

Pleading for Sanity: Cosmic Heart in a Sea of Fire

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"There is an optimism which cheapens Christianity and makes it absurd, empties it. It is a silly, petty optimism which consists in being secure because one knows the right answers . . . I will multiply negatives in honor of the God of Job."

—Thomas Merton to Czeslaw Milosz, 6/5/61

"And a monk should wind himself up in a cocoon?"

—Thomas Merton to C. Waddell, 1/4/64

". . . one fell in step with the dance of the universe, the liturgy of the stars."

—"The Sacred City," in *Preview of the Asian Journey*, 79

They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

—"Brahma," R. W. Emerson

1. In the Sea of Fire

In "Honorable Reader," Thomas Merton wrote presciently,

The new world will not be built by the Russian perversion of the Marxist dialectic . . . (nor) by the destructive passions of

Fascist militarism . . . (nor) the magic of imperialist technology. We cannot hope for anything more than deception and confusion in 'dollar diplomacy'.¹

The monk's social and political critique lay in his ability to see through the thin facade of power politics, the phony subterfuges that lay in all the shallow schemes and apparent good will and accepted paradigms that drive the great powers. He idealized the then Third World, as he often did by locating the real future and hope of the planet in East Asia, Africa and, particularly—at least to this writer—in his first love, his beloved Latin America, which more than any other region of the world he appropriated to himself. The monk saw in their then pre-technologized and free-from-the-market-economy people and societies a purity long lost in the mechanized civilization of North America. He neither allowed himself to be taken in by the north's often unquestioned myths of progress nor to where that progress fatefully led. Whether he was objective with regard to the way he reflexively favored the south over the north, or the east over the west remains at best problematic.

However, what remains unquestioned, given both Merton's political orientation and native compassion for the underdog, was that he saw the major powers in opposition to the downtrodden and disenfranchised of the world. Further, he saw in both communist and capitalistic democratic societies, including his own adopted America, the unhealthy roots and festering wounds of alienation as well as the moral and spiritual brutalization of the human species acting dishonorably. Compassion for the beleaguered, the underdog, was Merton's natural bent and the Gospels its true fulfillment; this, despite early in his career, he was hardly in a position to predict both the starkness and the richness of that message and the existential price that would, in his own life, be exacted from living out the Gospels. In a relatively short time, the monk/writer was to experience not only a baptism of water but of *fire* as well.

In America, he saw this terrible sea of fire engulf his own society not so much by police tactics—though there were gross manifestations of that too in the struggle over civil rights and to end the war in Vietnam—but rather, to his mind, through a misguided technology which, the more successfully marketable it became, the more it ate away into man's inner freedom. As his basic temperament and per-

1. Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on my Work*, edited with an introduction by Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 42–3.

ception did not allow him to critique the world from a merely liberal political agenda, he came to see the programs of the major powers as morally corrosive forces tending to diminish both personal and communal freedoms. And, as artist and man of faith, he increasingly saw the curtailing of the diminishment of the inner person as his principle role, a task for which his readings and contemplative vocation prepared him well.

This paper will demonstrate the priceless value Merton placed on the inner self, its importance with regard to the recovery and reconstruction of community, and, being a Christian monk, the ever-increasing faith he had in identifying this inner self with Christ, especially the *suffering, paschal* Christ.

To Merton, the North American capitalist agenda, by freely and indiscriminately enlisting and manipulating human knowledge, research, and technology, rather than furthering the cause of humanity—its overt intention—had the reversed effect of keeping the giant unthinking machine well-oiled and self-perpetuating, albeit misdirected. To the monk, Americans of his time lived by the unquestioned assumption that their lives were inextricably linked with that self-propelling machine, and anyone disconnected from the speed, efficiency, and progress that drove the entire enterprise was somehow not fully sane and rational and outside the American dream. It distressed him how a nation which prided itself on personal liberty could so easily miss the obvious bridge between this *diminished* self and the continuous usurpation of and the facile inroads made against freedom by a sophisticated technology that seemed to have taken on a life of its own. This technology was most profoundly embodied in the military-industrial complex and an ever more powerful and self-serving mass media.

Merton harshly criticized the USA because he believed as leader of the free world his adopted country fell far short of the goods she purported to be delivering, particularly when it came to preachments regarding peace, race relations, humanity and fair play, and, above all, nuclear responsibility. He called her bluff on these and many more issues. Going beyond the more conventional social and cultural critics, the monk, seldom wasting ink on patchwork reform, insisted in *radical* social and political change related to inner transformation and the reinvention and reassessment of true brotherhood, an issue to which he was increasingly responsive as his personal correspondence extended globally and his writings diversified to cover an ever-broadening range of concerns.

One sees this urgency particularly in his letters of the 1960s to fellow writers with whom he had a special affinity beyond the commonality of generation, race and religion. Such relationships through correspondence deepened his understanding of the world. It would be well to remember that this keeping of the channels of communication open among his circle of like-minded friends was, for Merton, a matter of *personal* survival. As a monk, Merton found himself increasingly questioning the viability of his own religious community as a social unit. He vacillated over its communal authenticity, at times perceiving it as an unedifying institution that mirrored all too clearly some of the more unpromising pragmatic and utilitarian elements of the larger world beyond. Rightly or wrongly, he did not see a future in it *as it stood*, being convinced that Gethsemani with all its continuous input of middle class values did not pose as a radically different alternative to the styles of living enjoyed outside its walls. It would seem that a proper understanding of Merton's anxieties over, and protests against, his life as a cloistered monk should be seen within the framework of a search for a condition that would ground him more firmly in the poverty of Christ which, to him, held the answer to the restoration of monastic community (or, by extension, *any* community, both religious and secular). He sought a return to some semblance of sanity and authenticity in which the ideals of monasticism could once again become living tissues in the lives of its monks. Typically, for Merton, it meant a setup allowing both a deeper solitude as well as a greater embracing of universal human concerns.

Nothing meant more to Merton than living the authentic life; moreover, true vocation in which one is free to make use of one's natural gifts and a living community kept together by genuinely caring hearts in support of one's brothers (and sisters) held the key to human survival and genuine reformation of social and political life. It was both his weakness and his strength that he considered the monastic experience a basically *human* experience, not unlike any other institution engineered and maintained by human beings. In other words, Gethsemani was neither better nor worse for its being an overtly religious institution. Yet, this did not prevent him from being dismayed that even at his beloved monastery, life, by the late fifties, had become a too-real reflection of society in general.² The novice master often

2. In a *GEO Magazine* interview, "Father Ernesto Cardenal" (exact date uncertain, though it is most likely in 1984–85), conducted by Kenneth L. Woodward,

complained of the barren, if not total absence, of conventional cultural life and the distressingly mediocre level of consciousness among his young students, which he felt were obstacles to genuine spiritual progress. Merton's own greatness seemed to lie in his ability to nurture the subtle and creative dialectics and constant interplay he allowed himself—and, we might add, encouraged among his student novices—between a broad secular or worldly culture and the spiritual life. Being himself a poet, he never closed his heart to other artists, and he knew his friends, though they were not necessarily Christians or even theists but humanists in the broad sense, were indispensable in bringing him closer to or at least keeping him intimate with the heart of Christ.

Merton's correspondence, particularly with writers, was a conscious attempt to connect with those whose lives bore the noble burden of preserving glimmers of authentic life burning within whatever tradition they were working and living. Today, few would deny that by having kept his own end of the contemplative world open to the influences of both secular and sacred traditions, Christian monastic life now reflects a broader, deeper and more catholic spirituality. In the tradition of all genuine reformers, Merton seemed to have gone forward by having trekked backwards, certainly to the spiritually sumptuous and "open cellars" of his own rich traditions; equally important, he courageously willed to explore the multi-tiered mansion of the cosmic heart and, by an unflinching instinct, he knew his very salvation was tied with that search and unfolding. He made the task all the more difficult for himself because he never doubted that life at its core was one and paradisiacal.

Cardenal, the then Minister of Culture in the Nicaraguan Sandinista government, says the following:

Merton said the Trappists were a very antiquated order, though he recognized that it could be very good for some people. He said the monks were much too influenced by the American way of life, and that within the monastery, which was to be a place of contemplation, they ran around like it was rush hour on the New York subway. He said the Trappists had the political mentality of middle-class North Americans and that he himself was very anti-North American. He felt Latin. He was born in France, and French was his native language. He told me he loved the poetry of Latin America and was very anti-Yankee, very much in favor of Latin America (20).

2. "Lotus-Eaters" of the North

Living in an America of unprecedented social change, Merton aimed his criticisms at his fellow citizens and religious for what he called their "intransigence" and "complacency." To Ernesto Cardenal, on the American indifference over the nuclear buildup, he wrote in harsh, angry tones:

It is as if (North Americans) have become lotus-eaters. As if they were under a spell. As if with charmed eyes and ears they saw vaguely, through a comatose fog, the oncoming destruction . . . I resist this bad dream with all my force . . .³

Then, in the same letter, he blasts the American Catholic Church, particularly its hierarchy, in having accepted

the most secular, the most debased, the most empty of world standards. In this case, the acceptance of nuclear war. Not only that, it is glorified as Christian sacrifice, as a crusade, as the way of obedience . . . This is to me a complete nightmare (CT, 130).⁴

But over and above such criticisms of his own Church, Merton severely berated the more pervasive "lotus-eaters," his fellow Americans:

(North Americans) are prisoners of a completely quantitative view of life and consequently, having no sense either of essence or existence, are out of touch with reality. It is a culture of well-fed zombies (CT, 133, 5/22/62, to Cardenal).

3. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*; selected and edited by Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1993) 129–30. Hereafter referred to in the text as CT.

4. See letter to James Forrest (11/7/62) which points out both the confusion and the casuistic tendencies of Catholics: ". . . the ambiguity of so many Catholics on the war question . . . is a very serious symptom of spiritual sickness in our society. It is a mark of the failure of Catholics to meet the spiritual challenge of the times. They have failed to meet it not because the Church as such has failed, because the clear statements of the Popes are there. But these statements have not been effectively interpreted or put into practice. On the contrary they have been left as pure dead letter except for clauses that give a loophole for militarists." (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, selected and edited by William H. Shannon [New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985] 271. Hereafter referred to in the text as HGL).

In a later letter to Cardenal, he asks distressingly, "Do we have to be in a concentration camp before the truth comes home to us?" (CT, 137, 11/17/62).

Besides calling Americans "mealy-mouthed patriots" and "lotus-eaters" living in a "comatose fog," Merton literally bristles in a letter to Miguel Grinberg as the US had become ever more entrenched in the quagmire of Vietnam four years later:

What is this country? If you want to know, look at Vietnam because that is where it all comes out into the open. A big bucket of sickness. But everything here (in the US) goes on in dazed tranquillity. The patient is etherized upon the table . . . The beasts chew on his flesh but he observes nothing (CT, 203–4, 10/8/66).

As early as the late 1950s and 1960, when he was seriously considering a move to Mexico and other points south until his hopes were dashed by authorities in his own Cistercian Order, he wrote to Paris to the exiled Polish poet, Czeslaw Milosz, who was contemplating living and teaching in the US. In strong, unguarded language one often finds in letters to fellow writers, Merton, perhaps blind to life in Eastern Europe and unable fully to assess Milosz' own heart, discouraged his coming. Yet, his words remain more prophetic than ever:

Why live among lotus-eaters and conformists. Never was there a place where freedom was so much an illusion . . . you will find here no imagination; nothing but people counting, counting and counting, whether with great machines, or on their stupid fingers. All they know how to do is count (CT, 68, 5/6/60).

The sea of fire was not merely Vietnam but the various materialisms offered by the major political powers. Merton, who saw no fundamental choice between the US and the Soviet Union offered the following to Pablo Antonio Cuadra for whom he had written the splendid, "A Letter . . . Concerning Giants":

The tyrannies and compulsions under which we live . . . are a moral affront to man, the image of God. And it is becoming more and more clear that our fundamental moral obligation is to resist complicity and submission to every form of abusive power, whether physical or moral or spiritual. And this is both complicated and perilous (CT, 184, 6/13/59).

And, as we know today, "complicated and perilous" applied ever more to Merton himself. He keenly anticipated such future personal

difficulties when he said to Cardenal, his former novice student, on Christmas Eve, 1961: "I realize I have to be very careful how I protest because otherwise I will be silenced. And no doubt sooner or later I will be."

In hindsight, the important letters to Cardenal served to bolster the latter's courage; more significantly, they set on solid ground Cardenal's own social and political commitment to his native Nicaragua in whose cabinet he would serve two decades later as Minister of Culture. Given the nature of the Trappist vocation, its conventional expectations and the unorthodox manner in which Merton proceeded to fulfill that vocation, the monk was perceived by many as "a square peg in a round hole," the way he half-humorously described himself once in a letter to his abbot, James Fox.⁵

3. Moral and Spiritual Brutalization

Merton's writings often drive home the point that human brutalization in the twentieth century has not been restricted to war and politics. They are filled with indictments aimed at capitalist societies that he felt consciously conspired to imprison and glut our minds with their unending barrage of invented pleasures. Even in Asia, the human problem is greatly intensified by the fact that, in order to survive economically, her societies have ever more been forced to accept the global modernist package whole. The ever-present hustle, the promise of "big bucks," even the antagonisms one finds in academic circles resulting from competition for research grants and other unpleasanties that have little to do with true learning and education now add up to a generally non-conducive atmosphere for healthy personal and communal development.

As early as the mid-fifties, in the essays of *No Man Is an Island*, Merton already assumes a frame of mind so characteristic of his later writings when he writes:

Half the civilized world makes a living by telling lies. Advertising, propaganda, and all the other forms of publicity that have taken the place of truth have taught man to take for granted that they can tell other people whatever they like provided that it

5. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters*; selected and edited by Br. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990) 80. Hereafter referred to in the text as SC.

sounds plausible and evokes some kind of shallow emotional response.⁶

In the wake of cultural grotesqueries such as morally-neutralizing and language-dulling talk shows, the continuing mindless onslaught of the mass media, and the indiscriminate use of hi-tech and bogus statistics in pressing forward self- or party-serving political programs, all of which can, indeed, sound plausible and enticing and "evoke shallow emotional responses," authentic communication has become ever more difficult and improbable. One wonders, then, how Merton would have negotiated the often hazardous waters of the present, including the phenomenon of political correctness? Yet, we can perhaps answer such a query by showing in the concrete the nearly always uncompromising manner in which the monk dealt with such problems. Merton rarely opted for the useful, the cheaply gotten or the expedient.⁷

We can clearly see this in the monk's letters to Evora Arca de Sardinia who with her husband were Cuban exiles in Miami. The letters are richly textured and bring into sharp relief the difficult position he had to assume as shepherd and priest to suffering men and women seeking moral and spiritual support. In his missives to Arca de Sardinia, what he wrote was all the more delicate and poignant given the nearly impossible political circumstances in which she found herself. We can also see in them Merton's thinly-disguised aversion for the old Batista gang that the Cuban revolution had driven from the country.

6. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), 193.

7. Merton's ventures into Asian thought can be said to be a reconfirming of his strong dislike for the "useful," the "expedient," and the merely practical and pragmatic. To James Forrest, he writes: "It is clear that everywhere we are up against a brass wall of organized stupidity and prejudice, the monumental institutionalism that says no to all truth that is inexpedient. To be without God is to be condemned to a cult of expediency" (*HGL*, letter of 11/29/61, 259).

Again, to Forrest who had been arrested during an anti-war demonstration and sentenced to a short prison term on Hart's Island in the East River, Merton seemed to have been suggesting a higher form of efficacy or was even being *Taoistic* when giving counsel on the tactic of non-violent protest: "One has to learn to see the significance of one's apparent *uselessness* and not be driven to frustration by it. The uselessness, the inactivity, the frustration are deliberately assumed as an important part of non-violent resistance" (*HGL*, letter of 3/21/62, 264, Emphasis added).

When he wrote, "How tragic it is that everywhere men (sic) fall victims to the tyranny of absurd ideologies and empty slogans, which have such far-reaching consequences,"⁸ the monk was pointing to a good deal more than the political propaganda on *both* the Communist and the side of the refugees and, of course, by implication, the U.S. government. Merton, true to form, was forthright and risked both hurting and being misunderstood by this woman of simple faith. In the following, he is bold yet sensitive to the nearly impossible position she was in, her husband, after all, being a freedom fighter committed to the overthrow of Castro:

Frankly, I think most of your troubles come from the conflict of grace within your own nature and with the obscure awareness you have that all is not well with the political cause you have embraced, or with Christianity as a whole, as it is manifested in the comfortable and wealthy Catholicism of the US. The situation is full of ambiguities and contradictions, and *right and wrong is inextricably mixed up on both sides*. The evil of Communism grows in Cuba, but *the evil of moral injustice is not absent on the American side*. There is no question that there *is* some truth in the accusation of American imperialism: in the same sense that the big money is what determines all the decisions . . . This is a bitter injustice, and you obscurely realize this: You cannot help doing so (WT, 82, 9/19/62, Emphasis added).

The voice is clearly that of a compassionate friend saying—no matter how difficult the task—what needed to be said and reading quite accurately the furtive hieroglyphs on the conscience of another whom one supposes only Merton the confiding monk was privy.⁹ The words,

8. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*; selected and edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994), 83. Hereafter referred to in the text as *WF*.

9. A fitting tribute to Merton are the following words of Robert Coles ("Thomas Merton the Healer") in his interview of Dorothy Day: "I especially remember Dorothy Day's remarks about him: 'He had known much pain, and he knew how to lift pain from others.' . . . (Day) knew that an essential and important part of Merton's life was his passionate desire to minister unto others, to hear from them, learn of their tensions and turmoils, and tell them of his, too. Once Dorothy Day said this about Merton . . . 'He cured with words—all the time he did! I know! I can remember those letters, the good medicine that they were to me. And I always knew that with Merton it was the doctor healing himself as well as the rest of us who were his patients.'" From *A Robert Coles Omnibus* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993) 33–4.

simple yet neither simplistic nor patronizing, are remarkable for the way they make sense of the diverse and seemingly intractable and diffused elements of the ethical, the spiritual and the political. They are subtly and artlessly interwoven into a living and rationally integrated whole so characteristic of Merton. Empathy was closer than arm's length because the monk himself was then living out of the "ambiguities and contradictions" he speaks of above.

In later letters to the Cuban exile, he writes with a good deal of political savvy and realism. He is sensitive yet unafraid of risking possible misunderstanding:

The ones to blame are not Castro and Khrushchev . . . We must take a far wider view: this is just one part of a huge historical and social cataclysm and the root of it all is the technological revolution with its myriad consequences (WT, 83, 1/1/63).

I assure you that if the exiles take over Cuba, then the whole thing would start all over again, there would be other exiles planning bloody revenge, and the new ones in power would savagely execute their former persecutors . . . You simply cannot put your trust in American arms, but *you cannot trust in any arms* (WT, 84, 7/25/63 Emphasis added).

Merton was able to voice in naked form such seemingly despairing sentiments because, knowing he was addressing a person steeped in religious faith, he saw in it an opportunity to strengthen that faith and to conspire in the possible inner transformation of another person. Some of the most affecting words to her can be found in his letter of 10/29/62 (*Cold War Letter #109*, WT, 82): "Certainly it is hard to see your world broken up around you. No man (sic) can take that without suffering and self-questioning." Then, as if addressing and nurturing his own hurt and pain at a time of deep personal crisis when he himself often felt standing alone, he turns spiritual director *par excellence* as he consoles and encourages. Note, too, how he suggests the ever possible danger of faith degenerating into superstition and the necessity of accepting maturity *on God's terms* rather than on human terms:

God has sent these trials to deepen your faith, not to destroy it. If you feel that it is hard to believe, this is because God is no longer presenting to you the image and idea of Him you once had. He is different from what you think He is and what you want Him to be. If He does not do things the way we want Him to, and we cease to believe in Him, then that means we only want to believe

in a God made in our own image. That is why we have to have our faith purified and conform to His inscrutable will (WT, 82).

Still later, he adds, "Be detached and go forward in faith, and use prayer as the great weapon for the liberation of your country" (WT, 83, 2/22/63).¹⁰

Such letters from the heart seem to serve the dual purpose of reminding both the recipient and the sender the impossible and futile task of living out the Christian commitment through mere human effort; they also remind us of the extent of the spirit of poverty and surrender necessary as a prelude to the suffusion of grace in our lives. Finally, they drive home to us the futility of holding on to some stultifying and usually uninformed or trivialized notions we have regarding the Ground of Being.

Merton seems to be insisting that whatever role we may play in our own inner transformation, as long as we are not yet resigned to the *inherent* limitations of such efforts and its ultimate bankruptcy when pushed beyond its limits, we have not yet understood the role Wisdom plays in helping truth to emerge in us. In short, the monk rarely fails to caution his readers that God seldom makes His appearance at our beck and call, and that Wisdom never favors one ideology or social program over another, or, surely in any movements that inevitably divide people into two distinct and faceless camps. Wisdom, in other words, is likely to be present in the most unsuspecting of circumstances, when we least expect it.

Like Job, Merton the monk increasingly began to understand *through his own lived life* that the only answer to any human problem

10. On prayer and inner transformation as the basis of social and political change and action, writing to Forrest who was involved in a General Strike for Peace, Merton says: "Really we have to pray for a total and profound change in the mentality of the whole world. What we have known in the past as Christian penance is not a deep enough concept if it does not comprehend the special problems and dangers of the present age . . . (What is) important is the complete change of heart and the totally new outlook on the world of man. We have to see our duty to mankind as a whole . . . / The great problem is this inner change, and we must not be so obsessed with details that we block the deeper development in other people and in ourselves. The strike is to be regarded . . . as an application of spiritual force and not the use of merely political pressure. We all have the great duty to realize the deep need for purity of soul, . . . the deep need to possess in us the Holy Spirit . . . This takes precedence over everything else" (HGL, *Cold War Letter* 25, 1/29/62, 262).

lay not in any facile knee-jerks nor dogmatic schemes but *in God Himself*. Or, like Christ, one becomes a "scandal," not only to one's community and the world at large but *to oneself* as well, for part of this scandal and, indeed, destitution of soul lies in the rejection of all things that were once held to be precious and sacred. Instead, being stripped of all crutches and abandoned, one finds oneself "answer-less." Even God may refuse to be the answer, for this experience is not inconsistent with Christ's own agony and suffering. Perhaps not fully realizing its full implications, the monk had been granted the greatest of Christian gifts: he was, with the help of imperceptible grace, beginning to free himself of all illusions. And his letters to friends could not help but reflect the contradictions that came with this freedom of self-surrender.

4. "The Trouble with Squares . . ."

To Czeslaw Milosz, Merton writes with great passion and a resignation reminiscent of the beleaguered Job. The following are sentiments—with large dosages of gall and sarcasm—precipitated by the visit, as he says, of "a very good and learned" European monk whose answers were "all better down the line." Yet, though intellectually he accepts them, Merton retorts almost obstinately, "something in me says 'No' to them." This letter reveals a personal defiance rarely found in his more formal writings, or even in the journals:

I have given the impression I had answers./ . . . / . . . One is left without answers, without comfort, without companionship, without a community. That is the thing that has finally hit me. My darkness was tolerable when it was only dark night, something spiritually approved. But it is rapidly becoming "exterior" darkness. A nothingness in oneself into which one is pressed down further and further, until one is inferior to the human race and hates the inferiority. Yet clings to it as the only thing one has. Then the problem is that perhaps here in this nothingness is infinite preciousness, the presence of the God Who is not an answer, the God of Job, to whom we must be faithful above all, beyond all. But the terrible thing is that He is *not known to others*, is incommunicable. One has no sense whatever that He is mentioned or referred to ever by anyone else; hence there is great danger that it may be the devil, for God, they say, is not at all private (CT, 75, 6/5/61).¹¹

11. Merton was perfectly aware of his walking on a theological tightrope, and he was to spell this out rather clearly, among other places, in the essay, "A Christian

Merton speaks from out of a broken heart, or a broken cistern, if you will, yet, one suspects it is in and through this desperation and sense of *angst* that Merton's own ultimate liberation and inner transformation are rooted for, in their painful existential depth, we sense (and, no doubt, he senses) an identity with humanity hitherto merely verbal and abstract, which, in a sense, was still a luxury and a cushion distancing him from his fellow men and women. They also foreshadow his later ideas of the monk *in diaspora*, of the necessity of having to stand alone in post-Christian times.

Nearly two years before, in a letter to the poet, Herbert Mason, Merton had sung a quite different, surely more optimistic and conventional tune regarding "darkness." It is classic John of the Cross, wonderfully rhapsodic yet, upon some reflection, in comparison to the Milosz letter, there are still traces of the glibly-confident Merton:

Look, if you think about darkness you will naturally get a tired mind. And when you think about it you put a kind of light in its place, that is what makes you tired. When it is dark, it is dark, and you go in the dark as if it were light. *Nox illuminatio mea*. The darkness is our light, and that is all. The light remains, simply, our everyday mind, such as it is, floating on the sea of darkness which we do not have to observe. But it carries us with great power. It is the being carried that is, actually, its light. Float, then. And trust the words of God, which you do not see either, but they are cool (WF, 263, 8/24/59).

Articulate and reassuring, and even euphoric. But in the later letter to Milosz, a less-assured and bruised Merton rejects now the "sanity" of easy rejoinders, of facile affirmations not grounded strictly in experience, especially in human suffering and alienation from one-

Looks at Zen" (*Zen and the Birds of Appetite* [New York: New Directions 1968] 33–58. Hereafter referred to in the text as ZBA):

(W)e must not neglect the great importance of experience in Christianity. But Christian experience always has a special modality, due to the fact that it is inseparable from the mystery of Christ and the *collective life of the Church*, the Body of Christ. To experience the mystery of Christ mystically or otherwise is always to transcend the merely individual psychological level and to "experience theologically with the Church" . . . In other words, this experience must always be in some way reducible to a theological form that *can be shared by the rest of the Church* . . . (46. Emphasis added).

self and the world. In the beginning of that profound missive to the future Polish Nobel laureate, the monk admits to his failure in coping with the "basic theological questions." "There is," he says, "something wrong with the questions that are supposed to be dispensed of by answers. That is the trouble with squares. They think that when you have answers you no longer have questions." But, on the contrary, he continues,

The more you simply stand with the questions all sticking in your throat at once, the more you unsettle the 'peace' of those who think they have swallowed all the answers. The questions cause one to be nauseated by answers. This is a healthy stance, but it is not accepted. Hence *I am nauseated by answers and nauseated by optimism*. There is an optimism which cheapens Christianity and makes it absurd, empties it. It is a silly, petty optimism which consists in being secure because one knows the right answers (CT, 75, 6/5/61. Emphasis added).

Merton had finally come to terms with the fact that in this "worst of all centuries" (CT, 77, 9/16/61) identity with mankind meant, among other things, being "spiritually excommunicated," of suffering the sort of "metaphysical torment" that marked the lives and writings of Simone Weil, of Charles Peguy, of Albert Camus, and of Milosz himself, and that such lives, though perhaps unofficially non-Christian and even atheistic were, he now perceived, *more Christian* than his own. He seemed to have found himself "on the outside" as far back as the early 1950s.¹² But his later readings, contacts and struggles over his vocation and with authorities over censorship with regard to his writings and his wish to leave Gethsemani strongly persuaded him that true sanity and humanity lay in the midst of the bleak human desert and especially among wrecked lives that indeed did not have the comfort and luxury of ready-made answers.

The Pauline "putting on Christ" began to manifest an unthought of starkness and a radical and existential encounter not with Merton's own nor with any humanly-conceived spirit of poverty but with the very "*perfect poverty*" of Christ who seemed to want to live

12. See letter to Naomi Burton Stone, Merton's agent, WT, 130–1, 10/10/52. Writing to his "sensible sister," the monk perhaps half-laments yet convincingly says, "I am now used to the fact that what seems to me to be prayer seems to many holy men (sic) to be folly." My own assessment is that the censorship battle over *The Sign of Jonas* radicalized Merton once and for all and convinced him that his true vocation was not to walk the well-worn monastic path of past centuries.

now in the monk and some chosen others *by being absent*. In such a modality, one is neither comforted by the presence of the self nor the presence of divinity, and grace is so stark and poor that "all is done in us but without us—in *nobis et sine nobis*" (ZBA, 121).

5. Conclusion: God Heals by Wrecking

In some sense, what Merton experienced in those years was even beyond Zen, for Zen can take us to purity of heart but not to the Kingdom of God which demands a greater personal price and resignation of self and sense of emptiness and destitution whereby, as Merton says, "the real work of God begins."¹³ Life takes on the mode of "a dynamic gift, a fullness of love" (ZBA, 138) experienced at every moment in the *here and now* and yet, whose manifestations are fully undeterminable, unmediated and unconditioned by anything either exterior to or interior in us, and surely beyond anything we may wish for or expect.

This is the only *milieu* in which divine freedom can breathe, and its pulses are wholly inconsistent with the rhythms and beats of human constructs and intrusive "answers" which purport to catch anything. It is the *milieu* in which God wrecks havoc on all human plans and schemes and takes away all hopes that might obscure His loving and merciful Intrusion. His mercy is so great that He insists on crowning His saints with His own nobility rather than allowing His creatures to wallow in their own falsified and alloyed elements. But existentially—in his own abject poverty—man cannot face this loss of self and utter bankruptcy of reality alone and unaided.

In an inspired essay in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, Merton writes:

13. Merton writes in ZBA, echoing among others, Cassian, Evagrius Ponticus, Sts. Maximus and Gregory of Nyssa,

Purity of heart . . . is the intermediate end of the spiritual life. But the ultimate end is the Kingdom of God. This is a dimension which does not enter into the realm of Zen.

. . . Purity of heart . . . is the necessary preparation not for further struggle between good and evil, but for the real work of God . . . , the work of the *new creation*, the resurrection from the dead, the restoration of all things in Christ. This is the real dimension of Christianity, the eschatological dimension which is peculiar to it, and which has no parallel in Buddhism (132).

(A)ll transcendent experience is for the Christian a participation in 'the mind of Christ' . . . *who emptied himself* . . . obedient unto death . . . This dynamic of emptying and of transcendence accurately defines the transformation of the Christian consciousness in Christ. It is a kenotic transformation, an emptying of all the contents of the ego-consciousness to become a void in which the light of God or the glory of God, the full radiation of the infinite reality of His Being and Love are manifested (75).

Merton continues by quoting Meister Eckhart whose following words D. T. Suzuki himself had once likened to the experience of *prajna* (Buddhist wisdom): "In giving us His love God has given us His Holy Ghost so that we can love Him with the love wherewith He loves Himself. We love God with His own love; awareness of it deifies us" (ZBA, 75). Perhaps, rather than regarding the experience as an "emptying," it may be more appropriate to take Merton's lead and see it as a divine *crowning*, a *lifting* or *restoring* of the ego to the mind of God whence it originates and has never really left. While the ego, or what we may call, "limited selfhood," "simply vanish(es) out of the picture altogether" (76), the pain of this "self-naughting," the letting go of both attachments *and* detachments that nurture and inflate the ego and serve as its scaffolding, nonetheless, remains intensely real because the old Adamic pull continues to have its sway, remaining, as long as there is human life, forever an emblem of man's willfulness. Apropos of the monk's sense of ambiguity was the ever-hovering and humbling awareness that he was a sinner.

Despite his strong conviction that we, without being conscious of this great boon, are always living in the presence of this Oneness, Merton never allowed himself to live under the delusive luxury that he or anyone else had conquered sin and alienation once and for all. Consequently, while he never regarded the world with all its perplexities as an illusion, he nonetheless stubbornly refused to acknowledge that the sea of fire to which we had all somehow contributed to its making, succumbed to its seductions and which now engulfs us all constitutes a viable and sane way of life. Its roots, in other words, lay in duplicity and sin, the result of the Fall. And we may guess that perhaps it was this overriding awareness of seeing himself personally as a sinner with a *similarly* duplicitous nature that finally gave him the balance, humility and wisdom to seek ever more broadly and deeply for further manifestations of the true brotherhood and sisterhood of the human community in both the present and the past, and in all races and religions of humanity.

He saw as well the need for dialogue and for connectedness with all those who similarly seek salvation—though, perhaps, *gropingly* and through a glass darkly—by contact with a cosmic heart and with people who understand instinctively the utter need for continual inner transformation and whose joys and sorrows and fecundity are as great as Christ would allow them to savor in His inner sanctum. In fact, Thomas Merton had been there all along without fully realizing where he was; paradoxically, the initial impulse of that awareness that God truly loved him was most surely felt when he first *reckoned himself out*, and he became gratefully and willingly and, we might add, *joyously*, God's or Brahma's solitary and compassionate eternal hymn to the world.