

## Reading Merton from the (Polish) Margin: 2004 Bibliographic Survey

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In 1958 Merton was reading Czeslaw Milosz's *The Captive Mind*, a book that opened many Western eyes to the brainwashing rituals of the New Faith practiced behind the Iron Curtain, on the far-away rim of the Western world, and to the desperate struggle of Eastern intellectuals to adjust to the new reality without compromising at least some of the values they deemed crucial to their artistic integrity. Deeply touched by what he had read, Merton decided: "I have got to write stuff that will be *worthy* of the public in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Russia, even though it never reaches them."<sup>1</sup> As a Pole, I am struck by the extent to which Merton's wish has come true. Actually, his ardent desire to write for the willing and not-so-willing converts to Dialectical Materialism to provide us with glimpses of the spiritual reality for which we hungered, albeit half-consciously, had been fulfilled even before Merton managed to verbalize it.

As early as 1949 the Polish Catholic monthly *Znak* published an anonymous article on Merton entitled "A Popular Trappist."<sup>2</sup> Although, possibly in order to satisfy the censors, the author of the article attributed much of the American popularity of Merton's ascetic religiosity to the American love of the exotic, supposedly characteristic of the shallow, consumerist societies of the West, he recognized Merton's books, *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *Seeds of Contemplation*, as religious classics. Two years later the Catholic socio-cultural weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, providing a—monitored, to be sure—forum for the Catholic intelligentsia in Stalinist Poland, published a laudatory discussion of Merton's autobiography. Fragments of Merton's poetry and prose started to appear in Catholic periodicals. Since then interest in Merton has been steadily growing. When *No Man is an Island* was published in 1960, the whole edition of several thousand copies was sold almost immediately. Theologian and philosopher, Archbishop Jozef Zycinski, then a seminarian, recalls that one female reader was so fascinated by Merton's book that she stayed at work after hours to typewrite

it in several copies. "The book," claims Zycinski, "with its profound analysis of spiritual resources, then unnoticed in official philosophy, was a tremendous success."<sup>3</sup>

Also other countries from the Soviet block started to recognize the authenticity of Merton's religious experience in a progressively more and more confusing, post-Christian age. In the Fall 2001 issue of *The Merton Seasonal* we can find short information, based on Margot Patterson's article from the *National Catholic Reporter*,<sup>4</sup> on how Merton's works, secretly translated into Czech and read in defiance of the reigning, militantly atheistic ideology of communist Czechoslovakia, allowed their Czech readers to rediscover the contemplative dimension of prayer, and eventually, in 2002, helped to reintroduce Cistercian monastic life to the Czech Republic. Lately Merton has been gaining readership in Russia, with the translation of Jim Forest's biography *Living with Wisdom* (2000) and of fragments of prose and poems by Merton himself. In 2003 a translation of *Thoughts in Solitude* was brought out by the Franciscan Publishing House in Moscow. A glance at the running Merton bibliography in *The Merton Seasonal*, however, suffices to conclude that in the so-called Eastern part of Europe it is Poland that continues to evidence the greatest activity in publishing *Mertoniana*.

### Digression: Problematizing the Margin

Wedge between the "civilized" West and the East represented by the powerful Russian empire, our eastern frontier raided by savage infidels (Turks and Tartars), 17<sup>th</sup> century Poland turned vices into virtues and prided itself on being a rampart of (Western) Christianity, a perception only testifying to our unredeemed sense of inferiority resulting from geographical and cultural marginality. The paradigm of marginality has been confirmed ever since. Even as I am writing these words, I am conscious of the marginal position of this country, which along with several other countries from the former Eastern block has only recently been admitted to the European Union. Prior to 2004 we had not even been "in" Europe, now we are the continent's (somewhat problematic) periphery, a new arrival to the wealthy economic empire, and as it happens with recent arrivals, advised to keep silent. Interestingly, the geographical map of Europe, if consulted, will tell quite a different story. It will reveal that the geographical middle of the continent is situated somewhere in the north-eastern Poland (or south-west-

ern Lithuania): the center literally *is* in the margin. I am sure Merton would have savored the irony of this and he would have been quick to point out the blessings this privileged marginality—if I am allowed to resort to an oxymoron—is likely to bestow on us. In Merton's language marginality was the proper sphere of the monk, whether of the professed or unprofessed, right-side-out or inside-out kind, and that category included every person who would listen to a drummer other than the technological-commercial one. While some must struggle hard to attain to this position, in our part of Europe marginality has been a birthright. Is this another reason why Merton appeals to us so strongly?

In my bibliographic essay I intend to read the recent publications by and about Merton from a marginal vantage point. Starting with the Eastern outskirts of Europe, where Merton Studies have been instituted only recently, I shall work my way through to their well-established, Anglo-American center, hoping to redraw the Merton map and to redefine marginality as a process, rather than a fixed position.

### Merton's Presence in the Polish Margin

Looking at the Merton bibliography in Polish, one notices certain regularities. The earliest Merton works to be published in Poland relate to areas of experience discredited, even actively discouraged by the New Faith: spirituality and contemplation (*No Man is an Island* [1960], *The Sign of Jonas* [1962], *The Seven Storey Mountain* [1971 and 1972], *Seeds of Contemplation* [1973]; substantial fragments of those books had first appeared in periodicals). While this has proved to be a seminal field of interest, in the late 1980s we turned to Merton for more adventurous nourishment. The publication of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1988) seems to have responded to the growing attraction of Oriental spiritualities in certain circles dissatisfied with the "safe," and therefore spiritually uninspiring, religious experience offered by the institutional Church. Recently, in his preface to the Polish edition of Merton's *Thoughts on the East* (2003), Maciej St. Zieba, lecturer in Oriental religions at the Catholic University of Lublin, remembers reading Merton's "The Transcendental Experience," a fragment of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, published in *Znak* in 1979. He reminisces how that essay influenced members of his generation, Poles born in the second half of the 1950s, who started to perceive Merton as a bridge-builder between the West and the East and a guru of the flower-power move-

ment along with such New Age mystics as Alan Watts, Fritjof Capra, Philip Kapleau, and Edward Conze. Such was at least their initial impression of Merton in the face of the postmodern confusion of values. Like Bede Griffiths, another important bridge-builder, Merton approached other cultures through the “transcendental experience” of the essay’s title. “Here was a proof”—or at least so it seemed to the Zieba generation—“that the Catholic Church was . . . opening itself to the spiritual heritage of the whole humankind.”<sup>5</sup> That this was a premature conclusion soon became apparent, eventually, however, a close reading of Merton allowed them to rediscover authentic Christian spirituality and remain with it, rather than yield to the facile syncretism of New Age.

Zieba’s essay, which obviously captures something of the experience of Merton *aficionados* across generational or geographical borders, discreetly addresses the doubts of the numerous critics of Merton’s engagement with Asia and, by implication, rebuts the arguments of sensation-seeking, tendentious novelists like Huorihan<sup>6</sup>: the risk of living faith must be taken in order to demystify the “little securities” of the Law as idols, false gods that obscure the Law’s spirit.<sup>7</sup> Zieba’s preface is a confirmation of the experience of many Christians who have discovered that an attentive reading of Merton will eventually return them to the God of Abraham, Israel, and Jacob, even if they initially come to Merton with different expectations. If I devoted much space to the issue that is far from new, it is because the perception of Merton as somehow “dangerous” persists to haunt Merton studies and there is never enough stressing how groundless and absurd it is.<sup>8</sup>

The 1990s and the first years of the new millennium have yielded an especially ample harvest of *Mertoniana* in Poland. The year 2004 alone saw the publication of five books by Merton,<sup>9</sup> a personal anthology of Merton texts,<sup>10</sup> a variety of reviews and short essays, and even a curious anthology of texts on charity translated *en bloc* from Italian, which includes Thomas Merton’s essay “The Climate of Mercy.”<sup>11</sup> As far as the current boom on the Merton market is concerned, we owe much to Krzysztof Bielawski, the editor-in-chief of the Homini publishing house dedicated to popularizing the message of the Gethsemani monk through translations, book-launching events, Merton conferences, and the publication of the periodical *Studia Mertoniana*, of which two issues have appeared so far. It is only to be regretted that the Polish Merton Society, officially launched during the First International Merton Con-

ference in Poland in 2002, has mysteriously fallen silent after the initial period of enthusiastic planning and organizing. In 2004 work had been in progress to prepare a two-day Merton conference, alas the event did not take place and not even a note was issued to explain why, or even THAT, it would not. I want to believe these are only temporary difficulties and that the Society will shortly resume its activities in a more reliable manner.

Obviously, the high point of Merton Studies in Poland was the above mentioned international conference, the proceedings of which have been published in a bilingual edition of *Studia Mertoniana* 2. Paul M. Pearson has already written about "a wonderful variety and diversity" of scholarship to be found in that volume.<sup>12</sup> Considering that it came out at the very end of 2003 and has not been reviewed at length, I feel it falls into the temporal range of this bibliographic essay and will include it in later discussion. First, however, I wish to conclude this brief overview of Merton's reception in Poland by referring to my personal experience as lecturer in American Literature and member of the Polish Association for American Studies (PAAS). Over more than a decade I have heard only two scholars (other than me) giving papers on Merton at our annual American Studies conferences or other literary conferences in the English language for that matter. Unfortunately, in the academic life outside the confines of theological and spiritual studies' departments, Merton is a marginal presence at best, a significant absence at worst.

### **Pitfalls of Merton-Centricity**

This brings me to the ambiguities of Merton's canonical status and his reputation as a poet in particular. Although the Gethsemani monk treated poetry as his most authentic and probably most important means of expression, judging by publications about Merton from the serialized bibliography in *The Merton Seasonal*, only a narrow margin of Merton scholars have recognized this, while the larger critical establishment remains totally oblivious to the merits of his verse, or even to its existence. Are we, Merton readers and scholars, aware of this fact, or is our perception distorted by the gravitational pull of our sympathy for and professional interest in Merton? Recently, when reading Krzysztof Bielowski's short introduction to a section on literature and art in the Merton anthology in Polish, *Aby odnalezc Boga* (To find God), it dawned on me how easily, how willingly in fact, we all fall into the trap of

Merton-centricity. Bielawski claims that Merton considered himself a poet, which is true, and that he is perceived as such in the Anglo-Saxon cultural context, which is already a wish projection of a dedicated Merton reader, I am afraid. It is sufficient to leaf through a couple of recent anthologies of American poetry (other than spiritual or religious poetry) to realize that Merton is not included at all.<sup>13</sup> David Perkins' classical two-volume study *A History of Modern Poetry* mentions Merton only in passing, as a representative of the neo-Metaphysical mode of the 1940s and 1950s. Perkins writes:

Merton, a Trappist monk, was better known for his prose writings than for his poetry. Though his verse is rather conventional, some lines are memorable, as, for example, when he observes that Greek women "Walk like reeds and talk like rivers." In the 1960s Merton's verse engaged social issues, and became satiric and declamatory.<sup>14</sup>

And that is all.

While this comment, free from the bias of Merton-centricity, may dispel some of our deeply cherished illusions and help us regain a healthier perspective on Merton, it also makes us realize how much serious research is still needed to bring the readers' and critics' attention to such late poems as *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, which remain less known than they deserve to be.<sup>15</sup> Their full appreciation might turn the tables of critical opinion in Merton's favor, as these poems register the challenges of late modernity and contain insights the contemporary reader can well relate to, regardless of his or her religious affiliation. Sadly, Merton's late poetry is practically unknown in Poland. The only Polish collection of Merton's selected poems, published in 1986,<sup>16</sup> contains about seventy pieces, including eight fragments from *The Geography of Lograire*, and almost no other late verses.

### **Free-Floating Existence under the State of Risk: Collected Papers of the First Merton Conference in Poland**

Among the contributors to the bilingual post-conference volume *Studia Mertoniana 2*, the English and American scholars need no introduction. Most of the Polish names, however, are not so easily recognizable to an English speaking reader, though they deserve to be. The essays presented in the collection can be grouped into several categories: some examine Merton's contemplative experi-

ence, others discuss his, broadly understood, witness to life, still others deal with the monk's art and poetry, as well as the Milosz connection. Regretting that I cannot discuss them all in detail, since they are all stimulating, I intend to devote more attention to those pieces that offer intriguing arguments and open fresh vistas on Merton Studies.

Jozef Zycinski's "The Crisis of Scientific-Technical Civilisation and the World of Spiritual Values in the Reflections of Thomas Merton" leads off the volume, presenting Merton as a guide in the axiological deserts of the third millennium and providing a frame of reference for the essays to follow. The author starts with an overview of the postmodern condition, tracing its roots to the post-Enlightenment disillusionment with the rhetoric of progress and the unfulfilled promise of science to usher in a world of universal peace and happiness. Zycinski shows how the de-centering process initiated with Nietzsche's radical critique of the metaphysics of presence resulted in the subsequent revisions of such concepts as truth, sense, and the human person. Small narratives of weak thought, with no aspiration to understand existence in its totality, have replaced the discredited metanarratives. Consequently, *homo postmodernus* is a tragic nomad wandering aimlessly in a disorientated territory which resembles a rhizome. Such a person becomes easily seduced by New Age ideologies offering a substitute of authentic mystical experience along with a makeshift of sense in an otherwise absurd reality. Here the author draws an arresting analogy between New Age, kitsch, and belief in the UFOs, the three being identified as extreme examples of pathologies in the realms of religion, art, and science respectively. Shown against this background, Merton's religious quest, solidly grounded in the mystical tradition of the West enriched and complemented by Eastern contemplative spiritualities, a quest that stresses personal effort rather than passive obedience to necessary laws, becomes an attractive option in the open society of late *modernitas*. The essays that follow explore aspects of this intriguing attractiveness.

Patrick Hart, OCSO, concentrates on Merton's contribution to monastic renewal as an important aspect of Merton's witness to life. Insisting that the monastic charism is a charism of freedom, Merton specified that in order to exercise it in a prophetic spirit, monks must be liberated from the confusions of the "worldly" existence. In other words, they must be marginal and deliberately irrelevant to the world, which in turn aligns them with such mar-

ginal persons as poets or hippies. The paper introduces the theme of marginality, which comes under close scrutiny in another essay presented in the volume. Maciej Bielawski, OSB, professor of theology at St. Anselm University in Rome, Italy, looks at "Merton's Margin" from socio-historical, existential, theological, and symbolic perspectives, performing some dazzling verbal acrobatics to expose the paradoxes and ambiguities of marginality. First, since what passes for the center of life in the *polis*, proves to be a centerless world, a world without God, the monk must move away "to the margins of civilization, Church, monasticism, and himself," although he never leaves those dimensions completely.<sup>17</sup> Next, in his search for meaning and authenticity, he discovers a new center in the margin, which discovery makes the ex-center circulate around the new one, thus depriving the anti-center "of its lethal power."<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, viewed from the theological perspective, the monk arrives "to the margin of the world with faith," and, having discovered doubt in its margin, he goes "to the margin of faith" in order to purify faith itself. Bielawski adds that in the act of creation God decentralized himself to allow the world to exist in the center. Our task as believers, therefore, is to discover the centrality of this self-marginalized God.<sup>19</sup> In our search for this true center we are aided by marginal persons, among whom Bielawski enumerates Kafka and his protagonists, Pinocchio, characters created by Hans Christian Andersen, Dostoyevsky and his Prince Myshkin, Kierkegaard, Lao Tzu, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and such Polish poets as Cyprian Kamil Norwid and Czeslaw Milosz. "It is good to ... place [Merton] in this specific company," says the author.<sup>20</sup>

Czeslaw Milosz is another contributor to *Studia Mertoniana*. His short essay,<sup>21</sup> one of the last things he wrote before his death last year at the age of 93, is a tribute one marginal person paid to another. The Nobel laureate places Merton among such heroes of the troubled 20th century as Simone Weil and Albert Camus, "whose creative thought may tip the scales of victory of good over evil."<sup>22</sup> This comment is a lucid proof that Milosz finally succeeded in freeing himself from the limitations of the Eastern European perspective that for a long time had been influencing his view of the Gethsemani monk.

The burden of history resulting in misapprehensions and mutual misreadings is carefully analyzed in the essay entitled "Merton and Milosz in the Face of Totalitarianisms." Elzbieta Kislak, a lit-



erary scholar, finds it ironical that Milosz should have misread the author of "Letters to an American Liberal" as a liberal, while Merton misread the Polish émigré poet, who happened to have written the tremendously influential *Captive Mind*, as a political writer, apparently undervaluing his poetry. The whole essay seems to circle around the insidious traps of perspectivism which distorts ideas in the process of, literally, getting them across. On the other hand, such misapprehensions can become a *felix culpa*, a broadening of horizons inescapably limited by one's unique and always fragmentary experience. And thus, for instance, in consonance with his understanding of resistance to the totalitarianism of commercial culture (which found its expression in his practice of anti-poetry), Merton (mis)read Milosz's Ketman<sup>23</sup> as a paradoxical affirmation of one's identity through a dialectical game with the regime, while, protests Kislak, "independence and inner freedom weren't at stake, they constituted the cost."<sup>24</sup> At the same time, however, Merton's broad understanding of totalitarianism made his reading of *The Captive Mind* "innovative and profound,"<sup>25</sup> anticipating the development of Milosz's own thinking on the subject as expressed in *The Year of the Hunter*.<sup>26</sup> All in all, it is the spiritual kinship of the two "monks," rather than divergences between them, that emerges with clarity in the Polish poet's later work (*The Land of Urlo*, *Hymn to the Pearl*, and *Another Space*).

"Thomas Merton—an Artist" is the title of Katarzyna Bruzda's engaging study. Herself an artist, Bruzda discusses four categories of Merton's artistic work: 1) early drawings, caricatures, and sketches; 2) the cycle of female portraits; 3) photography; 4) calligraphies, specifying that the subject calls for a more detailed analysis. Her essay is informative, entertaining, lucidly argued, and quite exhaustive, considering the limited range of its twenty pages.

Waclaw Hryniewicz, OMI, head of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology at the Ecumenical Institute of the Catholic University of Lublin, compares the visions of universal salvation in the mystical experience of Thomas Merton and Julian of Norwich.<sup>27</sup> In his essay Hryniewicz argues that mystics are crucial to our times, since the difficult task of rethinking the mysteries of Christian faith in order to bring out Christianity's most daring and thought-provoking aspects cannot be realized in a purely discursive way. Mystics are on the side of mercy, concludes the author, they cannot accept eternal damnation, they preach hope and build bridges of under-

standing between religions. That is why Merton and Lady Julian are so close to his heart.

Theresa Sandok, OSM, brings her philosophical expertise to a study of Merton's evolving views on contemplation ("Thomas Merton's Contemplative Vision"). She argues that Merton's understanding of God as pure Being "helped him avoid saying foolish things about God and the spiritual life"<sup>28</sup> and ultimately grounded his interreligious dialogue. Merton knew that contemplation is a theological grace, rather than a technique that can be taught. What enables us to receive it is *Gelassenheit*, a resolve to open ourselves to Being.

Openness is a key term in Krzysztof Bielawski's empathic reading of Merton's *Midsummer Diary*. Accidentally, his essay may provide a counterpoint to the disenchanted (I would say ill-disposed) readers who feel irked by Merton's supposed dismissal of his affair with M. as "incredible stupidity."<sup>29</sup> At this point I feel tempted to benefit from the opportunity provided me by this essay and express my personal conviction that, when placed within the whole context of Merton's life and vocation, it becomes clear that what the monk dismisses is not the seriousness of his engagement, but the ensuing entanglement in illusion and sentimentality. Having married compassion, Merton discovered that his vocation to universal love was incompatible with the commitment and exclusivity required by passionate love. A careful reading of his journal entries and the diary he wrote for the student nurse suggests that Merton found himself in a state resembling anomie, a condition in which norms of conduct are unclear or contradictory. Introduced by sociologist Emile Durkheim in his classical study on suicide, anomie can be defined as "rootlessness bordering on self-annihilation that occurs when human desires are raised beyond their realistic life expectations."<sup>30</sup> It seems to me that what Merton termed "incredible stupidity" was his recklessness in pursuing unrealistic desires and the self-division this recklessness fostered.

The remaining essays in *Studia Mertoniana* exercise familiar themes. A literary scholar, Zofia Zarebianka, interprets the monk's verses in terms of a personal spiritual diary ("Meditative Experience in the Poetry of Thomas Merton"). Konrad Bereza, OSB, comments on "Thomas Merton's Theology of Self," while another Cistercian scholar, Konrad Malys, analyses Merton's reading of St. Bernard. Basil Pennington, an American member of the Cistercian community, in his essay "Thomas Merton and Center-

ing Prayer," develops the insights introduced earlier in his book *Thomas Merton: Brother Monk*. Two other interesting contributions complete the collection: Paul M. Pearson's "Thomas Merton, Archivist" and the Polish Jesuit Stanislaw Obirek's "Second Round of Merton's Beer or Mysticism Incarnate." Since both had already been published in other periodicals, I assume they are familiar to the interested English reader.<sup>31</sup>

Unfortunately, the English reader will not always get the full flavor of the papers which were originally written in Polish, as the translations are of uneven quality. Thus, for example, the compact, erudite text by Zycinski, sprinkled with philosophical and scientific terminology, suffers in translation from stylistic awkwardness and sometimes it is hard to get the gist of his argument without referring to the original. Surprisingly, there are some rather serious linguistic mistakes in it, too. But the essay by Katarzyna Bruzda seems to suffer the most. The translation is simply negligent: it loses articles and prepositions, whole phrases or even sentences are missing, adjectives are used as nouns, meanings are distorted. Occasionally, one has the impression of listening to a learner of English.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the publisher did not always remember to set longer quotations apart from the text or, when they are indented, they get mixed up with the (also indented) commentary. I really see no justification for allowing so many mistakes and mistranslations slip into a volume that was to be a milestone in the history of Merton Studies in Poland.

### **Translation and Stereoscopic Vision**

The literal sense of translation is to bear across. What can be borne across, however, are not only words or ideas, but people, too. "Having been borne across the world, we are translated men [and women]," says a contemporary writer.<sup>33</sup> It strikes me that Merton can be seen as a typical translated person, son of translated parents, and that his life exemplifies all the attendant risks and hard-won gains of the translating process.

Czeslaw Milosz described his correspondence with Merton as "an interesting clash of American and European minds."<sup>34</sup> There is, obviously, much truth in it, but while Milosz was attracted to Manichean dualities, Merton struggled to transcend dichotomies, and this is part of his abiding attractiveness. Born in France of a New Zealand father and an American mother, and educated in French and English schools, he accepted American citizenship as

late as 1951, though even then he was far from settling his ongoing argument with America. That it was the old continent that had actually had a formative influence on the young Thomas Merton was once again brought to our attention by a recent article, "A New Zealand Painter in Medieval France," published by Roger Collins, a specialist in Owen Merton and the curator of an exhibition of his drawings and paintings entitled "Owen Merton—Expatriate Painter," held in 2004 at the Christchurch Art Gallery in New Zealand. In an interesting earlier essay Collins had already pointed out the paradoxical geographical trajectory of Owen Merton's life, which, from hindsight, seems to anticipate his son's ambiguous relation to the dialectics of margin and center. In 1916, when Owen with his wife Ruth and their one-year-old son Tom were leaving France for New York, Owen was an expatriate who twelve years earlier "had traveled from his colonial periphery to the center (first London, then Paris)" and subsequently retreated "to the isolation of the French provinces." Now, continues the author, he "was once again moving to a metropolitan center."<sup>35</sup> The constant shuttling between periphery and center, between continents and cultures, entails both losses and gains. It seems that the greatest gain, as well as the most precious gift the translated person can offer the world, is a sort of "stereoscopic vision."<sup>36</sup> The problematic attitude to the "nationality" category in passport, manifested by the narrator of Thomas Merton's early semi-autobiographical novel *My Argument with the Gestapo*, becomes paradigmatic of the loss of sharp outlines and the blurring of borders in the process of being "borne across."

Roger Collins' primary interest in "A New Zealand Painter in Medieval France" is to detail Owen Merton's discovery of French landscapes, art, and architecture, to document his sensitivity to color and the effects of light, and how these influences enhanced his art. The artist's letters to his mother and the pictures he painted while in France prove that France made Owen aware of Europe's medieval heritage.<sup>37</sup> Owen first visited France in 1905 or 1906. He came back in 1910 to attend a sketching school in Brittany and to travel in the country. It was only then that he started to absorb the medieval atmosphere of southern townscapes which he was contemplating with a painter's eye. Poitiers, the site of the great battle of 1356, in which the king of France was defeated by England's Black Prince, and Chinon, suggestive of Joan of Arc and François Rabelais, made him aware of the historical dimension of the present

moment; they spoke of continuity rather than break with the past. Roger Collins identifies an important epiphany Owen experienced during his stay in Chinon. Becoming tired of the merely picturesque, he understood the value of structure and of the arrangement of details within a picture as crucial aspects of beauty and art itself. Significant details—all those “small things”—claims Collins, continued to delight the painter throughout his life. Such details also dominate the artist’s epistolary descriptions of his travels in France, aligning his letter-writing with the painting technique he adopted.

Infatuated with France, Merton decided to settle in Paris, where he was exposed to some more medieval architecture. Although Owen Merton “cannot be acclaimed as an exemplary pioneering New Zealand medievalist,”<sup>38</sup> says Collins, he did appreciate the beauty of French cathedrals, was discovering organ music and Gregorian chants, and delighted in his visits to Chartres and Carcassonne. In 1913, the beauty of Chartres Cathedral and the color of Provence made Owen confess in a letter to his mother, Gertrude Merton: “I cannot bring myself to contemplate the possibility of life anywhere but in France.”<sup>39</sup> He managed to communicate some of this fascination with France and its medieval heritage to his son, Tom, born in Prades, a town permeated with medieval atmosphere. In his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* Thomas Merton remembers his passion for “those cathedrals and ancient abbeys and those castles and towns and monuments of culture”<sup>40</sup> he first studied as a boy in a richly illustrated book *Le Pays de France*. Roger Collins’ article, documenting an important period in the life of an unjustly undervalued artist, whom John Simpson calls “a shadowy figure mostly remembered as being the father of Thomas Merton,”<sup>41</sup> throws an interesting light on the importance of the European heritage in the life of Owen’s celebrated son. Thomas Merton was to remain faithful to this early awakened passion for the Middle Ages and gothic architecture and would eventually become member of a religious order which had originated in twelfth-century France.

A Polish Cistercian scholar has recently presented Thomas Merton as a person captivated by St. Bernard’s “youthful Europe,” with its simplicity, vigor, universality, and magnanimity. In his introduction to the Polish edition of Merton’s *The Last of the Fathers*,<sup>42</sup> Michal Ziolo, OCSO, presents the American monk as a spiritual seeker able to perceive God’s presence in the most profane

dimension of life, an artist gifted with a capacity for wonder, an intellectual endowed with brilliant intuitions, and a man of creative restlessness intrigued by the dynamics and daring of early Cistercians in their confrontation with seemingly hopeless situations. Cistercian spirituality is thoroughly rooted in the here and now and attentive to quotidian reality, so that the most prosaic object or event may trigger an illuminative experience, explains the author. Interestingly, his comments imply a continuity of experience between Owen Merton's appreciativeness of details, which Roger Collins attributed to the influence of France, and the Cistercian spirituality embraced by his son. The Cistercian ecstatic but always realistic optimism<sup>43</sup> points to the indebtedness of Thomas Merton's hopeful disposition to an original European tradition, rather than being derived solely from the optimistic legacy of Emerson and Whitman.<sup>44</sup>

Merton left evidence of his contemplative attention to and deep respect for the immediate reality in numerous spiritual and poetic works, as well as in his calligraphies and photographs. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Zen Photography of Thomas Merton* edited by Paul M. Pearson is a slim but important publication that continues to introduce us to the monk's photographs collected in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University. Like the 2003 booklet, *The Paradox of Place: Thomas Merton's Photography*, it is a catalog of an exhibition, held at the McGrath Art Gallery, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky from November 19th 2004 to January 5th 2005. In addition to reproductions of some of the photographs, accompanied by a list of all the thirty-five exhibits paired with carefully selected quotations from Merton's prose and poetry, *A Hidden Wholeness* consists of three essays that explore various aspects of Merton's photographic art in terms of the artist's Zen way of seeing. These are: "Thomas Merton: Photographer" by Paul M. Pearson, "Through a Glass Purely" by Deba P. Patnaik, and "'One Aesthetic Illumination: Thomas Merton and Buddhism'" by Bonnie B. Thurston.

In his documentation of Merton's fascination with the camera, Paul M. Pearson brings out the monk's growing awareness of the captivating beauty of the "unpoetic." In 1962 Merton was taking photographs in Shakertown and wondering: "How the blank side of a frame house can be so completely beautiful I cannot imagine."<sup>45</sup> Another important self-revelation that Merton registered with his camera concerned his position vis-à-vis the world. In the

best of his photographs what we see is not an "objective" world existing independently of the observer, but a world the observer is a part of, though s/he never "possesses" or controls it. In 1963 Merton meditates on Merleau-Ponty's dictum: "I am myself as I exist in the world." Pearson comments:

This leads him to question the position he had been taking, of being himself by withdrawing from the world, and stating that he agrees profoundly with Merleau-Ponty providing that the world he is referring to is not one of "delusions and clichés." He writes that "to withdraw from where I am in order to be totally outside all that situates me—this is real delusion."<sup>46</sup>

This moment is highly significant not only for situating Merton within the optics of Zen-consciousness, with its annulment of the subject / object split and the recovery of the sense of oneness with all creation, but also within the vitally important tradition of object-based poetics, itself influenced by the Zen-inspired Anglo-American imagist movement of the 1910s. Although Pearson's focus is obviously different, he manages to smuggle in a reference to Merton's use of the camera to produce "images which had the same effect as his later drawings and antipoetry."<sup>47</sup> I welcome this allusion as it opens a much needed perspective on a better appreciation of Merton's late poetry and its similarity to, as well as a difference from, the American avant-garde poetics of the 1950 and 1960s.

This insight is deepened by Deba Patnaik, who aligns Merton's photography with the sparing poetry of Robert Lax and Louis Zukofsky, as well as the art of 20th century minimalist photographers. The common denominator for all those artists is avoidance of self-projection and referentiality and concentration on "pure seeing" instead. Such seeing becomes possible when, in Merton's words, "the smoke of ideas clears."<sup>48</sup> Patnaik's organizing idea for the essay comes from Merton's comment on Zen: "If Zen has any preference it is for glass that is plain, has no color, and is 'just glass'."<sup>49</sup> Recovering the innocence of vision that allows things to exist in their own right, rather than as projections of human desires, the contemplative photographer becomes transparent to the world and sees it, as it were, from within: seeing "through a glass purely" parallels Rilke's "inseeing." Patnaik advances the theory that Merton's photography can be called "photographing degree zero," by an obvious analogy with Roland Barthes' "writing de-

gree zero"<sup>50</sup> that renounces all "messages" and contraptions of art. "We are what we are" proclaim the images in the McGrath Art Gallery. "See. See without the smoke of theories and symbolisms."<sup>51</sup>

The Zen idea of becoming all eye, along with the possibility of piercing illusions and reaching the very "suchness" of things, is further explored in the collection's third essay. Bonnie B. Thurston calls Merton's photographs "a sort of *satori*," an intuitive illumination which the monk achieved—and captured with his camera—because he was wholly present to the immediate reality. She remarks: "Direct awareness of and response to the minute details of daily living are fundamental aspects of Zen discipline. . . Merton's photographs invite us to 'one aesthetic illumination' in which we see the 'mundane' and the 'spiritual' as one."<sup>52</sup> Obviously, the emphasis on the ordinary as a potential vehicle of spiritual enlightening that Thurston attributes to the influence of Zen on Merton's art was part of a broader and more complex phenomenon. On the one hand, William Carlos Williams in his belief that

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens<sup>53</sup>

endorses the same understanding of the poetics of the real, a return to "the thing itself," however ungainly, in search for aesthetic illumination. On the other hand, there is the whole contemplative tradition of early Cistercians, influenced by the *Theoria Physike* of the Greek Fathers that taught Merton to perceive the simplest and most ordinary reality as imbued with Presence. Merton's Zen photography, his "anti-poetry," and his Cistercian spirituality are different facets of the same, integrated, artistic-contemplative vision of reality—a "stereoscopic vision" produced by the process of cultural translation. Such a vision cannot but result in a truly "universal embrace."

*The World in My Bloodstream: Thomas Merton's Universal Embrace* is the title of a collection of papers originally presented at the Fourth General Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great



Britain and Ireland. While corroborating most of the above-discussed insights, the volume extends the range of concerns beyond art and spirituality to explore the significance of Merton's message for the post-9/11 political, economic, and social issues. Some authors are quite outspoken in their critique of the hypocrisy and short-sightedness of the current American policy, others make a similar point in a more nuanced manner. All go to Merton for answers to the fundamental question about the place of the individual in troubled times. The answers, they all agree, are to be found in the ethical vision of life, in becoming responsible for oneself and others, in relating to others not within the abstract framework of globalization, but through altro-centeredness, personalism and compassionate love. In the context of the cross-cultural misunderstandings attendant on the "war on terror," Merton's tender embrace of Islam explored by Bonnie B. Thurston is of particular relevance. All the essays collected in the volume show Thomas Merton as a person who had the entire world in his bloodstream and whose universal embrace forged a new transcultural consciousness—one would almost wish to add that he was like a transparent glass, without the accumulated smoke of ideas and theories, which reflected the world "purely."

**The Beatnik-Monastic Fringe of the All-American Trio:  
Thomas Merton, Robert Lax, and Edward Rice**

Merton's association with the Beat Generation of the 1950s and 1960s has lately become another fertile ground of research. Quite predictably, Merton found himself in sympathy with those writers, self-excluded from the consumerist utopia of the "square" society and contesting its values by casting themselves in the roles of beaten—as well as beatific—artists of life. In Merton's language they qualified as "monks in reverse."<sup>54</sup> This theme is explored by David Belcastro and Angus Steward in two stimulating essays from *The World in My Bloodstream*. Belcastro asserts that through his life and writings Merton redefined monasticism to include the "subterranean" world of the body the Beats represented. To prove the point he quotes Merton's poem on the five (Beatnic) virgins who came to the Wedding Feast with disabled motorcycles and were allowed to stay. Angus Steward examines the Merton-Kerouac connection, calling both figures Dharma Bums.

Well in advance of the movement, however, Merton and his Columbia friends, chief among them being Robert Lax and Ed-

ward Rice, had already been living the Beat experience without knowing it. This fact is alluded to in Arthur Jones's article "A Poet, a Monk and a Journalist."<sup>55</sup> Reviewing the three books on the "all-American trio" published in the last few years—S.T. Georgiou's *The Way of the Dreamcatcher*, the letters of Robert Lax and Thomas Merton edited by Arthur W. Biddle, and *Circus Days and Nights* by Robert Lax—Jones savors the climate of jazz and experimental writing and living characteristic of the three friends' Columbia days. Commenting on their status as "the first hippies," he says: "They were hippies who could write—initially for each other, then for wider audiences . . . finally, cumulatively, to the future as epilogue and epitaph writers for the generation."

The relationship between the three "monks" and artists becomes the focus of attention of James Harford, a long-time friend of Lax and Rice, in his article "Merton and Friends in the 1940s"<sup>56</sup> excerpted from a book he is currently working on. Harford places his memories of the trio in the context of Wilfrid Sheed's comment: "Much of the Beat life style existed among a small group at Columbia University as early as 1939."<sup>57</sup> The other date bracketing the decade Harford is focusing his lens on, 1949, was the time Lax got reunited with his other fellow Columbia bohemians: Ad Reinhardt, the budding abstract painter, and Bob Gibney, then married to Lax's former girlfriend, Nancy Flagg, at the Gibney's Virgin Island abode. It is Flagg who years later compared the mood of the Olean days in the life of the Merton-Lax-Rice trio with the quartet's Carribean experience in her 1972 article "The Beats in the Jungle." In between the two dates Harford traces the lives of Merton, Lax, and Rice, highlighting the antiestablishment attitudes they owed to their Columbia experience and their resulting dedication to explore cultural and spiritual alternatives to mainstream values, combined with their self-imposed marginality: Merton's in the monastic enclosure, Rice's and Lax's in their nonconformity and relative obscurity. Prior to launching his groundbreaking, dogmatically challenging religious magazine *Jubilee*, Rice was striving unsuccessfully to be a writer. In the meantime Lax had been fired from the *Time* because his film reviews were apparently too subtle for the editors, felt that he was made "unholy" by his two-year-stint in Hollywood, finally joined the Cristiani Brothers circus as a reporter-at-large, but the article he was to write never materialized. Instead, the reworked experience was published in 1959 as a volume of poetry *Circus in the Sun*. Of the three Colum-

bia friends only Merton was secure in his monastic withdrawal from the world and, paradoxically, becoming a celebrity with the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* in 1948.

On December 1, 1949, Rice remarked that the "best art of the present" is "spot art. . . Good because it is used as an aid to other things just like medieval and Byzantine wall drawings and decorations were used as an aid to worship."<sup>58</sup> This comment captures an important aspect of the three ex-Columbia bohemians' sense of art, as well as elucidating the relative lack of critical acclaim they suffered from when their most authentic artistic voice was concerned. Just like Rice, Merton and Lax treated art as a cognitive tool, an instrument to access the hidden wisdom of things, rather than a goal in itself.

As regards the spiritual quest the three of them were pursuing in the 1940s, Merton speculated in his autobiography that Lax had a deeper sense of God's closeness than he did.<sup>59</sup> It is difficult not to think about this remark reading the beautiful tribute Moschos Lagouvardos write for his late friend, "Memories of Robert Lax." The author had met Lax on Patmos in 1968 and since then visited him often. His lyrical essay seems to touch on the very mystery of holiness. Remembered as a person who loved even inanimate beings and never said a bad word about anyone, "Roberto" Lax enjoyed the company of simple people, knew waiters, fishermen, and hotel staff by their names, and was at peace with himself and with the world. One can hardly read these recollections without being reminded of the Sermon on the Mount and seeing the beatitudes at work in the life of that man. There are some humorous touches in the essay too, but they only reinforce the sense of "Roberto's" almost otherworldly innocence and kindness. Thus for example, Lax did not care for the clothes he was wearing, but, Lagouvardos says, "unkemptness was part of his charm."<sup>60</sup> And so was his awkwardness, at which he often laughed. Dividing his time on Kalymnos and then on Patmos between praying, writing, answering voluminous mail, and traveling or walking, Lax became what Thomas Merton was striving hard to be: an authentic monk, though a monk *in* the world. In the purity of his heart, his meek disposition, simplicity, peacefulness, and love of wisdom and beauty, Lax was free from attachments and oblivious to his own needs—like transparent glass that allows light to pass through without deflecting it. Recollecting Lax's words that "art makes all things bright," Lagouvardos remarks: "He himself was that art

which he had just talked about that afternoon. He touched the earth as if he were nothing more than a tender look."<sup>61</sup> Such poetic moments are frequent in this heartfelt verbal portrait sketched by somebody who knew and loved Robert Lax and felt happy writing the essay because he was writing "about Roberto."<sup>62</sup> It is good these memories can be shared because the fate of the world depends on its saints, their mercy, and their joy. Robert Lax was among those who make the world brighter. Holiness may be marginal *in* the world but it is absolutely central *to* it.

### Public Intellectual in the Margin

The fact that Merton's extended definition of the monk proves to be consonant with many contemporary intellectuals' understanding of their role in the technological society is the focus of J.S. Porter's essay "Thomas Merton as Public Intellectual," published in the summer issue of *The Merton Seasonal*. Porter first situates Merton in a long line of Columbia public intellectuals, from Mark Van Doren to Edward Said, "noted for critique and dissent,"<sup>63</sup> which qualities he attributes to "a legacy of enlightened humanism."<sup>64</sup> Next he quotes Morris Berman's description of the "new monastic individual" as "a sacred / secular humanist, dedicated not to slogans or the fashionable patois of postmodernism, but the Enlightenment values that lie at the heart of our civilization: the disinterested pursuit of the truth, the cultivation of art, the commitment to critical thinking."<sup>65</sup> Having thus established a link between the intellectual and the monk as persons marginal to and critical of the power structures and illusions of the world, Porter evokes one of the most celebrated intellectuals of the last half-century, the Palestinian scholar Edward Said, to demonstrate how closely Merton's concept of marginality corresponds to Said's belief that the intellectual should always side with the poor, the silenced, the outlawed, the excluded, and raise uncomfortable questions to confront the apparently unshakeable certitudes of the established centers. All in all, the monk as public intellectual—as well as the public intellectual as monk—must be an exile, literal or metaphorical, from a one-dimensional technopoly (society dominated by technological values). The main body of the essay examines Merton's challenge to technopoly as represented by Merton's parodies of Adolf Eichmann, the technological man *par excellence*. Eichmann, who was in charge of the Auschwitz genocide project, is a prototypical techno-man, "a rational man without feeling,

without compassion and without guilt or anxiety"<sup>66</sup> who speaks the language of officialdom. In our times, says the author, his voice can be heard, for instance, in the pronouncements of Cheney and Rumsfeld.

While the whole essay is lucidly organized and cogently argued, there are two occasions when it falls short of the high standard the author sets for himself. First, Porter advances a risky thesis that Merton was an "heir to a legacy of enlightened humanism," which needs to be qualified to be properly understood. Without this qualification the reader may mistake the "Enlightenment values" Porter's public intellectual is to cherish with Merton's wholesale acceptance of the Enlightenment, which is simply untrue. Merton, quite predictably, had a problematic relation with the Age of Reason, which, to put it bluntly, replaced metaphysics with physics and so launched the Western world towards technopoly and the postmodern void. It is sufficient to revisit Merton's essays on Camus and Faulkner to realize how much Eichmann's "sanity" was the product of the Enlightenment itself: of the rational, Apollonian, "enlightened" mind that, as Merton saw it, "recoils from Dionysian dread."<sup>67</sup> Porter, seemingly oblivious to the inconsistency within his argumentation, fails to show that Eichmann's sanity without love is seen by Merton as frequently vested in the most "enlightened" individuals (Faulkner's Jason would be a literary case in point Merton commented on<sup>68</sup>).

Moreover, Porter identifies four Merton pieces that revolve around the figure of Eichmann, while Merton wrote only three.<sup>69</sup> The fourth one, "Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces" (1963), performs not Eichmann but Rudolf Hess, the first Auschwitz concentration camp commander, who started organizing mass murder in a technical way. Merton must have known how easily people confused the two criminals and so he made it clear that "Chant" was about Hess in his letter to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the editor of *Journal for the Protection of All Beings*, who was publishing his poem.<sup>70</sup> The letter to Cid Corman that Porter quotes as, supposedly, identifying the poem as "a sort of Eichmann's own double talk about himself" refers to "A Devout Meditation."<sup>71</sup> Having said that, I want to stress once again that these are minor flaws in an otherwise admirable essay, and even the confusion of Eichmann with Hess is quite a legitimate mistake, as both represent two almost identical realizations of the same "technological man" type. In the optics of the essay the intellec-

tual-monk's task is to demystify the "new man" of technopoly as enslaved to slogans and dominated by machines, and to present creative, authentically *new* alternatives to such a solipsistic, fragmented existence.

The same issue of *The Merton Seasonal* features another thought-provoking, post-conference paper that identifies Merton as an intellectual exceptionally sensitive to the *Zeitgeist* and, consequently, living at the religious edge. In "Thomas Merton: A Parable for Our Time" William Reiser, SJ, identifies a number of fault lines in the Gethsemani monk's thinking, which anticipate the "disjunctions, dislocations, and relativism" of our postmodern times.<sup>72</sup> One of the tensions resulted from Merton's early recognition of the multiple ways in which God's mystery manifested itself in the world: "The business of becoming fully human and of creating a world order marked by justice and peace," remarks Reiser, "is far too important for God to entrust it to just one religion."<sup>73</sup> This recognition situated Merton at the "edge of Christian identity,"<sup>74</sup> and demanded solidarity with the victims of power politics of most diverse sorts. There is no doubt that Merton's heightened sensitivity to the spirit of his age that has ultimately made him "a parable for our time" can be largely attributed to his belonging to a number of, apparently at least, discontinuous worlds. Reiser enumerates the following: "the world of the Desert Christians, the world of the Cistercian spiritual tradition, the world of cultural Catholicism of post-war America, the cultural world of Europe, the world of the preconciliar Church, and the world of other major religious traditions."<sup>75</sup> The creative tensions between these worlds could not but lead to some dislodging of traditional assumptions and to producing what I baptized Merton's "stereoscopic vision"—a vision that continues to inspire us in the twenty-first century. In the face of our own struggles and dislocations we can still find strength in the reassurance that "Thomas Merton had been there before me."<sup>76</sup>

### Centering Perspectives: *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*

"But my position loses its meaning unless I can continue to speak from the center of the Church. Yet that is exactly the point: where is the true center?"<sup>77</sup> asked Merton in exasperation, confused about the ban on his peace writing issued in 1962 by Abbot General of the order, and challenged by E.I. Watkins to disobey and follow his conscience. It is a revealing moment. Although Merton did obey

the ban, realizing that an authentic change in the Church's official position on war and on the nuclear threat could come only from inside the institution, the thought about the "true center" of the Church continued to bother him. In a letter to Jim Forest, Merton insisted that his silencing "reflects an insensitivity to Christian and Ecclesiastical values, and to the real sense of the monastic vocation." Considering his banned book, he added with bitterness that "it might just possibly salvage a last shred of repute for an institution that many consider to be dead on its feet."<sup>78</sup> In the same letter Merton commented once again on the monastic vocation and rearticulated his deepest conviction that the monk's position should be in the advance guard of the Church and that his first allegiance was to his conscience.<sup>79</sup> Years later he would define the monk's life in terms of a "free floating existence under the state of risk."<sup>80</sup>

Believing that only obedience would make his witness to peace credible, however, Merton chose a sort of inner emigration.<sup>81</sup> Renouncing the idea of publication, he managed to circumvent the ban by sending self-published copies of his peace book to friends, peace activists, and theologians participating in *Vaticanum Secundum*. It is only recently that, after decades of its existence on the margin of the Merton *opus*, the long suppressed Merton essays gathered in *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* have finally been released by Orbis Books, establishing themselves where in fact they have always belonged: in the center of the Merton canon. The Gethsemani monk frequently expressed his conviction that universal peace must have its origin in the human heart and that unless the individual consciousness has been rebuilt and the heart purged of hate and self-absorption no lasting peace can prevail. *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* once again brings those considerations into sharp focus, but while commenting on the totalitarian state of mind that has led Western Christians to consider waging a nuclear war on their Communist enemy, the author sets himself the task of examining the Church's official position on the bomb and her attitude to war and peace in general. In his recourse to the Fathers of the Church, papal encyclicals, and prominent theological voices of the twentieth century, he truly speaks "from the center of the Church," finding there the very message of peace and nonviolence that many Western priests and religious apparently chose not to hear in the troubled 1960s.

"The purpose of the present book," says Merton about the now forty-two-year-old volume that is still as topical as ever, "is to stand back from the imminent risks of the Cold War crisis, seeking to judge the problem of nuclear war . . . in the light of moral truth."<sup>82</sup> In other words, Merton the Church intellectual retreats to the contemplative margin of the activist, war-crazed society to take a broader view of the totalitarian mind and to ground his political and ethical considerations in an all-embracing spiritual perspective. Doing this he notices that even in the so-called Christian countries Christian ethics is universally ignored, that violence has become the norm while the once normative ethics of charity has acquired an exotic status, and that Christianity itself has been reduced to "a materialistic neopaganism with a Christian veneer." In what he considers to be a post-Christian age Merton prophesies that "life in Christ will become a matter of extraordinary heroism, a venture and an unconditional commitment of which very few will be capable."<sup>83</sup>

Although Christianity has been contaminated by naked power and Christian politicians tend to follow Machiavelli rather than Christ, Merton proclaims his and every conscientious believer's dissent from this line of reasoning by identifying love, including the love of enemies, not power, as the keystone of authentically Christian policy. In this eschatological perspective Christian peace becomes the fruit of the Spirit—it belongs to the new life of the Resurrection, while war and hatreds are remnants of the old life under the Law. Addressing "the dwindling and confused Christian minority in the West,"<sup>84</sup> Merton asks them to muster heroic courage and become peacemakers, that is, nonviolent witnesses to the eschatological norm. Voicing his belief in the power of the spiritual weapon of prayer and witness, Merton quotes Cardinal Newman's belief that "the greatest victories of the Church were all won before Constantine, in the days when there were no Christian armies and when the true Christian soldier was the martyr, whose witness was nonviolent."<sup>85</sup> Such a witness consists, as it did in the early days of Christianity, in proclaiming the hidden presence of the kingdom of peace right in the middle of the violence of history. The secret kingdom, this hidden center of the world from which God seems to be otherwise singularly absent, belongs to those who "will take no direct part in the struggles of earthly kingdoms. Their life is one of faith, gentleness, meekness, patience and purity,"<sup>86</sup> says Merton. (At this point it is difficult not to think



of Robert Lax.) Only by centering their lives in love, this fundamental truth of the Gospel, can such marginal witnesses facilitate the larger world's access to the life-giving truth and initiate a much-needed spiritual revolution that would enable others to choose peace and become responsible before, and give a conscientious response to, the Lord of History.<sup>87</sup>

In his foreword to the book Jim Forest opines: "it would distress [Merton] that, far from being a poignant memento of a bygone era, it [*Peace in the Post-Christian Era*] remains both timely and relevant."<sup>88</sup> Even though Merton concentrated on a particular historical situation and could not even imagine the collapse of Communism, no post-Cold War reader can fail to register a shock of recognition when perusing his prophetic words. Attunement to the spiritual dimension of history allowed Merton to capture the hidden dynamics of totalitarian mentality which, like the mythical hybrid, keeps growing ever new heads. In this context our struggle against the external enemy—be it Communism, terrorism, or other "isms"—can succeed only when we decide to wage a war on "our own violence, fanaticism, and greed" first.<sup>89</sup> Merton's "new" book, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, is a bitter reminder that victory over evil is still as distant as it was when Merton started to pen these essays.

### Conclusions

This brings me back to the relationship between the false center of the *polis* and the margin of authenticity. In my essay I have been arguing that Merton redraws the lines between living in the world and the monastic life and, in the broadest context, between the center and the margin. Most of the publications I have been reviewing explore Merton's vision of the solitary who withdraws to the margin of society to become a diaphanous center of awareness and in whom the divine and the natural intersect.<sup>90</sup> Faced with the postmodern lack of stable centers, the solitary becomes a center him-/ herself. It is a new center that is nowhere and everywhere, that is open and inclusive, and that can, therefore, transcend the opposition between centrality and marginality in a higher synthesis that embraces all.

Questions about the true center of life led Merton away from the "proud world" he had once been immersed in to a Trappist monastery situated on the periphery of the world's concerns. Puzzlement about the true center of the Church made him leave

the relative safety of rigorously and uncritically accepted dogmatic solutions concerning vital problems of his time and placed him on a narrow path close to the religious edge. In this “free-floating existence under the state of risk” Merton was thought to be drifting to the margin of Church orthodoxy, but it was in this very margin that he rediscovered the core of the authentically Christian message and reclaimed it for the Church. Here again Merton seemed to be ahead of his time, anticipating the postsemiotic discovery of marginality as a process, rather than a fixed position. In the materials reviewed in this essay marginality and centrality refuse to remain safely confined to oppositional concepts and become instead two states in an endless process of reinterpretation that parallels the early Christians’ understanding of faith—and life—as pilgrimage, a dynamic reality open to the new and the unexpected. Everyday experience likewise confirms this pivotal truth of the Gospel that the marginal is central. I can only wish for a similar transformation in the realm of Merton Studies in Poland.<sup>91</sup>

## Notes

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1. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude* (ed., Lawrence S. Cunningham; Journals III, 1952-60; San Francisco HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 230.

2. M. J. “Popularny trapista,” *Znak* 5 (1949), pp. 429-430; reprinted in *Studia Mertoniana* 1 (ed., Krzysztof Bielawski; Bydgoszcz: Homini, 2002), pp. 31-33.

3. Jozef Zycinski, “Merton and Ecology of Human Spirit,” tr., Anna Muranty, *Studia Mertoniana* 2. Collected Papers of the first Merton Conference in Poland. Lublin, Oct. 24-27, 2002 (ed., Krzysztof Bielawski; Krakow: Homini, 2003), p. 8.

4. “Building History One Stone at a Time,” *National Catholic Reporter*, July 27, 2001, online.

5. Maciej St. Zieba, preface to the Polish edition, Thomas Merton, *Mysli o Wschodzie* (tr., Adam Wojtasik; Lublin-Krakow: Homini, 2003), p. 11, translation mine.

6. Paul Hourihan, *The Death of Thomas Merton. A Novel*, (Redding, CA: Vedantic Shores Press, 2003).

7. See Paul Ricoeur’s illuminating essay “Religion, Atheism, and Faith,” tr. C. Freilich, in *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), pp. 440-467.

8. Recently a similar conclusion has been reached by Ron Dart in his article “Thomas Merton and Alan Watts: Contemplative Catholic and Oriental Archivist,” *The Merton Journal* 11.2 (Advent 2004), pp. 12-15.

9. *The Last of the Fathers: Saint Bernard of Clairvoaux, Passion for Peace: The Social Essays, Survival or Prophecy: Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq, Dialogues with Silence*, and a re-edition of *Raids on the Unspeakeable* (first published in 1997).

10. Thomas Merton, *Aby odnaleźć Boga. Antologia* [To Find God. An Anthology] (sel. and tr. Aleksander Gomola; Poznan: W drodze, 2004).

11. *O miłosierdziu* [*Parole di misericordia*], tr. Irena Burchacka (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Ksiezy Marianow, 2004).

12. Paul M. Pearson, "Book Round-up," *The Merton Journal* 11.2 (Advent 2004), p. 35.

13. See, for example, *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (ed., Cary Nelson; New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000).

14. David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry. Modernism and After* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1987), p. 387.

15. Recently this field has been explored with interesting results by such scholars as Claire Hoertz Badaracco, Lynn Szabo, and David Belcastro.

16. Thomas Merton, *Wybor wierszy* [Selected Poems] (ed., Jerzy Illg; Krakow: Spoleczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, 1986).

17. Maciej Bielawski, "Merton's Margin," transl., Anna Muranty, *Studia Mertoniana* 2, p. 83.

18. Bielawski, *Studia Mertoniana* 2, p. 85.

19. Bielawski, *Studia Mertoniana* 2, pp. 86-87.

20. Bielawski, *Studia Mertoniana* 2, p. 86.

21. The essay was reprinted as "Czeslaw Milosz on Merton" in *The Merton Journal* 11.2 (Advent 2004), pp. 2-4.

22. Czeslaw Milosz, "Merton," transl., Anna Muranty, *Studia Mertoniana* 2, p. 47.

23. As defined in *The Captive Mind*, Ketman, by analogy with the practice known under this name in the Islamic world, is a strategy that allowed Eastern intellectuals to hide and defend their true beliefs by confessing belief in contrary values. Milosz evokes Gobineau's book *Religions et Philosophies dans l'Asie Central*, which claims that in Islam one is obliged to protect one's faith from being contaminated by contact with the infidel. Ketman, therefore, makes it possible for the Muslim to be silent about the truth or even preach the opposite in order to mislead the enemies of faith.

24. Elzbieta Kislak, "Merton and Milosz in the Face of Totalitarianisms," transl. Anna Muranty, *Studia Mertoniana* 2, p. 171.

25. Kislak, *Studia Mertoniana* 2, p. 172.

26. Czeslaw Milosz, *Rok myśliwego* [The Year of the Hunter] (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1990).

27. In the English translation of this article the mystic's name is wrongly spelled as "Julianna."

28. Theresa Sandok, "Thomas Merton's Contemplative Vision," *Studia Mertoniana* 2, p. 137.

29. Mary Jo Weaver, "Conjectures of a Disenchanted Reader," *Horizons* 30/2 (2003), p. 290.

30. I quote this lucid definition after Susan Muzruchi in "Fiction and the Science of Society," *The Columbia History of the American Novel* (ed., Emory Elliott; New York, Columbia UP, 1991), p. 198.

31. Paul M. Pearson's article appeared in *US Catholic Historian* 21.2 (Spring 2003): 414-62, Stanislaw Obirek's essay, under the title "A Second Round of Merton's Beer, or Mysticism Incarnate," in *The Merton Journal* 10.1 (Easter 2003), pp. 43-49.

32. For example—and I blush to quote: "In this way he enters in his stormy youth, full of contrast events." *Studia Mertoniana* 2, p. 180.

33. Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands," *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1992), p. 17.

34. Milosz, *Studia Mertoniana* 2, p. 46.

35. Roger Collins, "Fronting up to the American Public: Owen Merton's Exhibitions In the United States," *The Merton Seasonal* 26.2 (Summer 2001), p. 36.

36. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p.19.

37. Roger Collins, "A New Zealand Painter in Medieval France," *L'offrande du coeur: Medieval and Early Modern Studies in Honour of Glynnis Cropp* (Christchurch: Canterbury Press, 2004), p. 144.

38. Collins, "A New Zealand Painter in Medieval France," p. 154.

39. Quoted in Collins, "A New Zealand Painter in Medieval France," p. 153.

40. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), p. 43.

41. Jon Simpson, "An Astonishing Variety," Rev. of Owen Merton: *Expatriate Painter*, Catalogue of the Exhibition: 11 June—26 September 2004, by Roger Collins, *The Merton Seasonal* 29.3, p.36.

42. Michal Ziolo, introduction to Thomas Merton, *Ostatni z Ojcow: Sw. Bernard z Clairvaux. Encyklika Doctor Mellifluus [The Last of the Fathers: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and the encyclical letter, Doctor Mellifluus]* (Skoczow, Wydawnictwo Sw. Bernarda, 2004), pp. 9-23.

43. Ziolo, introduction to Thomas Merton, *Ostatni z Ojcow*, p.16.

44. The latter view was held by Czeslaw Milosz. See *Studia Mertoniana* 2, p. 46.

45. Quoted in Paul M. Pearson, "Thomas Merton: Photographer," *A Hidden Wholeness: The Zen Photography of Thomas Merton* (ed., Paul M.

Pearson; Louisville, Kentucky: Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, 2004), p. 4.

46. *A Hidden Wholeness*, p. 7.

47. *A Hidden Wholeness*, p. 9. The same point was made by Katarzyna Bruzda in her essay "Thomas Merton—An Artist," *Studia Mertoniana* 2.

48. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (ed., Partick Hart; San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1999), p. 286.

49. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 4.

50. Thomas Merton, "Roland Barthes—Writing as Temperature," *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (ed., Patrick Hart; New York: New Directions, 1985), pp. 140–146.

51. Deba Patnaik, "Through a Glass Purely," *A Hidden Wholeness*, p. 15.

52. Bonnie Thurston, "'One Aesthetic Illumination:' Thomas Merton and Buddhism," *A Hidden Wholeness*, p. 17.

53. William Carlos Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow," *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (sixth edition, ed., Nina Baym, vol. D; New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2003), p.1271.

54. For a detailed discussion of this phrase see David Belcastro, "Merton and the Beat Generation: A Subterranean Monastic Community," *The World In My Bloodstream. Papers of the Fourth General Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, Oakham School* (ed., Angus Stuart, Abergavenny, Monmouthshire: Three Peaks Press, 2004), pp. 79-91.

55. *National Catholic Reporter*, NCRonline (October 8, 2004). Surprisingly, the text contains a number of imprecise figures concerning Merton. Jones mistakenly claims that Merton died at the age of 63 (actually, he was 53), that he entered Gethsemani in 1944 (it was in 1941), and was naturalized a U.S. citizen in 1950 (1951).

56. *The Merton Seasonal* 29.3 (Fall 2004), pp. 9–23.

57. Quoted in Harford, "Thomas Merton and Friends," p. 20.

58. Harford, "Thomas Merton and Friends," p. 23.

59. Quoted in Moschos Lagouvardos, "Memories of Robert Lax" (transl., Fanee Karatzu, ed., Paul J. Speath), *The Merton Seasonal* 29.3 (Fall 2004), p. 31.

60. *The Merton Seasonal* 29.3, p. 25.

61. *The Merton Seasonal* 29.3, p. 28.

62. *The Merton Seasonal* 29.3, p. 32.

63. *The Merton Seasonal* 29.2 (Summer 2004), p. 16. It was originally presented as a talk at Canadian Memorial United Church, Vancouver, BC, on January 20, 2003.

64. *The Merton Seasonal* 29.2, p. 17.

65. *The Twilight of American Culture* (New York: Norton, 200), p. 10; quoted in *The Merton Seasonal* 29.2, p.17.

66. *The Merton Seasonal* 29.2, p. 20.

67. Merton, "Baptism in the Forest," *Literary Essays* 120-21

68. See especially Merton's "Baptism in the Forest: Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner" and "Time and Unburdening and the Recollection of the Lamb: The Easter Service in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, *Literary Essays*, pp. 92-116 and 497-14 respectively.

69. "Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann" (1964), a fragment from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), and "Epitaph for a Public Servant" (1967).

70. "This piece is by the way not about Eichmann, but about the commandant of Auschwitz, [Rudolf] Hess." Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth. The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers* (ed., Christine M. Bochen; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), p. 268. Accidentally, Lynn R. Szabo, the editor of the just released collection of Merton's selected poems makes the same mistake. See *In the Dark Before Dawn. New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton* (ed. Lynn Szabo; New York: New Directions, 2005), p. 242.

71. Merton, *Courage for Truth*, p. 248. Incidentally, the letter was written on September 5, 1966, not 1965 as Porter claims.

72. *The Merton Seasonal* 29.2 (Summer 2004), pp. 3-13; the paper was first delivered at a conference at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts, on December 10, 2003.

73. *The Merton Seasonal* 29.2, p. 7.

74. *The Merton Seasonal* 29.2, p.9.

75. *The Merton Seasonal* 29.2, p.7.

76. *The Merton Seasonal* 29.2, p. 11. Accidentally, Reiser's emphasis on Merton being "in many respects so noticeably preconciliar" (p. 3) strikes me as unjust. The author apparently chooses not to remember how seriously Merton was involved in preparing the ground for the opening of the Church to the world that the Second Vatican Council implemented. Likewise, Merton's Christ: "the Lord of the Songs" who broke bread with the pre-Columbian Maya (*The Geography of Lograire*, p. 763), the Christ who "went down to stay with them Niggers and took his place with them at table" (*ibid.*, p. 516), and "Christ Our Mother" of Lady Julian of Norwich's revelation—seems to be very much the Jesus of the gospel and everyday life and not, as Reiser claims "the Christ of the dogmatic tradition" (p. 4).

77. Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World* (ed., Victor A. Kramer; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 244-45.

78. Quoted by Jim Forest in foreword to Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* (ed. Patricia A. Burton; New York: Orbis Books, 2004), p. x.

79. Incidentally, this point was elaborated in detail by one of Merton's early guides in the world of the spirit, Cardinal Newman, in his famous 1874 letter to the Duke of Norfolk. Explaining to its Anglican critics the controversial doctrine of papal infallibility accepted by the First Vatican Council in 1870, Newman made a distinction between the pope's *ex cathedra* pronouncements, which acquire the value of infallible decrees, and papal pronouncements dealing with practical matters, which can be erroneous. On the basis of his careful theological and historical inquiry, Newman could generalize the problem, claiming that the voice of conscience, through which God speaks to the believer, should take precedence over the voice of the superiors, who, being human, are always susceptible to misjudgments.

80. *Thomas Merton's View of Monasticism (Informal talk delivered at Calcutta, October 1968)* in: Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), p. 308.

81. Patricia Burton, "The Book that Never Was," introduction to Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, p. xxxv.

82. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, p. 4.

83. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, p. 72.

84. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, p. 9.

85. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, p. 129.

86. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, p. 30.

87. The nonviolent witness of Pope John Paul II's life and death, and the almost global spiritual renewal triggered by his funeral, seem to be most spectacular proofs of this proposition in recent history.

88. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, p. vii.

89. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, p. 11.

90. Compare Donald P. St. John, "Technological Culture and Contemplative Ecology in Thomas Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*," *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 6.2 (2002), pp. 159-182.

91. I owe a debt of gratitude to Edward Jan Michowski, SVD, for his invaluable help in accessing materials crucial to my research for this essay.