Czeslaw Milosz's Influence on Thomas Merton's "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude"

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Preceding and coinciding with his work on "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude," Thomas Merton focused much of his attention on issues raised for him by Czeslaw Milosz. Consequently, I believe it is within the context of this relationship that we may best understand the ideas presented in this work, in particular, Merton's ideas with regard to the dangers of solitude. After a brief review of those ideas and William Shannon's recent organization of those ideas, I will suggest a way in which we can further our understanding of Merton's philosophy of solitude.

Near the beginning of the article, Merton lists some of the dangers related to the life of solitude:

> Nor do I promise to cheer anybody up with optimistic answers to all the sordid difficulties and uncertainties which attend the life of interior solitude. Perhaps in the course of these reflections, some of the difficulties will be mentioned. The first of them has to be taken note of from the very start: the disconcerting task of facing and accepting one's own absurdity. The anguish of realizing that underneath the apparently logical pattern of a more or less "well organized" and rational life, there lies an abyss of irrationality, confusion, pointlessness, and indeed apparent chaos. This is what immediately impresses itself upon the man who has renounced diversion. It cannot be otherwise: for in renouncing diversion, he renounces the seemingly harmless pleasure of building a tight, self-contained illusion about himself and about his little world. He

accepts the difficulty of facing the million things in his life which are incomprehensible, instead of simply ignoring them. Incidentally it is only when the apparent absurdity of life is faced in all truth that faith really becomes possible. Otherwise, faith tends to be a kind of diversion, a spiritual amusement, in which one gathers up accepted, conventional formulas and arranges them in the approved mental patterns, without bothering to investigate their meaning, or asking if they have any practical consequences in one's life.[1]

While Merton specifically notes the first danger, he also mentions a second without designating it as such. The first is "the disconcerting task of facing and accepting one's own absurdity." The second is making faith "a kind of diversion, a spiritual amusement."

The third danger is noted several sections later:

The true solitary is not one who simply withdraws from society. Mere withdrawal, regressions, leads to a sick solitude, without meaning and without fruit.[2]

This "sick solitude" is characterized by Merton as "the substitution of idols and illusions of his own choosing for those chosen by society."[3] Consequently, it is not solitude in the truest sense of the word. This is the danger noted in section two under the title, "In the Sea of Perils."

There is no need to say that the call of solitude (even though only interior) is perilous. Everyone who knows what solitude means is aware of this. The essence of the solitary vocation is precisely the anguish of an almost infinite risk. Only the false solitary sees no danger in solitude. But his solitude is imaginary, that is to say built around an image. It is merely a social image stripped of its explicitly social elements. The false solitary is one who is able to imagine himself without companions while in reality he remains just as dependent on society as before—if not more dependent. He needs society as a ventriloquist needs a dummy. He projects his own voice to the group and it comes back to him admiring, approving, opposing or at least adverting to his own separateness.

1. Thomas Merton, "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude," in *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1960) 179–80.
2. Ibid., 181–82.
3. Ibid., 184.

Even if society seems to condemn him, this pleases and diverts him for it is nothing but the sound of his own voice, reminding him of his separateness, which is his own chosen diversion.[4]

The fourth danger is another subtle form of diversion:

The solitary condition also has its jargon and its conventions: these too are pitiful. There is no point in consoling one who has awakened to his solitude by teaching him to defile his emptiness with rationalizations. Solitude must not become a diversion to itself by too much self-justification.[5]

The fifth and final danger is present in the relation between the solitary vocation and social protests:

And if there is an element of protest in the solitary vocation, that element must be a matter of rigorous spirituality. It must be deep and interior, and intimately personal, so that the solitary is one who is critical, first of all, of himself. Otherwise he will divert himself with a fiction worse than that of all the others, becoming a more insane and self-opinionated liar than the worst of them, cheating no one more than himself.[6]

Briefly restated, there are five dangers noted by Merton: facing and accepting one's own absurdity; making faith into an amusing diversion; withdrawing into illusions of one's individuality; justifying one's solitude with rationalizations; and rebelling against society from the false position of self-righteousness. It should be noted that two, three, four, and five are all diversions from the first. We will recall this point later.

Shannon found this second section of Merton's article on the dangers of solitude "a mixed bag—with plenty of wonderfully quotable sentences, but at the same time somewhat wandering and repetitious."[7] He sorts out this "mixed bag" by gathering the dangers into one of three categories; three different yet related categories he appears to believe to be the substance of this section.

4. Ibid., 185–86.
5. Ibid., 189–90.
6. Ibid., 194.
7. William H. Shannon, "Reflections on Thomas Merton's Article: 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude,' " paper presented at the International Thomas Merton Society's Third General Meeting, Colorado College, June 11, 1993.

First, he compares and contrasts, as Merton does, true and false solitude. True solitude, unlike false solitude, does not renounce anything that is basic and human, separating oneself from society, but rather seeks solidarity with humanity at a deeper level. Then, he considers true solitude as the occasion for "taking responsibility for one's own inner life as a way into the mystery of God." That is to say, it is in solitude that one refuses to substitute the words, slogans, and concepts offered by Church and society for one's authentic experience. Last, he explains Merton's understanding of solitude as a form of social witnessing. The "hermit" has an important function to perform in society. He/she is a solitary witness to the primacy of the spiritual and mystical dimension of life, society, and the Church.

Seen in this way, the dangers of solitude listed here are understood essentially as those things that may lead the solitary person away from solidarity with humankind, an authentic religious experience of his or her own, and the responsibility of bearing witness to spiritual dimension. Any of these "movements away" will result in solitude that is an illusion and, consequently, destructive.

While I find Shannon's organization of Merton's "mixed bag of wonderfully quotable sentences" to be reasonable, accurate, and insightful, I believe there is a deeper dimension of this work yet to be explored and articulated. The way to that dimension is found in Merton's correspondence with Milosz.

On December 6, 1958, Merton, in a letter to Milosz, wrote:

It seems to me that, as you pointed out, and as others like yourself say or imply (Camus, Koestler, etc.) there has to be a third position, a position of integrity, which refuses subjection to the pressures of two massive groups ranged against each other in the world. It is quite simply obvious that the future, in plain dialectical terms, rests with those of us who risk our heads and necks and everything in the difficult, fantastic job of finding out the new position, the ever changing and moving "line" that is no line at all because it cannot be traced out by political dogmatists. And that is the difficulty, and the challenge.[8]

This letter begins a correspondence between Merton and Milosz that extended from 1958 to 1968 and consisted of twenty-six letters; eight-

8. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1993) 54.

een from Milosz and eight from Merton. Michael Mott believes this correspondence was the "most vital exchange" of the early sixties, pointing out that each correspondent had acknowledged the importance of the exchange and the seriousness of the tasks to which they had committed themselves.[9]

The correspondence was initiated by Merton's reading of Milosz's book *The Captive Mind*. Written during 1951/52 in Paris when French intellectuals were seriously looking at Stalin's communist Russia as a vision of the new world order, Milosz focused his attention on the vulnerability of the twentieth-century mind to seduction by socio-political doctrines and its readiness to accept totalitarian terror for the sake of a hypothetical future.[10] The book explores the cause of this vulnerability and finds it in the modern world's longing for any, even the most illusory, certainty. This longing for certainty is understood in the context of a world torn by a great dispute; a world where people have come to believe that they must conform to one or the other of the systems advocated by the participants in the debate; systems that were equally, though differently, totalitarian. Milosz's book is a search for the third position, a position of integrity for the individual who longs for a place to stand in the modern world. Writing about this search in another publication, *Native Realm*, Milosz makes a statement quite similar to one we will later consider by Merton from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

Nothing could stifle my inner certainty that a shining point exists where all lines intersect. If I negated it I would lose my ability to concentrate, and things as well as aspirations would turn to dust. This certainty also involved my relationship to that point. I felt very strongly that nothing depended on my will, that anything I might accomplish in life would not be won by my own efforts but given as a gift. Time opened out before me like a fog. If I was worthy enough I would penetrate it, and then I would understand.[11]

Merton responded to *The Captive Mind* with enthusiasm. His first letter to Milosz stated his intention to join with the Polish writer and

9. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 354.

10. Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981) v.

11. Czeslaw Milosz, *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981) 87.

others in the difficult and challenging task of finding the new position, "risking heads and necks and everything" in doing so. We see the commitment to the third position articulated by Merton over and over again. For example, in a letter to Filberto Guala dated March 20, 1968:

My intention was to bear witness to a common ground—a kind of existential searching which is implicit in the "experience" of struggle in which all modern men, believers included, must "examine" the integrity of their own motives for believing (as opposed to the apologetic and reasonable conscious motives). Is our "faith" really in "good faith" or is it an evasion, a falsification of experience?[12]

This search for the third position contributed significantly to the shaping of Merton's understanding of his vocation. With time, we see the merging of the solitary life with the third position and political protest. For example, in his preface to the 1963 Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, we read:

It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of, a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole race of man and the world with him. By my monastic life and vows I am saying NO to all the concentration camps. . . . I make monastic silence a protest against the lies of politicians, propagandists and agitators, and when I speak it is to deny that my faith and my Church can ever seriously be aligned with these forces of injustice and destruction.[13]

This statement is of interest because it not only indicates the coming together of the solitary life with the third position and political protest but also is a reminder of one of the dangers of solitude noted by Merton in his essay:

And if there is an element of protest in the solitary vocation, that element must be a matter of rigorous spirituality. It must be deep and interior, and intimately personal, so that the solitary is one who is critical, first of all, of himself. Otherwise he will divert him-

12. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1990) 372.
13. Thomas Merton, *Introductions East & West: The Foreign Prefaces of Thomas Merton*, ed. Robert Daggy (Greensboro: Unicorn, 1981) 45–46.

self with a fiction worse than that of all the others, becoming a more insane and self-opinionated liar than the worst of them, cheating no one more than himself. Solitude is not for rebels like this, and it promptly rejects them. The desert is for those who have felt a salutary despair of conventional and fictitious values, in order to hope in mercy and to be themselves merciful men to whom that mercy is promised. Such solitaries know the evils that are in other men because they experience these evils first of all in themselves.[14]

I believe that Milosz played an important role in shaping Merton's awareness and understanding of the danger of political protest to one's interior life. In the third chapter of *The Captive Mind*, Milosz described a particular kind of intellectual emerging in Eastern Europe:

In short, Ketman means self-realization against something. He who practices Ketman suffers because of the obstacles he meets; but if these obstacles were suddenly to be removed, he would find himself in a void which might perhaps prove much more painful. Internal revolt is sometimes essential to spiritual health, and can create a particular form of happiness. . . . For most people the necessity of living in constant tension and watchfulness is a torture, but many intellectuals accept this necessity with masochistic pleasure.[15]

And, in a letter to Merton, Milosz questions Merton's involvement in political activities:

Yet I asked myself why you feel such an itch for activity? Is that so that you are unsatisfied with your having plunged too deep in contemplation and now wish to compensate through growing another wing, so to say? And peace provides you with the only link with American young intellectuals outside? Yet activity to which you are called is perhaps different. Should you become a belated rebel, out of solidarity with rebels without cause?[16]

Through his book and their correspondence, Milosz became Merton's guide in the search for the third position. Because Milosz saw the Church as the last stronghold of opposition against totalitarianism

14. Merton, "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude," 194.
15. Milosz, *Captive Mind*, 80.
16. Czeslaw Milosz, Poland, to Thomas Merton, Gethsemani, March 14, 1962, Thomas Merton Archive, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky.

and looked to the outer fringes of the Church to lead the resistance, he accepted the opportunity to work with Merton, believing that Merton's books could have some influence. But he was of the opinion that Merton would have to change a few things. His advice for Merton was threefold: address the problem of evil (he thought Merton's writings had seriously neglected the harsh realities of this world and, consequently, appeared naive and innocent); write literary essays; and read Camus.

Milosz's advice is understandable with regard to reading Camus. Camus had established himself as the "conscience of his generation." His essay "Neither Victims nor Executioners," published in 1946, placed him at the forefront of writers working on finding a third position:

> Thus we all know, without the shadow of doubt, that the new order we are seeking cannot be merely national or even confidential, and especially not Western or Eastern. It must be universal.[17]

Merton did exactly as advised. His work on the third position consisted of reading Camus, writing essays on Camus' literary work, and addressing in those essays the difficult issues of the modern world.

Beginning in 1958 and continuing for the next ten years, there are numerous references to Camus in Merton's letters, journals, and notebooks. During this period of time Merton came to the conclusion that Camus was "the greatest writer of our times."[18] Furthermore, even though Camus was clearly a secular critic of religion in general and the Church in particular, Merton recognized in him the development of an asceticism and contemplative life that was very much in line with monastic tradition—so much so that he included Camus in his hermitage library, referring to him as an "Algerian cenobite."[19] More important to our present interest is a statement made by Merton during the summer of 1966 in *A Midsummer Diary* regarding his experience of reading Camus:

> I am reading Camus on absurdity and suicide: *The Myth of Sisyphus.* I had tried it before and was not ready for it because of the de-

17. Albert Camus, *Neither Victims nor Executioners,* trans. Dwight MacDonald (Philadelphia: New Society, 1986) 42.

18. Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton,* 430.

19. Thomas Merton, "Day of a Stranger," *The Hudson Review* XX.2 (Summer 1967) 212.

structive forces in myself. Now I can read it, because I no longer fear them, as I no longer fear the ardent and loving forces in myself.[20]

Here is a record of Merton's encounter with the absurd: the metaphysical void we experience when we become aware of ourselves as strangers in our own universe—strangers without origin, destiny, or meaning. This is, as you may recall, the first danger of the solitary life mentioned in "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude." It is also the primary concern of Camus' thought and writings. It is Milosz via Camus who brought Merton to this place. And it is from this place that Merton sets out in his literary essays on Camus to discover the third position.

It was not until August of 1966 that Merton wrote his first essay on Camus. His last essay would be completed nineteen months later. During the interim months he would write five more essays. In these essays we find issues, all related, directly and indirectly, to the search for the third position. Furthermore, there is a pattern in all of the essays that is characteristic of Merton's response to Camus. And I believe it is this pattern that reflects a movement from the absurd to the third position.

First, there is an indication of respect for Camus as a person and writer. Commenting on *The Plague* Merton writes, "It is a precise, well-built, inexorable piece of reflection."[21] Second, there is acceptance of Camus' message in general and approval of his ideas in particular. So he writes, "I can accept Camus' ideas of nobility and certainly agree with him. . . ."[22] This acceptance, however, is seldom without reservation. Consequently there is a third part to the pattern, the critical part where Merton indicates that in his opinion Camus is fine as far as he goes but he needs to go further. Commenting on Meursault in Camus' *The Stranger,* Merton asked whether Meursault's choice justified him, that is, whether his acceptance of poverty was a spiritual enrichment, his admission of absurdity a final somersault into sense, and his refusal to justify himself in some sense a justification. While Merton indicated that he was aware that the cliché interpretation of

20. Thomas Merton, "A Midsummer Diary," 2: quoted in Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton,* 451.

21. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals, 1964–1965,* ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1988) 71.

22. Ibid.

The Stranger assumed that it did, he was of the opinion that Meursault remained in his poverty, unable to integrate himself completely by compassion and solidarity with others who, like himself, were poor.[23] Merton inevitably comes to this place in his essays on Camus. Accepting Camus as far as Camus goes, that is, the absurd, Merton then goes on to mention another place, a place beyond the absurd where one's solitude becomes solidarity with humankind.

As we have seen, Merton, from 1958 through 1968, was interested in finding a third position, and this search was greatly influenced by Milosz and Camus. I believe that this third position is the solitary life described by Merton in "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude." This becomes apparent when the two are compared. For example, in Merton's summary statement of the solitary life in "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude" we find:

> I do not pretend, in these pages to establish a clear formula for discerning solitary vocations. But this much needs to be said: that one who is called to solitude is not called merely to imagine himself solitary, to live as if he were solitary, to cultivate the illusion that he is different, withdrawn and elevated. He is called to emptiness. And in this emptiness he does not find points upon which to base a contrast between himself and others. On the contrary, he realizes, though perhaps confusedly, that he has entered into a solitude that is really shared by everyone. It is not that he is solitary while everybody else is social: but that everyone is solitary, in a solitude masked by that symbolism which they use to cheat and counteract their solitariness. What the solitary renounces is not his union with other men, but rather the deceptive fictions and inadequate symbols which tend to take the place of genuine social unity—to produce a facade of apparent unity without really uniting men on a deep level. . . . Even though he may be physically alone the solitary remains united to others and lives in profound solidarity with them, but on a deeper and mystical level.[24]

Compare this with the letter to Milosz quoted earlier:

> It seems to me that, as you pointed out . . . there *has to be* a third position, a position of integrity, which refuses subjection to the

23. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981) 292–301.
24. Merton, "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude," 187–88.

pressures of two massive groups ranged against each other in the world. It is quite simply obvious that the future, in plain dialectical terms, rests with those of us who risk our heads and necks and everything in the difficult, fantastic job of finding out the new position, the ever changing and moving "line" that is no line at all because it cannot be traced out by political dogmatists.[25]

The important connection between these two selected readings is found in Merton's reference in the first to solitude as a call to "emptiness" and his reference in the second to the "ever changing and moving 'line' that is no line at all." This connection becomes clearer when we look at it in light of Merton's reflections on this "religious experience" at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville:

> Again, that expression, *le point vierge*, (I cannot translate it) comes in here. At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.[26]

If Merton's search for the third position and his vocation to a life of solitude are one and the same, then I believe that the dangers of solitude noted by Merton in his "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude" are best understood in light of his work with Milosz and Camus on the third position.

The first danger, "facing and accepting one's absurdity," is the reality Milosz encouraged Merton to face and Camus assisted him in accepting. The remaining dangers (making faith a spiritual amusement, withdrawing from society, becoming preoccupied with one's

25. Merton, *Courage for Truth*, 54.
26. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966) 142.

own justification, and attacking the world from a position of self-righteousness) are flights from the absurd into illusions of the solitary life, which are more destructive than the diversions offered by society. In "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude" Merton faces and accepts the absurd, identifies and avoids the illusions, and proceeds to describe the solitary life as the third position, a common ground for all humanity, the hidden Ground of Love. And it is at this place, the place that lies on the other side of the absurd, that Merton has moved beyond Camus and to what Milosz was certain existed.