

Merton and the American Romantics

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Early in 1976 I received a letter from Merton's friend and fellow poet, Robert Lax, in which Lax recalled some of the poets of whose work Merton was especially fond (see appendix to this article). What caught my interest was Merton's preference for poets like Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane, both of whom were twentieth-century poets writing, thematically at least, in the tradition of the American romantics of the nineteenth century. Other American Romantic poets were also to be the subject of Merton's admiration from time to time, as was William Everson (Brother Antoninus), whose writing Merton recommended to Czeslaw Milosz.¹ Similarly, in a letter to William Carlos Williams in 1961, Merton spoke warmly about the poetry of Allen Ginsberg, particularly about *Kaddish*, which Merton characterized as "great and living poetry and certainly religious in its concerns."² This linking of poetry and religion recalls Merton's remark in *The Seven Storey Mountain* that his reading of the great English romantic poet Blake had led him into the Catholic Church.³ The ease with which Merton drew alternately on romantic and religious sources can be seen in an early reference in *The Sign of Jonas* in which he likened the writings of St. John of the Cross and of Thoreau in helping him to see the importance of separating "reality from illusion."⁴

While critics like Michael Mott and Michael Higgins have discussed Blake's role in Merton's fundamental outlook as a writer, and

1. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993) 70.

2. *Ibid.*, 290.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 88.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 317.

while Dennis McNerny has initiated the inquiry into Merton's debt to the American romantics,⁵ much has yet to be added to both sorts of analyses. In the 1993 collection of letters by Merton to other writers edited by Christine Bochen, for example, Merton indicates the depth of the influence of the great American romantics of the nineteenth century upon him. Writing to Henry Miller in 1962 he declared that Thoreau was "one of the only reasons" why he became an American citizen, and he was pleased that Miller had compared him to American transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau, adding that he would try to be worthy of the comparison.⁶ Although in the same letter Merton conceded that he was not nearly as familiar with Emerson as he was with Thoreau, he indicated that he liked what he had read by Emerson.

Merton's debt to Thoreau is inestimable—not only in terms of Thoreau's thought but even stylistically as Michael Mott has suggested.⁷ The connection between Merton and Thoreau is all the more convincing when one recalls that both writers sought a balance between the active and contemplative, and specifically between social protest and spiritual and aesthetic contemplation. Not only did Merton characterize Thoreau's gift to America as "incomparable" in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*,⁸ but the whole course of his life would in significant respects parallel that of Thoreau, especially when he moved into a woodland hermitage in the 1960s. Indeed, he confided wryly in 1967 in the evocative essay "Day of a Stranger" that he had been accused of "living in the woods like Thoreau instead of living in the desert like St. John the Baptist,"⁹ an accusation he did not deny. What he did instead was to redefine the spiritual life so that it resembled a paradigm that Emerson and Thoreau might well have embraced: "Up here in the woods is seen the New Testament: that is to say, the wind comes through the trees and you breathe it."¹⁰ In this

5. See Dennis McNerny, "Thomas Merton and the Tradition of American Critical Romanticism," *The Message of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1981) 166–91.

6. Merton, *Courage for Truth*, 277.

7. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1984) 268.

8. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966) 227.

9. Thomas Merton, "Day of a Stranger," *Hudson Review* 20:2 (summer 1967) 211–8.

10. *Ibid.*, 214.

passage Merton rejects the association of spirituality with guilt, and instead bends his thoughts on the subject in the direction of simplicity and cosmic unity, both of which were emphasized by Emerson and Thoreau. Merton's continuous urging of the need to simplify recalls similar sage advice by Thoreau throughout *Walden*. In *Raids on the Unspeakable* Merton wrote that "only he who has the simplest and most natural needs can be considered to be without needs, since the only needs he has are real ones."¹¹ In *The Sign of Jonas* Merton underlined the passage in *Walden* in which Thoreau recalled that he had gone to live in the woods in order to confront the "essential facts of life."¹²

The greatest threat to cosmic unity perceived by Emerson, Thoreau, and Merton was the intellect in its rational operations. In *Walden* Thoreau had described the rational intellect as a cleaver, a coarse and intrusive instrument that "discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things."¹³ Merton's romanticism can be seen in his evolving resistance to a predominantly rational approach to religion, which he increasingly came to think of in an intuitive and mystical rather than in a systematic and theological manner. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, for example, Merton confided that at moments he experienced a "flash of Zen" in the "midst of the Church," but that such experiences were often foreshortened by "reasoning too much about everything."¹⁴

From Merton's mystical and romantic perspective all that existed was part of the dance of life, as he visualized it, echoing Yeats, in the incandescent ending of *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Similarly, in a letter to Marco Pallis in 1965 Merton argued that the division between the natural and supernatural in religion was "misleading and unsatisfactory."¹⁵ The letter signaled a turnaround for Merton from an earlier letter to Aldous Huxley in 1958 in which he contended that Huxley ought to have distinguished "experience which is essentially *aesthetic*

11. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 23.

12. Merton, *Sign of Jonas*, 316.

13. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: Norton, 1966) 66.

14. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 136.

15. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985) 470.

and natural from that which was *mystical and supernatural*."¹⁶ While Merton's initial romanticism, which predated his entry into the monastery, was somewhat crimped during the 1940s and early 1950s by his desire to center himself on the Church, as he grew older his romanticism reasserted itself, especially in the post-Vatican II liberalism of the 1960s.

Merton's wariness about the limitations of rationalism are ubiquitous in his writings, but he is most convincing when he places rationalism within the fertile context of the sort of unified perception sought by all romantic writers. An instance is the poem "O Sweet Irrational Worship," in *Emblems of a Season of Fury*:

By ceasing to question the sun,
I have become light. . . .
I am earth, earth
All these lighted things
Grow from my heart.¹⁷

Merton's identification with the natural elements and his submerging of his intellect recall Emerson's celebrated essay on "Nature" in which the writer describes himself as a "transparent eyeball" in which the "currents of the Universal Being" circulated through him and in which he felt "part or particle of God."¹⁸ Similarly, Thoreau in an equally famous passage describes his head in an ecstatic moment as an "organ for burrowing" through which he would "mine" his way through the low hills around him.¹⁹ Like the monistic Emerson and Thoreau, Merton strove ceaselessly for unity both in perception and feeling, bristling at the apparently artificial borders of systematic thought—as when he noted in a letter to Czeslaw Milosz that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul was not "fully and really Christian" since it was the "whole person" who was immortal.²⁰

As with American romantic writers of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Merton proclaimed the priestly role of the poet and of the creative artist, writing to the Latin-American poet Nicanor

16. *Ibid.*, 437.

17. Thomas Merton, "O Sweet Irrational Worship," *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 344.

18. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971) 1:10.

19. Thoreau, *Walden*, 66.

20. Merton, *Courage for Truth*, 76.

Parra in 1965, for example, that contemporary artists tended to fulfill many of the functions that were once the "monopoly of monks."²¹ Similarly, in the essay "Answers on Art and Freedom" in *Raids on the Unspeakable* Merton argued that the modern artist had inherited the combined functions of "hermit, pilgrim, prophet, priest, shaman, sorcerer, soothsayer, alchemist and bonze."²² Here, one hears echoes of Whitman's proclamation in *Democratic Vistas* that the "priest departs, the divine literatus comes,"²³ as well as of Wallace Stevens' well-known pronouncement that the poet was the "priest of the invisible," the "intermediary between people and the world in which they live."²⁴ This belief about the artist has become so deeply ingrained in contemporary aesthetics that many might not perceive its roots in American romanticism. One cannot imagine eighteenth-century writers like Swift, Pope, or the American poet, Philip Freneau, however, affirming such an idea.

As with other romantic writers Merton embraced the primitivism of romantic thought, which was characteristically linked to nature and to the corollary that society, and cities in particular, were corruptions of the primal beauty of the world.²⁵ Romantic primitivism can also be observed, as it can in Whitman, in Merton's celebration of the child, the human embodiment of primitivism. The most famous example of this symbolism of the child in Whitman is in the long poem "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." While Merton's use of the child as a symbol of romantic primitivism can no doubt be traced back to Blake, it is likely that he was also familiar with Whitman's use of this motif. There is an admiring reference to Whitman, for example, in *The Geography of Lograire*,²⁶ and in introducing the poetry of Ruben Dario, Merton noted the mood of "fraternal love" in Whitman's poetry.²⁷ In an essay on the American poet Louis Zukofsky, Merton describes

21. *Ibid.*, 212.

22. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 173.

23. Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, *The Portable Walt Whitman*, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York: Viking, 1973) 321.

24. Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, rev. ed. (New York: Knopf, 1989) 195, 189.

25. C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 6th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992) 374.

26. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire*, in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, 582.

27. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1981) 306.

the speech of the child as "paradise speech."²⁸ This romantic motif was christianized when Merton, in speaking of Karl Barth, declared that though Barth had matured into a great Protestant theologian, Christ had remained a "child" in him.²⁹

The most memorable poem in *Emblems for a Season of Fury* is "Grace's House," which focuses on the sublimity and primacy of the child's vision. The occasion for the poem was Merton's receiving a child's drawing of her house. Her name, Grace, along with the pristine sketch, had a suggestive effect on Merton's imagination:

Where all the grass lives
And all the animals are aware!
The huge sun, bigger than the house
Stands and streams with life in the east
While in the west a thunder cloud
Moves away forever.³⁰

"Alas," the speaker notes, looking at the drawing, there was "no road to Grace's house."³¹ Merton's romantic primitivism can be seen in his desire to recover, here on earth, the consciousness of the unity that had been "shattered by the 'knowledge of good and evil,'" as he put it in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*.³² Reconciling his adherence to both romanticism and Catholicism, Merton declared in the preface to an Argentinean edition of his writings that his faith dated from the "beginning of the world," when the first human being emerged in the "image of Christ."³³

In common with the American romantics of the nineteenth century, Merton affirmed the supremacy of the imagination over reason in generating an experience of transcendental awareness. In *Bread in the Wilderness* he identified the imagination with an ability to perceive that which is spiritual.³⁴ Furthermore, in an essay entitled "Poetry and

28. *Ibid.*, 130.

29. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 4.

30. Thomas Merton, "Grace's House," *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, 331.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 117.

33. Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader*, ed. Robert Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 41.

34. Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953) 30.

Contemplation: A Reappraisal," he associated the recovery of paradise and a renewed contact with God with the exercise of human creativity.³⁵ In writing about the poetry of Zukofsky, Merton noted that all "valid" poetry, that which generated "imaginative life," was a kind of "recovery of paradise."³⁶ Similarly, in discussing the writings of Boris Pasternak, and in particular his character, Zhivago, Merton identified the artist, specifically, as one who can evoke the primal experience of paradise: "It is as artist, symbolist, and prophet that Zhivago stands most radically in opposition to Soviet society. He himself is a man of Eden, of Paradise. He is Adam, and therefore also, in some sense, Christ."³⁷ All of the elements of Merton's hybrid Christian romanticism are present in this passage, notably the romantic insistence on the spiritual transcendence offered by the imagination and the heightened value of human nature made possible by the death and resurrection of Christ.

For Merton, as for the American romantics, no human eloquence, particularly of a rational kind, could rival the eloquence of nature itself. In "Rain and the Rhinoceros," one of Merton's most memorable essays, the sound of the rain is described as "wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech," and is contrasted with the "noises of cities, of people," of the "greed of machinery that does not sleep."³⁸ In a sense not only is society rejected here, but the language used by society as well. For this reason the poet represents an alternative to the debased language of the group, an attempt to begin over again, to seek the voice of the primal, that which still bears the imprint of the divine hand.

Although Merton argued in his M.A. thesis on Blake that Blake, unlike Wordsworth, did not idolize nature,³⁹ there is a tendency in Merton's writings to perceive the natural order as morally superior to the social order, and in this respect Merton is closer to Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman than he is to Blake. When Czeslaw Milosz chided Merton for his uncritical approval of nature in a letter written in 1960, Merton was forced to admit that "nature and I are very good friends, and console one another for the infamy of the human race and

35. Merton, *The Literary Essays*, 345.

36. *Ibid.*, 128.

37. *Ibid.*, 47.

38. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 10.

39. Merton, *The Literary Essays*, 426.

its civilization."⁴⁰ Merton was not altogether consistent in his behavior toward nature, though. One remembers that in the evocative, impressionistic natural setting of "Day of a Stranger" he recounts having killed a copperhead snake, presumably as luminous an example of natural order as any other.

More than Emerson and Whitman, Thoreau had dwelt on the predatory aspects of nature. The most obvious example is the grisly battle of the ants scene in *Walden*.⁴¹ In a dramatic scene in *The Sign of Jonas* Merton focused directly on these harsher aspects of nature. Having settled down after being frightened by an eagle, a flock of starlings is described moving about on the ground, singing. Suddenly, a hawk swoops down, flying "straight into the middle of the starlings" just as they were getting off the ground. Rising into the air, Merton writes, there was a slight scuffle on the ground as the hawk got his "talons into the one bird he had nailed."⁴² Merton ponders the scene: "It was a terrible and yet beautiful thing, that lightning flight, straight as an arrow, that killed the slowest starling."⁴³ Merton does not overlook the violence of the scene, but shows the hawk in the field "like a king," taking his time in eating: "I tried to pray, afterward," Merton confides. "But the hawk was eating the bird." It is clear that Merton was not so much repelled as awed, feeling finally that the hawk should be studied by "saints and contemplatives; because he knows his business."⁴⁴ Although the episode might have spurred troubled thoughts about the creator of a Darwinian universe, there is no sign of such reflections. Merton accepts the mystery of nature, is as stirred by its beauty as by its power, and piously leaves the answer of its inner riddle to God. Furthermore, though attracted to nature, he portrays nature as ultimately doomed. Consequently, the resourceful pilgrim will want to pass through nature, to some other place, so as to look not only at nature but through it. Otherwise, Merton's symbolic episode implies, one will suffer the fate of the starlings.

Characteristically in Merton's writings, nature serves as an agent of transcendental experience, as can be observed in a scene in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* in which he found himself absorbed by a bowl of flowers in a monastery chapel:

40. Merton, *Courage for Truth*, 65.

41. Thoreau, *Walden*, 152-4.

42. Merton, *Sign of Jonas*, 274.

43. *Ibid.*, 275.

44. *Ibid.*

Beauty of sunlight falling on a tall vase of red and white carnations and green leaves on the altar of the novitiate chapel. The light and dark. The darkness of the fresh, crinkled flower: light, warm and red, all around the darkness. The flower is the same color as blood, but it is in no sense whatever "as red as blood." Not at all! It is as red as a carnation. Only that.

This flower, this light, this moment, this silence: Dominus est. Eternity. He passes. He remains. We pass. In and out. He passes. We remain. We are nothing. We are everything. He is in us. He is gone from us. He is not here. We are here in Him.⁴⁵

Resisting the impulse to turn the flowers into symbol, Merton holds fast to them as reservoirs of the beauty of creation, and in so doing comes fortuitously into contact with their creator and equally fortuitously experiences a temporary release from time. Here, though, the moment of transcendence is linked with an orthodox Catholic theology instead of the pantheism that permeated the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman.

Nature placed Merton in touch with the creative hand of God. He wrote in his beautiful essay "Hagia Sophia" that there is in all things

inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me.⁴⁶

As with the American transcendentalists of the nineteenth century Merton's thought proceeds by means of a number of intuitive equations. This is because the transcendentalists derived their thinking in part from Kant, who posited the legitimacy of certain kinds of a priori perceptions.⁴⁷ Thus, in Merton's writings the city and society, for example, are perceived as an estranged wildness that contrasts with the sacred wildness of creation. The contrast can be easily seen in the

45. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 131.

46. Thomas Merton, "Hagia Sophia," *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, 363.

47. James D. Hart, *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1983) 770.

poem "The City After Noon," from that splendid volume of poems *The Tears of the Blind Lions*:

What if the wild confinement were empty
And the lunatic pigeons were once again sane! . . .

What if the wild contentment were full
And there were nothing left in the world
But fields, water and sun
And space went on forever to eternity, without a rim?

What if the wild confinement were empty
And the sheriffs were free to go home!⁴⁸

Here, Merton pictures a tortured and perverse wildness generated by society, a bleak and unnecessary substitution for the natural wildness that would free the spirit.

Thus, Eden is sometimes portrayed by Merton not as a garden but as a naturally wild place, as in the poem "Dry Places" from *The Tears of the Blind Lions*:

For we cannot forget the legend of the world's childhood
Or the track to the dogwood valley
And Adam our Father's old grass farm
Wherein they gave the animals names
And knew Christ was promised first without scars
When all God's larks called to Him
In this wild orchard.⁴⁹

While there is a certain tension in the poem between the idea of Eden as a "farm" and a "wild orchard," it is clear that the latter represents the closest proximity to God. Furthermore, one cannot help but notice the depth of Merton's optimism, again more typical of the American romantics than of Blake, in which the desolation of the fall is instantly extinguished by the prediction of the coming of Christ.

Therefore, the way forward, spiritually, in Merton, is also the way back, toward the source, as the twentieth-century American romantic poet Robert Frost put it. Nature, the backward leaning soul,

48. Thomas Merton, "The City after Noon," *The Tears of the Blind Lions*, in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, 213-4.

49. Thomas Merton, "Dry Places," *The Tears of the Blind Lions*, in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, 217.

and God are pitted against a futuristically oriented society and technology, and typically (in a romantic writer) the soul peeks out at night when it is not overwhelmed by the active day, which eclipses the imagination—the soul's route of survival. The poem "Nocturne" in *The Strange Islands* is illustrative. In that poem, we are told: "Night has a sea which quenches the machine" and which tracks "all countries where the soul has gone." In the darkness the simplified light of the moon conveys a wisdom that "sails from God."⁵⁰ The night and moon symbols recall Whitman's use of such imagery in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," as well as Thoreau's vision of eternity in *Walden* as a night sky that is "pebbly with stars."⁵¹

Merton's ecstatic consciousness of the immanence of the divine was not, strictly speaking, pantheistic since he attributed his own conversion to Catholicism to the realization of the presence of God as a distinct being in "this present life, in the world and in myself," as he put it, adding that his task as a Christian was to live in "full and vital awareness of this ground of my being and of the world's being."⁵² At the same time, reflecting the hybrid nature of his thought as Christian and romantic, Merton affirmed his being a "part of nature," though a "special" part, that which is "conscious of God."⁵³ This ontological view was continuous with, though not identical with, Merton's more theologically conventional observation that for those who believe in the incarnation there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, "in mystery, the presence of Christ."⁵⁴ Indeed, typically in Merton's writings, particularly in the first half of his career, this view of the role of Christ, a perfectly orthodox one, was grafted almost invisibly onto the residual romanticism that he took with him into the monastery.

Merton's interest in the primal matter of creation attracted him to the unconscious, the spontaneous, and the instinctive. Thoreau showed a similar interest in submerging his intellect and imagining his head as the largely physical and instinctive head of a burrowing animal.⁵⁵ Guided by his religious training, however, Merton did not look

50. *Ibid.*, 230.

51. Thoreau, *Walden*, 66.

52. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 292–3.

53. *Ibid.*, 268.

54. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 296.

55. Thoreau, *Walden*, 66.

uncritically at the unconscious, but went so far as to urge the eradication of the "unconscious roots of sin" by exposing the darker side of the unconscious.⁵⁶ Similarly, in "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants," included in *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, Merton described his age as one in which political leaders and technocrats had acted out "bad dreams" in which external form was given to the "phantasms of man's unconscious."⁵⁷ Merton exhorted his readers to take command of the "mechanisms of natural instinct" instead of being swept away "blindly" by these subconscious forces.⁵⁸ Merton's wariness concerning the unconscious stemmed from what he perceived as threats to the freedom and sovereignty of human beings. Rather than confront the apparent contradiction between examples of his romantically optimistic and more pessimistic, theological readings of nature, Merton held to the center, upholding the need for human beings to celebrate the beauty and transcendental power of the unconscious while cautioning against the dangers of its more threatening undertow.

What distinguished nineteenth-century American romanticism from English romanticism was its strong social dimension. Members of the Transcendental Club, as is well known, launched the social experiment of Brook Farm, an experiment that was dramatized in Hawthorne's novel *The Blithedale Romance*. Moreover, the American and romantic belief in the primacy of the individual gave rise in Thoreau's case to civil disobedience. "The only obligation which I have a right to assume," Thoreau wrote, "is to do at any time what I think right," adding that any person more "right than his neighbors" constituted a "majority of one."⁵⁹ Like Thoreau, Orestes Brownson, and other American transcendentalists of the 1840s, Merton's romanticism took on not only a contemplative but also a social form.

Rooted in the consciousness of the supremacy of the individual soul, romantic writers tend to be anarchists politically. The reason is that romanticism affirmed the privileged status of individual consciousness over collective authority. At one point Thoreau scornfully described the state as "half-witted," afraid to confront a "man's sense,

56. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 98.

57. Thomas Merton, "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants," *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, 374.

58. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 107.

59. Thoreau, *Walden*, 225, 232.

intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses."⁶⁰ Going even further, he contended that there would never be a "free and enlightened State" until the state came to recognize the individual as a "higher and independent power, from which its own power and authority are derived."⁶¹ Moreover, there was a strong agrarian strain in the American transcendentalists, which also forms part of Merton's thought. There were also specifically Catholic influences on the development of Merton's social ideas. In addition, for example, to the influence of Dorothy Day and Catherine Doherty upon Merton, in the early 1960s Daniel Berrigan played an important role in the development of Merton's social thought. This influence was consistent with that of the American transcendentalists in some important respects. Day and Berrigan supported civil disobedience while Day and Doherty were agrarians.

Rather like Thoreau, Merton saw the artist politically as a necessary anarchist. In "Answers on Art and Freedom" Merton maintained that society ironically benefits when the artist "liberates himself from its coercive or seductive pressures," adding that the contemporary artist would likely only "find himself" if he were a "non-conformist and a rebel."⁶² Moreover, rather like Thoreau, in "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants" Merton measured the weight of the individual against the bureaucratic and technocratic state and found the state to be of thinner substance. The size of the state and corporate machinery, Merton argued, does not mean that it possesses "metaphysical solidity."⁶³ As a solitary Merton told Czeslaw Milosz in 1965 that he had no intention of joining movements even in the case of causes he supported,⁶⁴ reinforcing his earlier statement to Milosz that even as a Catholic he was a "complete lone wolf."⁶⁵ Similarly, in a striking remark in a letter to Henry Miller in 1962, Merton noted that in an oppressive, bureaucratic period the individual was the "only power that is left."⁶⁶

As with Thoreau, Merton grounded his anarchism not only in a belief in the primacy of the individual but in a conviction that the

60. Ibid., 236.

61. Ibid., 243.

62. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 172.

63. Merton, "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants," 373-4.

64. Merton, *Courage for Truth*, 84.

65. Ibid., 60.

66. Ibid., 278.

promise of the American republic had been betrayed. Indeed, in an essay on William Melvin Kelley he characterized Thoreau, like himself, as a "hermit and a prophet of nonviolence" who believed that the American Revolution had "either misfired or had never really taken place."⁶⁷ Echoing these sentiments in a letter to William Carlos Williams in 1961, Merton described the period in which he was living as one of "infidelity to the original American grace."⁶⁸

Merton contrasted his hermitage life, which he called "cool," with the "hot" life lived by those in community—including those in the monastery near him. Again, like Thoreau and Whitman, he associated society, including his own monastery, with a peremptory rationalism that involved the need to clarify, endlessly clarify, experience, as he put it in "Day of a Stranger."⁶⁹ Regarding the tyranny of reason, Merton's views resemble not only Blake's, but those of Whitman at the end of "Song of Myself":

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)⁷⁰

The rebelliousness of Merton's late poems, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, can be explained in part by his anarchic platform as an artist. In particular, the pervasive irony of these poems, both thematic and linguistic, was part of a stratagem that he had announced to Milosz in 1959 for the artist to be a "complete piece of systematic irony" in the midst of the "totalitarian life—or the capitalist one. And even the official religious one."⁷¹ The depth of Merton's revolt against the state and against institutionalism is indicated in another part of the letter to Milosz in which Merton observed caustically that we all have "our little game with Caesar, the little Father who is no longer human and who therefore *ought* to be cheated, in the name of humanity." Reflecting his view as both Christian and romantic, Merton argued in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* that the order imposed on individuals by society bore no apparent relation to their "real needs as persons," while that order at the same time summoned them

67. Merton, *The Literary Essays*, 169.

68. Merton, *Courage for Truth*, 269.

69. Merton, "Day of a Stranger," 213.

70. Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 96.

71. Merton, *Courage for Truth*, 64.

through legislation to cooperate in the work of "their own alienation."⁷²

Merton's argument against technology was integral with his objection to social oppressiveness, and in this respect he again lines up with Thoreau and to some extent with Hart Crane, whose great poem about the Brooklyn bridge was, according to Robert Lax (see appendix), a favorite of Merton's. Crane's anxious ambivalence about American technology issued from his fear that the imaginative genius that made great technology possible also and incidentally enslaved those who used it. As Thoreau had aphoristically put the matter in *Walden* a century earlier: "We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us."⁷³ The passage was one that Merton commented on directly in "Rain and the Rhinoceros," observing that whereas Thoreau had sat in his cabin criticizing the railways, Merton sat in his, wondering ironically about a world that "has, well, progressed."⁷⁴

In "Day of a Stranger," looking up at the bomb bay of an SAC plane flying over his woods, Merton wrote angrily that he did not consider this "technological mother" with its nuclear "egg" to be the "friend of anything I believe in."⁷⁵ Set implacably against the burden of modern technocracy was the artist with his or her view of the value of that which technology overlooks: "If one does not understand the usefulness of the useless and the uselessness of the useful," Merton cautioned in "Rain and the Rhinoceros," one cannot understand art. And a country that does not understand art, he added, was a country of "slaves and robots."⁷⁶

A poem that dramatically conveys the cluster of values surrounding Merton's antipathy to technology is "Gloss on the Sin of Ixion" in *Emblems of a Season of Fury*. Ixion, the Thessalonian king in Greek mythology who was bound to a wheel of fire because he tried to seduce the goddess Hera (Merton uses her Roman name, Juno), is projected by Merton as a symbol of the sort of grasping ambition that he associated with modern technocracies:

Our world too must steam and flame.
Ours must spin. Effort will break

72. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 232.

73. Thoreau, *Walden*, 62.

74. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 12.

75. Merton, "Day of a Stranger," 211.

76. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 21.

A bank. Work will run
(Wheels within wheels)
Monopolies.⁷⁷

The assault by contemporary societies is upon "sacred man," that is, human beings in their created, primal state, traces of which still inhere in their beings as individuals.

In Merton's imagination the rulers of technocracy are inevitably the wagers of war, represented in the poem by the "Giant mechanical boys," the centaur monsters who were the offspring of Ixion:

Heavy-set brothers of mess and fight,
Smoky bulldozers!
Wheeling cities burn!
Glass monsters break
Open faces, lit with high money.⁷⁸

The monsters bred by greed and sustained by the political and economic infrastructure entrenched in contemporary Western society are provocatively linked by Merton with a ruthless sexual drive to seize and rape the earth for profit, an analogue to the desire by Ixion to rape the sacred:

"Go hug dear mother profit in the dark, Possess earth,
"Possess money!"
Yet he missed.
He spilled.⁷⁹

The ejaculation of semen into the void symbolizes the ultimately doomed and sterile result of the ravishing of human beings and of the earth by the perverse social powers that surround them.

The poem concludes with a vision of a fiery war:

Up now comes
Out of earth and hell
Giant war Ixion
Rolling and fighting on the red wheel.⁸⁰

77. Thomas Merton, "Gloss on the Sin of Ixion," *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, 313.

78. *Ibid.*, 314.

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*, 315.

The symbols of materialism, debased sexuality, war, and technocracy are all fused in the poem through the underlying assumption that all represent a radical drive for a power that begins in competitiveness and ends in destruction. Beneath this symbolic equation lay Merton's belief, shared certainly by Thoreau, that institutions were incapable of love, that one of the characteristics of a collectivity, as Merton put it in "Rain and the Rhinoceros," involved rejecting certain classes of people in order to strengthen its own self-awareness. Conversely, the "solitary" person cannot survive unless he is capable of "loving everyone."⁸¹ Merton's prophetic categories are intended to represent not simply actual societies and individuals, but rather ways of living. Paradoxically, he discerns societies as tending toward the sorts of classification that exclude and herd those within them in contrast to those solitary individuals who live as persons in open, sympathetic union with the life within and around them rather than enduring the sorts of collective lives of quiet desperation spoken of, for example, by Thoreau in *Walden*.⁸²

Merton's romanticism turned him in the direction of Asian religion, as had occurred in the case of the transcendentalists of the nineteenth century. Like Emerson and Thoreau, Merton was attracted to Asian religions, especially Buddhism, because of their transrational inclusiveness. On one occasion Merton described Zen Buddhism glowingly as the awareness of pure being "beyond subject and object," an awareness that thus circumvented the Western "dualistic division between matter and spirit."⁸³ Set aside was the relentless search for articulated meaning. Merton illustrated this sort of awareness in "Day of a Stranger" in an impromptu, whimsical sermon to the birds:

"Esteemed friends, birds of noble lineage, I have no message to you except this: be what you are: be birds. Thus you will be your own sermon to yourselves!"

Reply: "Even this is one sermon too many!"⁸⁴

Merton was greatly attracted to Asian religious thought, particularly in his later writings, especially for its emphasis upon consciousness. He regarded Christianity as focused upon action, particularly salvific

81. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 22.

82. Thoreau, *Walden*, 5.

83. Thomas Merton, *The Zen Revival* (London: Buddhist Society, 1971) 5.

84. Merton, "Day of a Stranger," 216.

action, and in contrast he thought Buddhism much more developed as a religion in its understanding of religious experience than other major religions. In *Mystics and Zen Masters* Merton celebrated the capacity of "pure consciousness" of a romantic and monistic kind in accepting things fully, in complete oneness with them, looking "out of them" as though fulfilling the role of consciousness "not for itself only but for them also."⁸⁵

The Asian Journal, which appeared following Merton's death in Thailand, reveals a romantic and mystical consciousness in full flower, centering as it does on the ecstasy of transcendental awareness. The breakthrough in consciousness that Merton achieved at Polonnaruwa in Ceylon affected him with as much surprise as exhilaration. The huge stone Buddhas, one seated and the other reclining, both symbolized and made possible the sort of transcendental relationship with the world around him that his studies of Eastern religions had been preparing him for. The quiet smiles of the Buddhas were filled with "every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation but of Madhyamika, of sunyata, that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything—without refutation."⁸⁶ The passage recalls the celebratory open-endedness of the poetic visions of Emerson and Whitman, who were unencumbered by any tendency toward exclusivity.

The relationship between Merton's romantic/Zen vision in *The Asian Journal* and his Christianity is difficult to ascertain since his focus is on Asian religion. One is tempted to see this journal as Merton's ecumenical reconstruction of his religion, at least in its contemplative dimensions, so that it articulated the unity of vision toward which his romanticism had always predisposed him. This does not mean that Merton was thinking of abandoning his vocation, as Emerson had abandoned Unitarianism because of what he regarded as its narrowness. Rather, Merton now perceived his vocation in a new and larger spiritual context in which he felt himself able, by relying on other religious traditions, to expand the experience and meaning of his own—even though he had also been troubled by the thought of Christian sectarianism, as can be seen in his later reservations about *The Seven*

85. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 233.

86. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 233.

Storey Mountain. Through a consciousness immersed in both Christian and romantic mysticism, Merton drew attention to our spiritual roots as human beings, evoking feelings of unity in readers who, like himself, had sought to have the experience of God.

**Appendix to "Merton and the Romantics":
Letter written in 1976 from Robert Lax to Ross Labrie**

Dear Ross Labrie,

Your letter jumped out of a bunch of others (mostly Christmas cards) today & said: answer me!

1) pound & eliot certainly meant a lot to merton; he admired early williams imagist poems, too; hart crane, too; & not impossibly, cummings. wallace stevens, too. (& h d). feel on surest ground with williams, crane & stevens. might well have liked whitman (at least never said he didn't). can't remember a word about poe's poetry (doubt that p's kind of rhythm would have appealed) but think he'd read and like the narrative of arthur gordon pym (& the other stories). i think of all these hart crane & the bridge (but his other poems too, & west indian ones) were closest to being real enthusiasms.

other american enthusiasms, though not from poem-books: new orleans kansas city chicago & new york: louis armstrong, bessie smith, joe turner, meade lux lewis, albert ammons, teddy wilson, baby dodds, cripple clarence lofton, bunk johnson, kid ory, count basie, duke ellington: blues lyrics, too; good morning blues (for example) a real favorite; bix biederbe cke, j c higginbottom, pee wee russell, fats waller, billie holiday: all people & artists he really liked and went out of his way to hear///// movies a big influence, too: mark bros charlie chaplin marjorie dumont, w c fields allison skipworth, j carrol naish (nash?) , oscar homolka (hitchcock, too) rene claire(a nous l liberte a real favorite, fred astaire; marched himself off to see edw g robinson in brother orchid when none of the rest of us wld go; may have liked lupino lane; did like wheeler & woolsy, laurel & hardy, j edgarx kennedy, harry langdon, buster keaton & hedy lamarr likedaldous huxley, hemingway & evelyn waugh jack oakie, too. (but not don ameche who wanted to play t merton in a movie version of 7 storey mt).

of british contemporaries he liked: auden, spender, c day lewis, louis macniece (george barker, too, i think; especially for poem called 'no other tiger walked that way that night') dylan thomas was a major enthusiasm, so, i think was auden; & early spender

lots of spanish & south americans, too: jimenez; octavio paz; jorge de lime; (alfonso?) pessoas, (& of course) ernesto cardenal. & you mentioned lorca (a real enthusiasm)

classical britons: shakespeare, marlowe, donne, suckling, chaucer, spenser,too; crashaw (*big* enthusiasm)herbert, too southey, sir philip sydney; blake (huge enthusiasm) hopkins (great, too) nashe, john lyly, webster; abraham golding, too (all these really meant lots to him) so did all good french poets: rimbaud & apollinaire, gerard de nerval & moreclassical ones, racine (for example); x not lamartine; cocteau as novelist & cinematographer; picasso james joyce, a huge enthusiasm. st john perse a big one too st john of the cross: (& teresa of avila) still others. xxxx rabelais, too (big); and chinese novels, like *monkey* liked-kerouac, ginsberg & ferlinghetti, too

it might be easier to name the five authors he *didn't* like, but i can't think of who they'd have been. malthus, adam smith, jeremy bentham, and, just possibly, john stuart mill.

role of anti-poetry: don't know. st jason: not a clue, at least from memory.

best wishes to you, & best to patrick hart.

sincerely,

Bob Lax