-Rast, "Recollections of Thomas Merton's Last Days in the West," *Monastic Studies* 7 (1969) 10.