

# Culture and the Formation of Personal Identity: Dilemma and Dialectic in Thomas Merton's Teaching

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A recent news magazine article suggested that the current intense scientific quest to understand the origin of the cosmos is matched by, and not unrelated to, a determined effort by many in our society to understand and experience the meaning of life in spiritual terms.<sup>1</sup> Whether as a reaction to unfulfilling materialistic values, the confrontation of the baby boom generation with its own mortality, or the result of a collective reflective pause as a new millennium approaches, the spiritual search is apparently widespread and real, and manifested in a variety of ways in both religious and nonreligious environments. Given this climate, we might well ask how such a search might be conducted in our time and culture, and to what end. Though framed in a monastic context, these questions challenged Thomas Merton as teacher; the evolution of his efforts in response to them may be instructive for us.<sup>2</sup>

To understand well Thomas Merton's development as a teacher, and particularly the evolution of his approach to monastic education, would require at least some correlative study of his own continuous intellectual, monastic, and spiritual formation and his teaching activity. Conceding the value of such a comprehensive approach, what might we learn from a broad overview of Merton's life as a teacher? What

1. Sharon Begley, "Science of the Sacred," *Newsweek*, vol. CXXIV, no. 22 (November 28, 1994) 56, 59.

2. This paper was developed from a draft presented at a conference entitled "Thomas Merton and the Vocation of Cultural Critic" at St. John's University in New York in October 1993. I am grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities for funding which supported some of the research for the paper.

did the acknowledged spiritual master learn about how to support the spiritual search of his monastic charges, and how, if at all, did he take into account the cultural milieu beyond the monastic enclosure in the process? Did Merton, in keeping with his own evolving effort to understand his role as a contemplative in the modern world, develop in any sense an "anthropology" or "cultural psychology" of education, a way of addressing the influence of culture in spiritual and monastic formation, and, in turn, the potential influence of spiritual insight on society and culture?

### Merton's Beginnings as a Teacher: Forming and Being Formed

Thomas Merton was a teacher for more than twenty years during a roughly thirty-year span of time. With a stint tutoring Latin during the previous year as background, Merton began teaching formally in the extension program at Columbia University during the Fall semester of 1939, responsible for a course in English composition. He was then twenty-four years old and pursuing his doctorate in English literature. The following Fall, his attempt to enter the Franciscan novitiate having been rebuffed, Merton began teaching a year-long course in English literature to sophomores as an assistant professor of English at St. Bonaventure College, Olean, New York. A year later, on December 10, 1941, having handed over some of his literature notebooks to a colleague, the twenty-six-year-old Merton entered Gethsemani Abbey. Immersed in his own monastic education, he would not shoulder teaching duties again until November 16, 1949, on the eleventh anniversary of his baptism as he notes it, beginning on that day an introductory "conference" (tantamount to a class) in theology and at about the same time a series of orientation classes for novices!<sup>3</sup>

Merton's educational responsibilities at the monastery gradually widened. Asked to become Master of Scholastics (or Master of Students) in June 1951, he assumed responsibility for teaching philosophy and theology to those monks (the "junior professed") studying for the priesthood, and provided them with spiritual direction. In 1955 he became Master of Novices, a key monastic role involving oversight of the monastic education and spiritual formation of newly entered

3. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1953) 236.

monks. Although Merton relinquished this formal teaching responsibility in 1965, he continued to teach, offering weekly conferences to his fellow monks up until his fatal trip to Bangkok in 1968.

Recalling his first teaching experience in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton wrote, "I liked teaching very much." The young teacher seems to have had a rather serendipitous approach to inciting thinking and learning: "I spent most of the time throwing out ideas about what might or might not be important in life and in literature, and letting them argue about it."<sup>4</sup> What Merton discerned and what he evidently honored in this liberal teaching process was "a definite hunger for ideas and convictions" on the part of his first students. In what would be characteristic of his teaching at St. Bonaventure College and later at Gethsemani Abbey, a reflection of the influence of teaching mentors such as Mark Van Doren, he used literature as a lens for focusing life's meaning.

While no less oriented to establishing the meaningful and true than in his pre-monastic teaching, Merton's efforts as a monastic educator had a more explicitly spiritual, Christian, and monastic focus. As the Master of Scholastics, Merton was responsible for the theological and spiritual preparation of the growing number of monks entering Gethsemani seeking ordination. Merton's position was created in fact in response to a surge in priestly vocations, which included about thirty-five of the monastic community of 250 at the time. Anticipating the role, he reflected that "The one who is going to be most fully formed by the new scholasticate is the Master of the Scholastics."<sup>5</sup> He humbly assesses his initial efforts in his journal:

It is now six months since I have been Master of the Scholastics and have looked into their hearts and taken up their burdens upon me. I have not always seen clearly and I have not carried their burdens too well and I have stumbled around a lot, and on many days we have gone around in circles and fallen into ditches because the blind was leading the blind.

I do not know if they have discovered anything new, or if they are able to love God more or if I have helped them in any way to find themselves, which is to say: to lose themselves.<sup>6</sup>

4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1948) 274.

5. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, 319.

6. *Ibid.*, 323.

Merton's self-evaluation reveals his chief concern as the mentor of the scholasticate: to enable the monks to love God more and, in accordance with the paradoxical biblical prescription, to find themselves by losing themselves. Indeed, if there is a leitmotif in Merton's monastic teaching, then, as in so much of his spiritual writing and self-reflection, it is the question of finding oneself, of realizing one's whole and authentic personal identity, of self-discovery "on the deepest possible level," as he put it once in a discussion of education.<sup>7</sup> This theme, however, becomes less and less an abstract proposition for Merton as teacher and spiritual director; it becomes an educational as well as a deeply personal and monastic question the more he confronts the challenge of guiding others in the monastic and contemplative way. Familiar to many, the educational question, or dilemma, might be framed this way: How can we help open others to the experience of their own true identity? What approach might we take? What "curriculum" would we offer? What, if anything, ought we to know about the people in our care in answering these questions? What role, if any, does culture play in the process? Merton would perhaps learn better over time not to judge his efforts as a teacher on what was after all a spiritual plane, even as he expanded his understanding of what might be educationally helpful in the process of spiritual formation, and what discovery of one's true self in Christ, in God, might mean, for himself no less than for his students.

If somewhat uncertain about how he had affected his students during the first months of the scholasticate, and humbled by the effort, Merton realized with gratitude that teaching and "the care of souls" had drawn him into the "terrible" and "beautiful" "wilderness of compassion." His premonition that he would be the one most fully formed by this work seemed to hold true. "The more I get to know my scholastics the more reverence I have for their individuality and the more I meet them in my own solitude," he wrote. But he had also begun to develop some perspective on his students' needs and on the kind of awarenesses and understandings which might ground their spiritual aspirations. He discovered

that after all what the monks most need is not conferences on mysticism but more light about the ordinary virtues, whether they be

7. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart and Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Bantam, 1980) 3.

faith or prudence, charity or temperance, hope or justice or fortitude. And above all what they need and what they desire is to penetrate the Mystery of Christ and to know Him in His Gospels and in the whole Bible.<sup>8</sup>

Here Merton, the relatively young educator opening up to the experience of his students out of concern for their spiritual formation, begins to reconstruct his monastic curriculum, giving more weight to what might be called normal preconditions for understanding and orienting oneself to the Christian spiritual and contemplative life. Confirming this view, John Eudes Bamberger, a member of the scholasticate from 1952 to 1955, observes,

At that period . . . he focused on spirituality and the most significant lectures for me, perhaps, were those on St. Paul's theology. His focus was decidedly and explicitly spiritual, but based on exegesis and theological reasoning. . . . He saw our greatest needs as getting to understand the Christian mystery in a wholesome and integral way, free from moralism and rigidity and a too negative approach. He also understood that we needed to get to know ourselves at a deeper level, get in touch with our feelings and intuition.<sup>9</sup>

There is no coincidence in the fact that Merton prepared *No Man Is An Island* while serving as Master of Students, a book which he describes as covering the ground taken for granted in his prior work, *Seeds of Contemplation*, and which addresses some of the virtues and disciplines fundamental to the spiritual life. Merton dedicated the book to the scholastics, who he suggested might recognize some of the "notions" in it. The prologue is replete with themes which echo some of the concerns which surfaced in the scholasticate—the importance of finding one's own identity through one's own experience, of saving one's life by losing it, of facing one's limitations.

Merton's work in the scholasticate also sharpened his appreciation for the psychological issues involved in the process of spiritual formation (if indeed these were not already eminently clear from his own experience), and particularly the kind of pressure created by inordinate expectations or hopes. He is less than enthusiastic in describ-

8. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, 326–327.

9. John Eudes Bamberger, O.C.S.O., to the author, January 12, 1994.

ing the scholastics' educational needs in these terms, remarking in a letter to a fellow Trappist that one of the "problems" presented by the scholastics was "nervous trouble." He observes that some monks "come in with the jitters in the first place," or with "a false notion of the monastic life . . . the idea that they have to be something exalted and brilliant." He mentions also their effort "to force their way to sanctity by sheer strain" and the "disease of perfectionism" which afflicts them all. In his bleak view, "They are obsessed with their own miserable 'perfection' and 'imperfection,'" concentrating on themselves rather than on God, and failing to understand that God loves us because we are imperfect.<sup>10</sup>

If Merton's portrayal of the scholastics in this instance seems to lack sympathy and compassion, it nonetheless points to his early awareness, beyond himself, of the needs and challenges faced by those embarking with high spiritual expectation on the monastic road. It helps explain further why Merton's teaching, as Bamberger's account suggests, evolved in a spiritually-oriented, holistic, and person-centered direction, one aimed at understanding "the Christian mystery in a wholesome and integral way, free from moralism and rigidity and a too negative approach," and enabling the monks to "get to know [themselves] at a deeper level, get in touch with [their] feelings and intuition." In striving to meet this aim Merton began what would become for him a fairly steady process of expanding the boundaries of the monastic curriculum. Bamberger notes, for example, that Merton gave the monks "an appreciation of art and its place in the spiritual life and of beauty."<sup>11</sup> He in addition introduced them to psychology, a subject which captivated Merton especially during the 1950s, and which he clearly mined to enable both him and his students to gain perspective on the psychological challenges which one might encounter on the spiritual journey.

Joining his study of psychology to his work in monastic education and spiritual formation, Merton wrote a paper in the mid-1950s entitled "The Neurotic Personality in Monastic Life" and later on produced a set of notes in collaboration with Bamberger called "The Mature Conscience," which circulated among the monks in the noviti-

10. Merton to Abbot Augustine Moore, O.C.S.O., May 10, 1953, *The School of Charity*, ed. Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 58.

11. Op. cit., Bamberger.

ate. Merton's piece on "The Neurotic Personality" is clinical in nature, an effort to delineate healthy and unhealthy psychological states in relation to ascetic religious life.<sup>12</sup> The notes on "The Mature Conscience" address similar themes, but consider immature emotional and psychological states in relation to the development of conscience. Perhaps in some indirect way a response to the "disease of perfectionism" Merton perceived in his early years teaching in the scholasticate, these notes conclude somewhat pastorally: ". . . the great thing is to realize that just as we are, with our deficiencies, faults, and limitations, with our anxiety itself and our sense of guilt, we have something to contribute, we can participate validly and fruitfully in the dialogue of love."<sup>13</sup>

### Merton's Middle Years as Novice Master: Taking Culture into Account

Merton's first seven to nine years of monastic teaching might be characterized as an effort to develop a spiritually-oriented education, to represent well the biblical and spiritual foundations of the contemplative life, and to apply his growing understanding of psychology to this work and his related role as spiritual director. While this effort does not diminish over time, beginning around 1960 there are perceptible and significant changes in content, tone, and rhetoric. For example, Merton's written introduction to the monastic vows for that year (he provided the monks with voluminous sets of carefully organized notes for each of his conferences) differs markedly from its predecessors—such as his introduction to monastic spirituality in 1955—in that it includes a commentary on modern society's treatment of the person as object.

. . . how does one judge the value of [a person]? . . . In the old fashioned standards of the nineteenth century—how much money

12. Thomas Merton, "The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life," *The Merton Annual: Studies in Thomas Merton, Religion, Culture, and Social Concerns*, vol. 4, eds. Robert E. Daggy, Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O., Dewey Weiss Kramer, Victor A. Kramer (New York: AMS Press, 1991).

13. John Eudes Bamberger and Thomas Merton, "The Mature Conscience," *The Collected Essays of Thomas Merton* (Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville).

has he been able to make? In modern standards—how necessary is he to an organization, to a business, to society? . . . In actual fact [persons] exist for *things*. In our society we reverence those who seem to *do* the most and *have* the most. There is still a shadow of reverence for personality . . . modern society encourages [us] to dedicate [ourselves] to *tasks*, to *things*, to spend [ourselves] as [instruments] of production. In return [we] will be surrounded by glamour and will have the choice of the best that is produced. . . . God, on the other hand, does not want our works [but] our love. That is to say, [God] wants *ourselves*. [God] seeks the person that we *are*, in order that we may share [God's] life and [God's] freedom, and [God's] love for all eternity . . . Our job in life is not so much to produce anything, as *to be what we are supposed to be*. . . .<sup>14</sup>

Here Merton establishes the question of personal identity as a matter of loving relationship to God, but only after he suggests, by contrast and in a tone which shifts from disapproving to pastoral, that several competing and culturally seductive ways are unacceptable.

Consider another statement by Merton, by way of comparison, delivered in 1965 during a weekly conference (he had by his time turned over his work in the novitiate) called "Freedom and Spontaneity." There is a tone of familiarity, and a sense of conversation based on shared experience:

There is an inordinate worry about whether you're happy or not happy in this present day and age, and in this country, and in this culture, because in this culture we're surrounded by happiness images. . . . All you've gotta do is open any magazine, and you find pictures of all these people . . . who are ecstatically happy because they've bought something. . . . The point is underlying this, what is the concept of man? What is the concept of happiness?

See, our idea of our self, of the kind of person we want to be, which everybody has—we're all stuck with a pretty big project of who we are, of who we gotta be, who we wanna be . . . must be like flying an airplane . . . we've got this huge psychological dashboard of all the things that we have to watch . . . so we're on our beam and we're getting where we want to get . . . maybe the best

14. Thomas Merton, "An Introduction to the Vows," *The Collected Essays of Thomas Merton* (Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville).

thing is to forget all that, maybe that's not important at all—I mean a hundred years from now where's that all gonna be? That's all gonna disappear . . . and yet here we are living our life determined by these ideas and images which surround this self which just isn't gonna be there anymore after awhile . . . so all this is an obstacle; all this stops us from being really free. . . .<sup>15</sup>

An interesting aspect of Merton's introduction to the monastic vows is the cultural context he provides for his spiritual discussion. In this case, Merton notes the prevailing cultural predilection for viewing human identity in terms of tasks, productivity, or organizational efficiency. Viewed in the light of Merton's own increasingly vocalized perceptions of the needs and faults of Western culture in the early sixties, this way of introducing the vows might not be surprising. Certainly it reflects the influence of his reading in contemporary social and cultural studies—for example, W. H. Whyte's *Organization Man*—that is, his own effort to understand the evolving "modern" culture and to determine his own response to it as a monk and contemplative.

Yet there is a greater significance to the fact that Merton begins a course on the traditional monastic vows with a cultural analysis than that it parallels his own widening vision of society and his own particular relation to it. Merton's approach to introducing the vows is another example of his deliberate refashioning and expansion of the monastic curriculum over time and a sign of his own evolution as a monastic educator. It reflects in particular Merton's growing sense that his students' access to spiritual questions might be broadened if they were placed in a cultural context or perspective, if their cultural experience, more broadly, their time and place in history, were somehow taken into account.

The episode from Merton's taped conference on "Freedom and Spontaneity" is similarly revealing vis-à-vis his educational concerns. It represents Merton's effort to address, in the folksy and informal way that often characterizes his conferences, the entanglement of contemporary cultural messages and psychological pressures which accompanies the search for authentic identity in God. In both examples Merton is suggesting that one helpful way to begin the process of discovering who one is may be to learn to recognize first of all those cul-

15. Thomas Merton, "Freedom and Spontaneity," Conference Tape #230B, December 19, 1965 (Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville).

tural definitions which one has already absorbed, and which already bear on one's sense of self. There are other, complementary ways in which Merton approaches the topic of authentic identity in his teaching, for example, in discussing the "higher self" and the "lower self" in St. Paul (1963) and through literature, the most outstanding example of which would have to be his explication of Faulkner's "The Bear" (1967). As significant as these biblical and literary approaches are, it is his developing concern for social and cultural context, and particularly for the monk's relation to society, which is perhaps most influential in shaping Merton's distinctive contribution to a monastic and contemplative education and pedagogy.

There is much to admire in Merton's ability to elevate cultural critique to an effective pedagogical strategy meant to expose cultural messages that block the road to a deep and whole sense of self. It would be wrong to conclude, however, that Merton takes the culture of his students into account *only* in order to set them over and against it. As much as it might be at a certain stage necessary in their formation as whole persons, particularly in laying the groundwork for developing a sense of freedom beyond that which is culturally ordained, to provide a critical perspective on cultural assumptions about what it means to be a person and to live, Merton's overall understanding of culture in relation to education is much broader and more nuanced.

Merton develops what might be called an educational anthropology, as well as a cultural psychology, to guide his teaching. This development corresponds to some extent to changes in Merton's own sense of relationship to the world. In very general terms, his educational vision broadens from a focus on explicating the foundational subjects in the monastic curriculum, to responding to the more complex educational dilemmas of how to take psychology and culture and the "world" into account in providing for the formation of a whole personal identity. By tracing this development through Merton's final years as a teacher, we can gain insight into his educational efforts and suggest their significance beyond the monastic setting.

### **Merton's Last Years as a Teacher: Liberating Self and World**

Merton seems to account increasingly for the impact of cultural versions of the self (such as the modern tendency to regard persons

in terms of tasks and things and organizational results) on the capacity for realizing oneself as a whole person in his teaching. This is especially evident when he broaches directly the topic of the true self and the experience of being. In a conference on St. Basil and the natural experience of God given in 1963, for instance, he points out that to attain a simple sense of one's own being, one needs the "very deep interiority which is natural to [humanity]" and which is reflected in "primitive culture." He notes, however, the "different modes we have for keeping people outside themselves all the time—the greatest problem, psychologically speaking, of our society—people are in every way prevented from getting inside, so that actually they become afraid of getting inside [which is] dangerous because you put [people] in a state of doubt regarding what is most fundamental and most necessary for [them]."16

Merton also confronts the false consciousness of self fostered in modern western society indirectly in the way he draws on monastic and cultural spiritual traditions in his teaching. He communicates such tradition as a matter of lived and living experience of the deepest realities of existence, as experience which can help open one to some understanding and experience of one's whole and authentic self. As he explains in introducing St. Bernard to his fellow monks, "What I can do and what I really intend to do, is not to talk about St. Bernard exclusively but to talk about *us*."17 The idea in studying Bernard's work is to apprehend the "resonances" of experience present there, and to transpose this experience "into our time and our way of looking at things." To instead give a review of Bernard's work would be "like school." As I have suggested elsewhere, Merton seeks to go beyond knowing *about* Bernard or what he says—beyond conceptual knowledge and beyond language—to evoke something more akin to living wisdom, or a sapiential experience, literally a "taste" of some existential truth.18 He therefore asks the monks to consider not the words themselves but their "implications" and to listen for "echoes" of real in-

16. Thomas Merton, "Natural Experience of God—St. Basil," Conference Tape #119, August 25, 1963 (Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville).

17. Thomas Merton, "Love Casts Out Fear," Conference Tape (Kansas City: Credence Cassettes, 1988).

18. Thomas Del Prete, "Education in Light of the Great Joy: On Advent and Thomas Merton as Teacher," *Grail: An Ecumenical Journal* 10 (December 1994).

terior experience. There is then a kind of curriculum of "experience" at work in this instance of Merton's teaching and a pedagogical effort to introduce the monks to a contemplative way of learning, one attentive and attuned to a deep existential reality; ultimately the "echoes" are intimations of the presence of God at the heart of our own being.

Teaching for Merton clearly becomes much more than an intellectual act and more than a matter of theological or conceptual discourse. Although these discursive ways of understanding might be important for him, his interest in teaching is often to foster a more intuitive way of knowing, and a way of communicating which creates an openness to deep human experience beyond what may be culturally dictated, to something more universal on an existential plane. As he wrote, a monastic education "must seek to develop the special human capacities which will enable [the monk] to experience the deepest values of the contemplative life. These values . . . imply a certain aesthetic and intuitive awareness, a 'taste' and connaturality or a capacity to savor (in an experience that cannot easily be formulated) the deepest truths of the Christian life."<sup>19</sup>

When Merton introduces topics such as Bantu philosophy in conferences, he is in part recognizing the limitations of our own culturally ingrained ways of knowing and thinking vis-à-vis attaining to a deep understanding of life. "I am very interested in this whole question of primitive kinds of philosophy, and primitive outlook on life and being . . . it's closer to the Bible, for example, than some of the stuff that we have with our post-Cartesian viewpoint," he explains in opening his conference on Bantu philosophy.<sup>20</sup> He goes on to suggest that whereas we are accustomed to standing back and analyzing, judging, and categorizing from a distance, the Bantu apprehension of reality is more direct, immediate, and concrete. According to Merton, we may have lost "this kind of direct intuition" or "intuitive knowledge," and we need it as a basis for the contemplative life because "the contemplative life is a life of intuitive contact with reality."<sup>21</sup> Merton thus appropriates the experience of a "primitive" non-Western culture as a way both to understand the constraints of contemporary Western

19. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, editorial note by Naomi Burton (New York: Doubleday, 1971) 201.

20. Thomas Merton, "Bantu Philosophy," Conference Tape #220, July 11, 1965 (Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville).

21. *Ibid.*

culture and to, in some sense, transcend them as part of the process of developing a more contemplative orientation to reality.

Merton draws on many other cultural sources in his effort to open the monks to new levels of cultural understanding and awareness of who we are as whole persons. He explains Greek tragedy, for example, as a "meditation on the meaning of life" and "a celebration of what they believe to be the truth about life."<sup>22</sup> As he discusses Sophocles' play *Antigone*, he invites the monks to "meditate on it a bit so that you see what the real meaning is that the Greeks have got out of this, to see in other words how this meditation spells out the theme that wisdom comes from something." The point in studying Greek tragedy is "the wholeness of the development of man—behind this whole idea of Greek tragedy is this idea of the wholeness of man, and what is a whole. . . ." <sup>23</sup> In another extraordinary conference ("It's going to be a wild conference this morning," he begins), Merton draws parallels among ancient Greek, Confucian, and Christian understandings of human wholeness, emphasizing that wholeness for a Christian is ultimately found in Christ.<sup>24</sup> When the Chinese scholar John Wu wrote to Merton that he was "bewitched" by his rendering of the Taoist poems of Chuang Tzu, he was acknowledging Merton's gift of being able to elicit the deepest of human experience across boundaries of time and culture. This is reflected in his teaching.

The Merton of the Cold War Letters is not readily apparent in the monastic classroom of the early 1960s, at least as judged by the topics addressed in the taped lectures. Except for a conference on "Nuclear Testing" recorded in May 1962, virtually all of the topics during this period are what we would expect—the monastic vows, the monastic fathers, Cistercian history, and so on. We might attribute this to the fact that Merton, compelled as he was to speak out for the truth, was somewhat anxious about the implications of his doing so and unprepared to embrace educationally what was so easily perceived as a kind of illicit monastic activism. Merton's growing social awareness and social voice have a significant educational counterpart only after he changes his view of the monk's relationship to the world and re-

22. Thomas Merton, "Community and Transformation," Conference Tape (Kansas City: Credence Cassettes). First recorded in the summer 1965.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Thomas Merton, "Chinese Thought," Conference Tape #216, June 6, 1965 (Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville).

casts the purpose of monastic education in a more prophetic mold. When Merton does begin to address social issues in his conferences, his purposes are not to offer a critique *per se*, but to develop awareness and clear understanding, and to provide an informed basis for an authentic human dialogue in which a monk might engage, thus an opportunity to respond to real needs in love.

In the Fall of 1964, Merton was asked to prepare notes for a meeting of abbots held at Gethsemani that might shed light on vocational issues among postulants. Though he fretted about the task, was tired out by the day-long sessions and was dubious about the results of his effort, the meeting provided the impetus for consolidating his thought on monastic education in relation to the modern world. His resulting articles, "Vocation and Modern Thought" and "The Identity Crisis," mark a significant turning point in his educational philosophy and practice. Together with his later piece, "Renewal in Monastic Education," they lay out the groundwork for an education which embraces culture and the world and which aims to build the monk's capacity for communicating and responding to the world from the perspective of contemplative wisdom.<sup>25</sup> These articles help bring to fruition Merton's own learning in a variety of areas and to some extent his struggle to reconcile his own cultural criticism with his contemplative awareness of deep connectedness to the world.

Beginning in 1964 the monastic curriculum in Merton's hands undergoes dramatic change. It was actually in August of that year, just prior to the abbots' meeting, that Merton, in his words, "slip[s] in" the first of several conferences on art, to be followed by a much longer series on poetry and different poets and some on fiction. Merton characteristically links discussion to the themes of being and developing ontological awareness. "The Christian life has to have beauty in it" and "beauty is being" he declares in his first session on art.<sup>26</sup> Understanding poetry becomes a way of understanding a particular expression of spiritual and interior experience in one instance, and, in another, a way of coming into contact with "a statement of universal truth, of universal experience . . . what people are . . . reaching for."<sup>27</sup> Dis-

cussing different dimensions of Edmund Waller's seventeenth-century poem, "Go, Lovely Rose," Merton moves from the rhythm, and the silences that it creates ("Good poetry is 50 percent silence"), to the poem's structure.<sup>28</sup> He suggests that the fourfold structure—four stanzas each "unified by the fact that he's got a verb addressed to the rose"—forms an archetypal mandala. It is in this archetypal structure that the poem "has its effect." "Although it's saying a silly, simple, conventional message . . . actually what it is doing by its structure, and by its consistency . . . [is] getting down into this basic archetypal form which is at the heart of all life and all experience . . . it opens up this kind of inner dimension." In conferences such as these, Merton, similarly, tries to create openness to a deep inner dimension of experience. In so doing, he fulfills his own prescription for a humanities education which is sapientially oriented, that is, oriented to wisdom and developing the interior capacity for wisdom.<sup>29</sup>

Between the Fall of 1964 and the Fall of 1968, before his departure to Asia, Merton's conference topics diversify to include not only the humanities, but modern thought (for example, Marx), Greek tragedy, and other cultural and religious traditions. In adding these topics to the monastic curriculum, Merton is trying to help the monks build a genuine knowledge of the world and of *themselves* as one prerequisite for entering fruitfully into dialogue with it and for developing a capacity for responding to it. As he suggested to the abbots in 1964, it was of crucial importance not to view modern thought as an antagonist to spiritual life but to recognize in it a source for understanding the experience, the needs, and the consciousness of those entering the monastery. It was on this basis that one could learn to communicate better, create an existentially meaningful communication, and thus respond educationally to the monk's own consciousness, to his own time. It is certainly no accident that words such as alienation, identity, and authenticity, common to different strands of modern thinking, become part of Merton's own educational lexicon. This way of accounting for

"T.S. Eliot," Conference Tape #210, May 6, 1965 (Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville).

28. Thomas Merton, "Lyric Poetry," Conference Tape (Kansas City: Credece Cassettes). First recorded on January 7, 1965.

29. Thomas Merton, "The Need for a New Education," *Contemplation in a World of Action*, editorial note by Naomi Burton (New York: Doubleday, 1971) 201–202.

25. These articles are all included in *Contemplation in a World of Action*.

26. Thomas Merton, "Beauty and Art," Conference Tape #175B, August 12, 1964 (Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville).

27. Thomas Merton, "Poetry," Conference Tape #199, January 29, 1965, and



culture in the formation of personal identity again suggests an anthropology or "cultural psychology" of education at work in Merton's teaching.

By 1966 Merton was circulating in the novitiate a new reading list "on the modern world" to accompany the traditional spiritual one. The list included titles such as *Organization Man*, Riesman's *Lonely Crowd*, Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society*, and Marcel's *Man Against Mass Society*, all grouped in categories such as "Life and Problems in the World," "Civil Rights," "Communism," "Art and Literature," and "Politics." Merton notes that "These books may help some monks to evaluate the situation in the world today, and to make accurate judgements about the monk's place in the world."<sup>30</sup>

### Summary

To summarize, Merton's response to the dilemma of how to support the formation of whole personal identity over time takes both individual psychology and the psychological impact of culture into account. His educational response to the question of whether and how to view culture in the formation of personal identity is in part to confront false cultural versions of the self, in part to embrace culture and to promote cultural awareness and understanding, and in part to open up a realm of interior experience not bounded by culture and time. This "anthropology" of education serves several educational purposes: to enable the monks to better understand themselves as part of the process of attaining to a deeper, free, and authentic self, to develop a basis for meaningful communication on matters of existential import, and, finally, to establish "a genuine knowledge of the world" so that they might respond to it prophetically and transculturally in a spirit of Christian freedom, simplicity, and love. Merton's teaching becomes as a result more diversified and multidimensional. He tries a variety of ways to foster ontological awareness. He taps the essential biblical and spiritual sources and "transposes" the experience they represent, making it a living and actualizing experience. He likewise taps the wisdom of artistic and literary work, and other religious traditions. He

30. Thomas Merton, "Readings on the Modern World," 1966, *The Collected Essays of Thomas Merton* (Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville).

creatively uses the past and other cultural traditions—for example, ancient Greek culture and Bantu philosophy—to build perspective on possibilities for human wholeness in the present.

In his final talk in Bangkok Merton remarked, "The monk belongs to the world, but the world belongs to him insofar as he has dedicated himself totally to liberation from it in order to liberate it."<sup>31</sup> The educational process in support of liberation which Merton develops might be described as a dialectic—a dialectic between deepening understanding of culture and the world, on the one hand, and deepening awareness of being, on the other—which builds towards authentic freedom in God. This freedom then becomes a gift in love to support a dialectic of liberation in the world. Merton puts it this way:

The task of the solitary person . . . is to realize within . . . , in a very special way, a universal consciousness and to contribute this, to feed this back insofar as he can, into the communal consciousness which is necessarily more involved in localized consciousness, and in such a way that there will be a kind of dialectical development towards a more universal consciousness.<sup>32</sup>

Seen in light of Merton's view of education and of teaching, the first obligation of the cultural critic is not to criticize but to understand who she or he is and to understand her or his world. Having understood, the true vocation is then to respond in loving wisdom, and in responding, to participate in the creative work of transforming culture and the world which is part and parcel of the Christian "summons to permanent newness of life" in the Spirit.<sup>33</sup>

31. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, eds. Naomi Burton Stone, Br. Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O., and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 341.

32. Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 69.

33. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, 126.