

Contemplation in the Age of Technology

Review of

The Merton Annual, Volume 24 (2011)

Edited by David Belcastro and Gray Matthews

Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2012

353 pages/\$19.95 paper

Reviewed by **Ross Labrie**

This volume of *The Merton Annual*, based largely on a conference at Bellarmine University in September 2011, considers the question of the place, if any, of contemplation in a technological culture, with Merton's writings serving as a focus for the discussion. The discussion is framed by Gray Matthews in a suggestive introductory essay (7-14) that begins with the surprisingly positive attitude of Thoreau towards nineteenth-century technology. Ironically, Thoreau, whom Merton greatly admired, felt a continuum between technology and spiritual consciousness. Although both Merton and Thoreau were ambivalent about the effects of technology, especially regarding its diminishing of the person by technology, each was open to its possibilities.

Merton's essay, "The Wild Places" (15-28), which has been admirably reconstructed from different sources by Patrick O'Connell, anchors the discussion of technology by providing a counterbalance to it – i.e., Merton's ecological awareness. The essay, which had originally appeared in W. H. (Ping) Ferry's *Center Magazine* in 1968, raised the issue of the effect of New England Puritanism on subsequent American culture. In particular, Merton linked the exploitation and mutilation of the American landscape to the Puritan idea that since nature was fallen and corrupt one was under no theological obligation to leave it undisturbed. The American Romantics of the nineteenth century attempted to reverse the Puritan view of the wilderness, arguing (as did Merton) that the source of corruption in American society was more likely to be found in the cities, where raw capitalism tended to take root. Exhibiting a characteristic balance, Merton, following Thoreau, agreed that while civilization was necessary and right, "an *element of wildness*" (21) was necessary as a component of civilized life. Moreover, Merton argued that what might appear to some in reading Thoreau to be merely literary intuition was in fact a view that had realistic and practical implications. Extending this line of thought, Merton connected what he called the ecological conscience with the peacemaking conscience, linking the chemical defoliation of Vietnam with the murderous war that raged across that land.

Appropriately, the editors included with "The Wild Places" Ping Ferry's essay "The Technophiliacs" (29-38), which followed Merton's essay in the *Center Magazine*. Ferry, with whom Merton corresponded

Ross Labrie, professor emeritus at the University of British Columbia, is the former president of the Thomas Merton Society of Canada and author of numerous books, including *The Art of Thomas Merton* (1979) and *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (2001).

prolifically in the 1960s, became a prime contact on technology, and influenced some of Merton's principal ideas in this area. Rather like Jacques Ellul, whose writings on technology also influenced Merton, Ferry saw technology as an enclosed world with a momentum and authority all to itself. Ferry called it a semi-autonomous phenomenon whose mandate was to do whatever could be done irrespective of the effect of some technology on human beings and their ultimate questions and values. While conceding that human beings have always defiled their environment, Ferry pointed out that never in the past has the threat to nature itself been so encompassing and final. Moreover, as Merton himself put it, technology in the modern setting has had the unfortunate effect of separating human beings from the earth and from themselves. Again like Merton, Ferry states that he does not want to dismantle technology but rather to harness it to ends that are compatible with human dignity and worth. The grouping of essays around Merton and Ferry includes a 1983 interview with Ferry conducted by Paul Wilkes and restored and edited by Paul Pearson (39-53). Ferry brings out that Merton emphasized that religious contemplation could have a healing effect on a culture that had been overwhelmed by technology. Noting that Merton was aware of the objection that contemplation would seem to offer little that was helpful to technological society, Merton insisted on its value in creating community in a world in which people were increasingly isolated from one another by a technology with which they interacted more than with each other.

Philosopher Albert Borgmann, author of *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* and keynote speaker at the conference, locates the threat of technological culture in commodification (54-66). By this Borgmann means the detachment of things from their traditional contexts, such as religion, through the intervention of powerful and concealed machineries. Noting that technology had invaded even monasteries, Borgmann maintains that Merton's situation, his life of monastic seclusion and closeness to nature, fortuitously allowed him to stay in touch with a natural world that for many beyond the monastery walls had already been effaced. At the same time, rather than presenting Merton as remote and exceptional, Borgmann argues that people need to pull themselves, temporarily but repeatedly, out of the vortex of technological culture so as to recognize the parts of themselves that technology and commodification had set at no worth. Phillip Thompson's essay, "Questioning the Goal of Biological Immortality: Mertonian Reflections on Living Eternally" (67-82), relates technology to the prolonging of life. Merton, however, was concerned that death, which had traditionally divided human beings from God, would in its absence or delay, further secularize and commodify human existence. Merton felt that the assault on death, while clearly beneficial to suffering, risked erasing the meaning of death as a culminating stage in the pilgrimage of human beings towards their Creator.

Daniel Horan's essay on the digital age (83-111), the age in which the Millennials (those born after 1982) appeared, is part of a group of essays in which the developments in technology since Merton's death are considered. Here, the issue is the loss of what Merton called the true self in contrast to the fictive selves projected through the internet and social media. The fact that many people are connected to smart phones twenty-four hours a day, Horan suggests, leaves them with no time to come to know and to develop the deepest parts of themselves. Thus the inner self is swallowed up by the chatter and distraction of an ongoing flood of external communication. While Horan comments on Merton's vacillation about the inherent goodness or evil of technology, he does acknowledge

Merton's prescience in anticipating the problems that the new technologies would bring. Indeed, one would think that one need look no farther than Merton's poetic sequence *Cables to the Ace* in order to see this.

Horan's essay is supplemented by Jeffrey Kiernan's survey of high school students (244-55). Kiernan turns up revealing testimony from students who admit that they are plugged in to their cell phones all day long, with some leaving the phones on to receive calls even through the night. While the students acknowledged the risks that Merton sees as implicit in the new technologies, they showed no inclination to want to do without them. Of particular interest in this essay is Kiernan's story of a woman on a US Airways flight who refused to turn off her cell phone just prior to take-off because she didn't want to be rude to her caller. The woman's oblivious sense of her obligation to her fellow passengers and to the crew of the plane illustrates aptly the upside-down world of contemporary communication where those with an electronic presence outweigh those human beings who are literally at one's side.

A number of the essayists make the point that Merton was balanced in his view of technology, that he was not a Luddite. Among these is Kathleen Deignan (112-27), who recalls that Merton loved going to the movies and that he loved jazz records even if he had little interest in TV. What disturbed Merton was the likely loss of time and space, both of which were being crowded out by a noisy culture dominated by speed and volume. This culture of distraction is what Gray Matthews calls commotion, which he identifies as the real threat to the inner life (128-49). Deepening this idea, Matthews argues that the external distraction of contemporary technological culture is the projection of an internal distraction and agitation. A possible remedy in this situation is contemplation, through which the interior life is recognized and nurtured. The situation is complicated, though, by the fact that this inner agitation of the self, in Matthews' view, is regarded as pathological by the culture at large and so the opportunity to track and deal with a very real sense that something is wrong with the self and the culture is missed.

Merton's well-known peacemaking retreat in the autumn of 1964 is the subject of essays by Paul Dekar (150-75) and Gordon Oyer (188-232). Oyer notes that the purpose of the retreat was to see whether or not the Christian clergy in North America might be persuaded to become actively engaged in peacemaking. The relationship between the retreat and the theme of technology stemmed from Merton's suggestion that the retreat focus at least in part on the question of whether technological society was by its nature oriented towards self-destruction or whether it could be considered a source of hope for a new, sacral social order. Dekar maintains that Merton, while seeing technology globally as morally neutral in itself, nevertheless regarded some technological objects as so destructive and morally evil that they should never have been produced. Hanging over the discussion of the proliferation of nuclear weapons, for example, was America's uncritical faith in technology. Ironically, Oyer observes, there was little discussion at the retreat about the usefulness of contemplation in peacemaking. In this respect, *Merton Annual* contributor Gary Hall (176-87) cites Merton in asserting that the role of contemplation is to restore a real world of experience and of real human relationships that had been short-circuited by technology. In this connection, as contributor Daniel Bogert-O'Brien suggests in his essay on Merton and Ivan Illich (233-43), immersion in the communications technology is a state of postmodernism. In the postmodern age, he explains, real presences are replaced by virtual ones.

The concluding sections of this volume of *The Merton Annual* are devoted to a bibliographic essay by David Belcastro on the year's work in Merton studies (256-80) and a final section comprising individual reviews of works by and about Merton as well as books on related subjects (324-42). Belcastro has oriented his review essay to the theme of technological culture and contemplation, and is generous in bringing out the values that the writers of the books under review have to offer. The most searching reviews in the final section of the book are part of a symposium on Monica Weis's new book, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (281-323). Here, both reviewers and the author grapple thoughtfully with a central difficulty in considering Merton's perception of and attitude towards nature, his apparent sentimental overlooking of the Darwinian aspects of nature. In his correspondence with Czeslaw Milosz in 1960, which was published in *The Courage for Truth*, Merton acknowledged that although many animals were predatory, this did not lead him to see nature as evil. In Thomistic fashion he regarded nature as morally neutral. Theologically, it would seem, Merton separated his own relationship to God as a human being from the relationship of God to other creatures.

Perhaps, in the light of the stalemate that characterized the discussion of this topic in the symposium, one might suggest a further light that might be thrown on the subject. No one had a more profound influence on Merton than William Blake in whose poetry the tiger is as emblematic of nature as is the lamb. While the creation (or evolution) of the tiger is ultimately a mystery in Blake, human beings in Blake's world are summoned to remake the world so that the power and beauty of the tiger unite with the compassion and innocence of the lamb. Indeed, Merton said as much in his 1968 essay "Blake and the New Theology" in which he argued that for Blake true holiness and redemption consisted in the reunion of contraries. Nature was incomplete, in need of a humanizing transformation of love as Merton, following his reading of Teilhard de Chardin in the late 1960s, came to believe.