

THE MONK AS A “MARGINAL” PERSON

by **George A. Kilcourse**

Thomas Merton personified the honesty of self-deprecating humor. While most of his readers today deftly drum computer keyboards and take for granted micro-chip and microwave technology, the twentieth century's most celebrated hermit appeared embarrassed when electrical and plumbing lines compromised his cinder-block hut by connecting it back to "the world." A Coleman lantern and stove combined originally with a typical Kentucky outhouse to serve the needs of the hermitage. Merton lyricized that simplicity "as one who has more or less retired to a marginal existence"¹ in a poignant prose-poem, "Rain and the Rhinoceros."² Yet one of his most striking retrospects spoke intimately from those margins of our society to celebrate the future of contemplative city-dwellers. Merton reminded us with that disarming honesty of his:

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*; edited by Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 305. Hereafter referred to in the text as *AJ*.

2. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 9-23. Hereafter referred to in the text as *RU*.

Due to a book I wrote thirty years ago, I have myself become a sort of stereotype of the world-denying contemplative — the man who spurned New York, spat on Chicago, and tromped on Louisville heading for the woods with Thoreau in one pocket, John of the Cross in another, and holding the Bible open at the Apocalypse. This personal stereotype is probably my own fault, and it is something I have to try to demolish on occasion.³

Perhaps no one will prove a more demanding revisionist on Merton than Merton himself. His mature writings on “the world” are punctuated with caveats to demolish some misleading myths about contemplatives. They are not misanthropes; nor are they cynics.

The wrath for “the world” piloting him toward Gethsemani Abbey three days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 hardly seemed friendly to any urban habitat. Fortunately the train route from New York passed through few named cities as the youthful Merton hurled invectives against “the city.” Much of the geography (an important metaphor for Merton) of America was spared his explicit curse. It is revealing to notice how much of his early poetry condemns cities, particularly New York City (as does the novel, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, London, for an earlier era⁴).

It seems ironic that we must still rectify these exaggerations that distort our image of Merton. It was with the same sense of remorse that he complained about the inevitably misguided effort “to make me into a Catholic myth for parochial school children.”⁵ The defects linger in what he confessed as a youthful theology in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Its simplistic “black-and-white” categories exact a heavy toll for contemporary Merton readers whose initiation comes through its sometimes bigoted pages.

“Contemplation in a World of Action” — the terms stand uncomfortably side by side. It is Merton’s vernacular for what Augustine had named the two cities, The City of God and The City of Man. Or, the same ambivalence toward “the world” Paul repeatedly addresses in the New Testament. For Merton, the paradox resided in their reconciliation. And that event, he said, depended upon what happened to us, the *persons* who explore the dynamics of living both contemplative and active careers. In spite of the neat vocabulary to distinguish contemplation and action, the ceaseless personal struggle to redefine and to recreate the expression of authentic Christian vocation drew Merton again and again into the drama.

3. Thomas Merton, “Is the World a Problem?” in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1973), p. 159. Hereafter referred to in the text as CWA.

4. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969).

5. Thomas P. McDonnell, “An Interview with Thomas Merton,” *Motive* 27 (October 1967), p. 33. Hereafter referred to in the text as *McDonnell*.

First, we begin with the unmistakably monastic identity of Thomas Merton. As so much of his later writing (which, incidentally, I date from the transition to the 1960s) demonstrates, he developed more and more mature understandings of what monastic identity demanded. In this sense, his development was *not* like the "genetic code" that hibernates until the climate and timing appropriately trigger its expression. Merton's understanding of monastic identity was open to indeed *radical change*: it was not static, rigid, or fixed; but tentative, historical, and dynamic. From the vantage of this personal self-understanding, Merton reached more and more to appeal to the contemplative dimension in each of us. Without becoming "formal monks," we might cultivate the intensely spiritual journey and become more fully human. It was, he said, all in the interest of moving us from what Faulkner dubbed "the frantic steeplechase toward nothingness."⁶ And yet, to nurture our contemplative lives, we need not imitate a "simulated monasticism" with all the medieval trappings and Gregorian chants. There was what he referred to more and more frequently as the vocation of "paramonasticism" or the "lay monk" (CWA, pp. 41-42, 124-125).⁷ It was the identity of the *marginal person* whose presence was not unlike the monk's.⁸ I am reminded by this musing (that married couples and families could venture into contemplative lifestyles for extended periods) of Marylee Mitchum's chronicle, *An Accidental Monk* (CWA, pp. 206). Likewise "homesteading" adjacent to the grounds of the Abbey of Gethsemani, her family attempted this contemplative experiment for many years. The demise of the venture and her subsequent reflections as a divorced "contemplative-nurse" working in an urban hospital prove how problematic such an ambition remains.⁹

It was almost a decade between Merton's walking through the arch at Gethsemani Abbey and our first public glimpse of his life cloistered in monastic silence. And the irony remains that the "fame" he struggled to distance himself from catapulted him into notoriety as author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* — after which event, there was no relief!

The Merton-monk image emerged guardedly. Although there is an undeniable intimacy in works like *Seeds of Contemplation*, it is a cautious,

6. Thomas Merton, "Problems and Prospects," in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 27.

7. Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Spencer, Massachusetts: Cistercian Publications, 1969), pp. 41ff. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CMP*.

8. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), pp. 153, 190-191.

9. *Accidental Monk: Her Domestic Search for God* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1976). See also her "Contemplation exploded in My Heart," *Commonweal* (11 September 1987): pp. 474-476.

and at times stiff effort.¹⁰ He invites us to explore the contemplative life with him. But sorties into mysticism such as the scholastic *The Ascent to Truth* in 1951 perplexed many readers.¹¹ Even Dom Aelred Graham scolded from his priory that Merton was dangerously attempting to prescribe "mysticism for the masses."¹² Into the 1950s, Merton's writing and the monk himself matured. He offered in a 1957 essay an intriguing image of his marginality: "In the night of our technological barbarism, monks must be as trees which exist silently in the dark and by their vital presence purify the air."¹³

As an ecology of prayer, to ward off spiritual asphyxiation, it labors under something of a romantic image of monasticism. Though Merton does not claim an absolute elitism about monastic life, he speaks, tentatively, of the role of the monk in a "changing world" in this essay. He acknowledges the solidarity of the monk with the world. Moreover, the monk, he says, "is inextricably involved in the common sufferings and problems of the society in which he lives" (*MJ*, p. 33). But much about even this transitional essay betrays a certain aloof, abstract commerce with "the world." The question begins to uncoil: how to maintain that contact and identity with the world's ordeal? And how, by a monastic identity, contribute to hope?

A series of highwater marks survive for Merton readers and students. They measure the tentative, provisional self-understanding as a marginal man. And they open his redefinition of the monk vis-a-vis a network of other marginal persons. In 1956 Merton made a trip to St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, with Abbot James Fox and Father John Eudes Bamberger for a conference on "Psychology and Religion." His work with the novices ostensibly warranted this opportunity. John Howard Griffin has reconstructed events in these days, recounting how the already famous monk was the victim of an incredible psychiatric performance engineered by a doctor and the abbot and professional friends of Merton.¹⁴ Merton's lifestyle was attacked in a conversation with the psychiatrist. It was

10. Published some twelve years later in revised form as *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

11. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951).

12. Aelred Graham, "Thomas Merton: A Modern Man in Reverse," *Atlantic* 191 (January 1953), pp. 70-74.

13. Thomas Merton, "Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality," *The Monastic Journey*; edited by Brother Patrick Hart (Kansas City, Missouri: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1977), p. 38. Hereafter referred to in the text as *MJ*.

14. John Howard Griffin, "Thomas Merton: Man as Believer," Thomas Merton Studies Center Lectures, 22-31 January 1973, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky. Tapes of these lectures are housed in the Center. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Griffin*.

described as "unsettled;" he was accused of exhibitionism in seeking to be a hermit; and he was diagnosed as being "verbalogical." It was a devastating experience for a Merton who had struggled with the quandary of the false self versus the real self, illusion and authenticity, the writer's shadow and the monk. The identity question, indeed, had not ceased: Who is my true self?

In the following year, 1957, Ernesto Cardenal (whose celebrity in the Nicaraguan Sandanista revolution continues in the news) arrived at Gethsemani and became a student of Merton's. In this contact with Central American culture and political struggles, Merton was to grow more open and informed. The interest in cultural thought and experimental poetry from the South Americas expanded from such an encounter and contact.

1958 saw even more public growth in Merton's horizons. He ventured a series of what now are confirmed as dangerous correspondences with the Nobel Prize designate, Boris Pasternak. The Russian novelist and poet was being menaced by politics in the Soviet Union's "cold war" strategy. Merton's essays about the Russian author in *Disputed Questions* (1960) suggest the profound spiritual vision of Pasternak's unorthodox theology.¹⁵ But this forged the kinship — as well as Cardenal and kindred spirits from other precincts — that led Merton in prefacing that book to reveal, tentatively, that he had "only recently come back into contact (through certain discrete readings and conversations) with the America I used to know" (*DQ*, p. ix). He was connecting now with the solitudes of other marginal persons, a network of spiritual witnesses and protesters who affirmed the deepest human convictions about freedom and responsibility in the violence and (often subtle) dehumanizations of our technocracy.

There would follow the links with the Civil Rights movement, and the Peace movement of the 1960s to mobilize against the fury of war in Southeast Asia. More and more, from the margins, the voice and presence of Merton would be heard and attested.

In 1964 he wrote an introduction to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Like so many of the prefaces, introductions, and re-editions of his work, this occasion provided readers with the most refreshing chronicle of an honest, personable Merton. The true self breathes from this writing. "Has the author changed?" He volunteers the question. The decision to be a monk, "to renounce and to depart from

15. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Question* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1960). Hereafter referred to in the text as *DQ*

modern secular society," he surmised, "has finally become irrevocable." But he adds, "the attitude and the assumption behind this decision have perhaps changed in many ways." The break, secession from the world, in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he confessed, was somewhat negative. "Since that time," he recalled, "I have learned, I believe, to look back into that world with greater compassion, seeing those in it not as alien to myself, not as peculiar and deluded strangers, but as identified with myself." He speaks from his own marginal stance: "Precisely because I am identified with them, I must refuse all the more definitively to make the delusions my own." Because of his Christian conversion, Merton asserted, the delusions and obsessions of modern man and his society had been surrendered.

Here he simply offered perhaps his most mature definition of monasticism:

My monastery is not a home. It is not a place where I am rooted and established in the earth. It is not an environment in which I become aware of myself as an individual, but rather a place in which I disappear from the world as an object of interest in order to be everywhere in it by hiddenness and compassion.

In that sense, it is not an "escape" from the world, but a participation in the struggles and sufferings of the world. He exclaimed:

It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of, a protest against the cries and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole race of man and the whole world with him. By my monastic life and vows I am saying *no* to all the concentration camps, the aerial bombardments, the staged political trials, the judicial murders, the racial injustices, the economic tyrannies, and the socio-economic apparatus . . . geared for nothing but global destruction . . . I make monastic silence a protest against the lies.¹⁶

Such a thematic center in Merton's writings radiates the mystery of the contemplative life. As early as *Seeds of Contemplation* he had phrased the question, Who am I?, as accepting the mystery of the deepest, real self. The action, he submitted, was first that of God-in-Christ, transforming us in *mercy*. (This, he recollected, was the only reason for coming to the monastery — not to become perfect, or to seek a life of asceticism; but in order to experience the mercy of God.)¹⁷ Our action flows from this contemplative experience of being transformed in our consciousness of God-in-Christ (experienced as the ground of Being). It makes us radically different

16. Thomas Merton, *Introductions East and West: The Foreign Prefaces of Thomas Merton*; edited by Robert E. Daggy (Greensboro, North Carolina: Unicorn Press, 1981), pp. 45-46.

17. This theme is best reflected in his early monastic journal, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953).

persons when we return to life's everyday transactions.

In *Disputed Questions* (1960) Merton had posed "the problem" in this language: the problem of the person and social organization. It was the lure of "mass man," the totalitarianism with its herd mentality and efficiency that cultivates the empirical self who flies from the obligation to love. Merton declared in this work's "Introduction" that the vocation of the *person* is fundamentally different. Rather than capitulate to such a stampede, we must reconstruct our own solitude he warned (*DQ*, p. xi). It was the very sense in which he would later say the contemplative knows he or she is "going against the stream" (*CWA*, p. 374).

The delusion was in a humanism that misled us into "an avalanche of faceless 'numbers,' rather than authentic persons." Here, too, he spoke of the "illusion" that monasticism is largely responsible for creating, "the idea that a contemplative monk is one who takes flight from the wicked world and turns his back on it completely in order to lose himself in antiquarian ritualism, or worse still, to delve introspectively into his own psyche" (*DQ*, p. xii).

Merton amplified this false marginality in a too little read volume, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (1961). The "Introduction" to that collection of Desert Fathers' sayings salvages the earliest monastic identity as commitment to the world's transformation — for the monk is the most hospitable of persons. The monk is one who seeks to "flee from the world," but for social and affirmative values. It is not a purely negative and purely individualistic adventure, Merton reminds us. As for retreating to the desert, the monks "did so only because they had come into the desert to be themselves, their *ordinary* selves, and to forget a world that divided them from themselves." There can be no other valid reason for seeking solitude or for leaving the world, Merton warned. "The Coptic hermits who left the world as though escaping from a wreck," he said, did "not merely intend to save themselves Once they got a foothold on solid ground, things were different. Then they had not only the power but even the obligation to pull the whole world to safety after them."¹⁸ Thus, the contribution of the marginal person.

Amid the history and reflection on monastic identity, Merton probed deeper. Never did he allow his struggle for a more authentic marginality to grow self-satisfied. It was the project of his last years from

18. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960), pp. 22-23.

within monastic life to contribute to the *renewal* that challenged and created a monastic renaissance — not in terms of the number of monks professing in the monasteries, but in terms of the quality of the monastic witness. (Also he was adamant in distinguishing structural “reforms” from interior “renewal.”) He good-humoredly put it: the trouble is that today there are no more deserts; all we have left is dude ranches! Without the *desert* of personal struggle with the true self, only the comedy of an artificial, out-of-place imitation “desert” remained. And a dude ranch surrogate for spirituality blasphemed the solitude of real contemplation. This was not the mere locale or terrain of a physical desert, but the desert of “inner experience.” As Merton once put it: “The desert is a desert as long as you try to escape it; the moment you accept it, it becomes a paradise” (*Griffin*).

With his eventually fulltime position as a hermit (beginning in August of 1965), Thomas Merton probed even deeper for a new sense of his own marginality. It led to reflections on the marginality of other kindred spirits — that network of solitudes with which he had come into contact. In a later essay, “English Mystics,” Merton proved transparent about this developing sense of marginality. “The hermit has been from the beginning,” he said, “more a ‘layman’ than a ‘clerk.’ That is to say, even if he may have been a priest, his separating from the monastic and liturgical community life put him in a certain sense on a level with the simple layman.” This life without pretense, at the bottom of the ladder, Merton phrased it, means that “more than anyone else the hermit has to be a humble man” (*MZM*, p. 153).

Never one to be satisfied with an answer to a question whose dynamic center always was forming a new radius, Merton was again confessional about his maturing monk’s identity with an edition of journal reflections from the late 1950s and early 1960s. Entitling them *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, his self-deprecating humility is again transparent. He ponders his own collaboration with the world’s turmoil; hence, the “guilty bystander” identity. And in Part II of the volume, the genesis of the title becomes more evident. He epigraphs this section with a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “The good news that God has become man strikes at the very heart of an age in which the good and the wicked regard either scorn for man or the idolization of man as the highest attainable wisdom.”¹⁹

12. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1966), p. 63. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CGB*.

Evidencing extensive reading of the German martyr's work, he considers the "Christian worldliness" and "religionless Christianity" there. The great threat, he agrees, is "Man's refusal of himself." The Bonhoeffer dialogue ignited new dimensions of conscience in Merton's monastic protest. In fact, I consider that the re-evaluation it catalyzed (provoked?) is perhaps one of Merton's most searching ordeals. His reading notes on Bonhoeffer date especially from the time of his "retirement" to the hermitage. It is so beautifully ironic that his struggle with Bonhoeffer's "worldliness" should coincide with his hermit's nativity. The main text Merton reads from Bonhoeffer at this juncture is the *Ethics*. In the midst of refining a sense of "social responsibility" Merton unearthed Bonhoeffer's critique of "medieval monasticism" and the accusation that it is a misdirected "escape" from the world. I consider that the title for this volume, while perhaps already in Merton's imagination (cf. his essay, "Letter to an Innocent Bystander" in *Raids on the Unspeakable*), owes much to his wrestling with the challenging thought of the imprisoned German Lutheran pastor.

In a notebook selection dated October 1965, Merton pauses to become introspective, searching. It explains the aptness of a repentant, converted "monk," a guilty bystander who comes to embrace the world ever more boldly. "Obviously in my early writings," he begins, "I said things about 'the world' that had a gnostic or manichean flavor about them." He goes on to say that he no longer accepts such statements, but there is a sense in the tradition that gives a basis for them — the "negative view" of the world that balances with the positive in the New Testament. He goes further to specify his "anti-worldliness" as that of genuine medieval monasticism, not the reactionary stance of Pius IX's "Syllabus of Errors."

I think my writing is split into two categories as regards this question. "The world" seen in terms of nature, of manual work, of literature, culture, Asian philosophy, etc. is fully accepted. Also "Man" in his historic reality. What is not accepted — the world in its contemporary confusions.

At which point Merton admits to not having faced the technocracy and the crises of contemporary culture with anything but pessimism. Perhaps as his own harshest critic he continues:

There may be some truth in my pessimism, but the pessimism itself has an evil root, and instead of getting the root out, I have been cultivating it in the name of 'spirituality' or what you will. This is no longer honest. My task is to come to terms *completely* with the world in which I live and of which I am a *part*, because this is the world redeemed by Christ — even the world of Auschwitz.

There cannot be a compromise with Auschwitz, Hiroshima, or Southern

racism, he insists. But, on the other hand, "they too must be 'Redeemed.' The great task of redemption is in America which imagines itself Christian! That is why I am here, and must stay here."²⁰

The search for the true self in monastic and eremitical life does not relax. In February of 1967 he finished reading a manuscript by theologian Rosemary Ruether. For a time his reading notes indicate a preoccupation with her writings. Like Bonhoeffer, Ruether challenged Merton (indirectly) to rethink continually his monasticism and marginal witness. In a correspondence with her he expressed the perception that her anti-monasticism sprang from a supposed claim that no monk would make: that the monk is the only true and radical Christian.²¹ Merton denied this caricature which the Church had long supposed and even marketed in terms of lay spirituality simulating monastic accidentals. On the other hand, he warned, is a new wave of Rosemary Ruether's claiming a similar uniqueness for the lay vocation to discredit (and misunderstand) the monk's vocation? It was a time for dissociating oneself in the post-Vatican II Church from much that was visibly "traditionalist" and cliché-ridden.

In this post-conciliar era, Merton searched his self-understanding. His sense of the Church in a "diaspora" or dispersal time conjures up an image of the *lay monk* — a borrowing he makes from the Russians' experience in the Paris diaspora. It was now a "monasticity of the heart," but not a conventional "interior life for the layman." The lay monk is "hidden, solitary, and unprotected, without the benefit of distinguishing marks and outward forms." And yet, he penetrates to the roots and essence of the monastic life, Merton says, on an "ecumenical and transconfessional level."²²

The essays collected in *Contemplation in a World of Action* comprise Merton's unsystematic efforts to coax monastic renewal. The desert for the monk, he wrote, "is where the comfort of man is absent . . . routines of man's city offer no support, and where prayer must be sustained by God in the purity of faith . . . as a solitary" (*CMP*, p. 39). And so contemplative

20. Thomas Merton, *Notebook # 76*, "1965 — second half. Readings, etc. August to November." Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College.

21. Merton's letters to Ruether are printed in *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*; edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), pp. 497-516. See also John Howard Griffin, "The Controversial Merton," in *Thomas Merton: Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox*; edited by Gerald S. Twomey (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 84-85.

22. Thomas Merton, *Redeeming the Time* (London: Burns & Oates, 1966), p. 118. Hereafter referred to in the text as *RT*.

prayer is "in a way, simply the preference for the desert, for emptiness, for poverty" (CMP, p. 121). It was this surrender to a struggle with the true self in the desert which, Merton said, becomes "the personal experience of emptiness that accompanies the deepening of serious faith" (CMP, p. 19). Douglas Steere, the Quaker author, in the Foreword to *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* remarks this vocation of the monk. It means, he says, that the monk differs from the masked, illusory self in the world because the monk cannot "go south for the winter" and ingeniously be distracted or escape from the struggle with his true self" (CMP, pp. 13-27).

Monks, Merton said, "realize themselves to be called to a totally different mode of existence, outside of secular categories and outside of the religious establishment. This is the very heart of monasticism," he insisted, "hence, a firmly 'established' monasticism is a self-contradiction" (CWA, p. 43). The monk's marginality became clearer for the Church and the world. "This is the real problem of monastic renewal," Merton concluded. "Not a surrender to the 'secular city' but a recovery of the deep desire of God that draws a man to seek a totally new way of being in the world" (CWA, p. 43). The monk, he warned, does not exist in order even to preserve monasticism or religion! It is not a matter of "keeping the memory of God" alive in the world; on the contrary, he said, "the function of the monk in our time is to keep himself alive by contact with God" (MJ, p. 37).

A corollary of this insight was, therefore, the "uselessness" of the monk as the secular world encounters him. He is not, Merton explained, "defined by his task." It is not what we do, but who we are. The monk "aims at the cultivation of a certain quality of life, a level of awareness, a depth of consciousness" (CWA, p. 27). Consequently, "the monastic life has always had something of this element of 'exploration' about it (at least in periods when it has been alive). The monk is the man who, in one way or other, pushes to the very frontiers of human experience and strives to go beyond" (CWA, p. 118). This very interior search to the margins within life is as important as the marginal presence of the monk for society. And the monk dares to experience the dread, the emptiness, and the desert-solitude in which his consciousness is transformed. From that vantage, he contributes to the dialogue with "the deepest and most neglected voice that proceeds from [the world's] inner depth."

So it was that monastic withdrawal from the world meant not rejecting reality, but "unmasking an illusion." He shared the "deliberate irrelevance" with other marginal presences: the hippies, poets, beatniks (AJ,

p. 306). Their solidarity was a common "witness to life," a going "beyond death in life." He suggested in his Bangkok address that this type of charismatic, unstructured monasticism is "imperishable" (AJ, p. 342). It was the broader definition of "monastic" that he also suggested in his Calcutta talk (October 1968).

This wider ambience of monastic witness, the network of marginal persons whose true transformation of consciousness makes them irrelevant to and yet vital for society, affirmed Merton's conviction that "Those who continue to struggle are at peace."²³ In a letter early in 1968, Merton, ever solicitous for authority, wrote to Archbishop Thomas J. McDonough, then Ordinary of Louisville. He suggested in the letter that perhaps it would be appropriate for him as a monk to make public appearances a few times a year at peace rallies on behalf of the anti-war movement. Though such suggestions never became a reality, even the possibility of a radical departure in the style of his marginality indicates new directions Merton was seriously entertaining for the venture into the 1970s.

So, too, he would press the issue of faith in essays such as "The Unbelief of Believers" and "Apologies to an Unbeliever" in the 1968 collection, *Faith and Violence*.²⁴ New coordinates were emerging for the dialogue of monasticism and the other marginal, even non-believing witnesses. These directions in his own self-understanding verified Merton's complaint: "Monasticism is nothing if it is not creative."

At this point I offer a final suggestion for an appreciation of Merton's creative, marginal presence. As a marginal person, he possessed unique gifts and talent. And it is in his imaginative efforts, the poetry and prose-poems of his last years in particular, where the mature Merton achieved perhaps the most enduring and authentic chronicle of his spiritual vision. In the anti-poetic renderings of the marginal person struggling with the true self, we launch into what he described as the "real journey in life" which is "interior." Even in his many popular and more familiar poems of early collections, images of transformation specify the transformation of consciousness and birth of the "new self" Merton coaxes to life for readers.

Surprisingly, Merton's later poetry, especially the two late lengthy collections, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, remain terra

23. Thomas Merton, "First and Last Thoughts: An Author's Preface," in *A Thomas Merton Reader*; edited by Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p. xi.

24. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 199-204, 205-214.

incognita for many Merton aficionados.²⁵ This can be explained in part by their being encapsulated in the literary form and images of satire and irony. They are not simple. They are laced with the sting of the Desert Fathers' cryptic sayings — "cables" and "geography" for the wandering, alienated world. Merton's culture creates these mythic worlds and implies our transformation to a more habitable, spiritual world of true identity.

It is in the maturity of this mythic vocation of the poet that Merton discovers something essential to his own monastic marginality. There is a kindred religious dimension in the poet's work. His article, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" (1968) testifies to this ability of the imagination to "contain in itself a structure which awakens our consciousness to a new awareness of the inner meaning of life and of reality itself." This Zen-mindedness is an attention to things in their identity. It dissolves illusion. Symbols are "in themselves religious realities in their own right," Merton said, "especially when their nature is sacramental."²⁶

Besides being a recognized poet, Merton also ventured into critical assessments of contemporaries. These afford a unique insight about his own poetic project. In a review of the work of musicologist-poet Louis Zukofsky I consider he has offered one of his most enlightening and revealing statements. (Perhaps it can tease you into approaching the poetry of Merton in like manner.) He opened the review which was originally titled "Paradise Bugged":

All really valid poetry (poetry that is fully alive, and asserts its reality by its power to generate imaginative life) is a kind of recovery of paradise. Not that the poet comes up with a report that he, an unusual man, has found his own way back into Eden; but the living line and the generative association, the new sound, the music, the structure, are somehow grounded in a renewal of vision and hearing so that he who reads and understands recognizes that here is a new start, a new creation. Here the world gets another chance. . . . another start in life, in hope, in imagination.²⁷

Without exploring the meaning of Merton's announcement that his poetics were "on vacation" when he wrote *Cables to the Ace* and *The*

25. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace: Or, Familiar Liturgies of Misunderstanding* (New York: New Directions, 1968), and *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969); hereafter referred to in the text as *GL*.

26. Thomas Merton, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" in *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 22 (New York: New Directions, 1968), pp. 1-15.

27. Thomas Merton, "Paradise Bugged" (review of *All: The Collected Short Poems, 1956-1964*, by Louis Zukofsky), *The Critic* 25 (February-March 1967), pp. 69-71. See also "Louis Zukofsky — the Paradise Ear," in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*; edited by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 128-133.

Geography of Lograire, suffice it to say that they continued to probe and meditate on the fully human and sacramental qualities of life. The idiom changes into abrupt ironies, satire. It is employed to shock readers' consciousness. It shocks, cajoles, and feeds back static to the culture, parodying its deprived language and advertising jargon. It is a matter of salvaging the word, syllable by syllable. The chronicles of dehumanization recorded in both collections are a journey in consciousness. They seek to unjar a false self, the masked illusions of the modern world. They witness the searing compassion of Merton's tenacious confidence in the Humanity of God — and they protest whenever they find dehumanization compromising that mystery of Incarnation. Merton's poetry sought, as he phrased it in one of the new "City" poems, "Miami You Are About To Be Surprised," to "Decode your own scrambled message" (*GL*, p. 17).

Merton the monk entered deeply into such contemplative solitude. There he explored beyond the margins of a superficial self, an illusory, masked self, an empirical ego. He relates this experience and the transformed consciousness in an unmistakable spiritual challenge. It placed him in a gallery of, at first glance, unlikely kin. But it revealed the humane dynamism of his marginality: the margins were not merely geographic or spatial, but margins of the deeper self, the true self "in Christ."

He half-boasted to Thomas P. McDonnell in a 1967 interview that he had not read Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* (McDonnell, pp. 32-41). He casually remarked that he might get around to it in "ten years." In this I find Thomas Merton not unlike the Georgia fiction writer, Flannery O'Connor, whom he admired so instinctively. He honored her, he wrote, because of the "great slashing innocence of that dry-eyed irony that could keep looking the South in the face without bleeding or even suffering" (*RU*, p. 37). Her analysis of the spiritual void of the secular city mesmerized Merton. In copious reading notes, he traced Hazel Motes' return to faith at a higher level (or, deeper — depending upon your metaphor) in the post-Christian world. I find it not unlike the familiar Merton scene recollecting the religious intuition experienced at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville. I stood there again recently, recalling this passage:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness . . . The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. Not that I question the reality of my vocation, or of my monastic life:

but the conception of "separation from the world" that we have in monastic life too easily presents itself as a complete illusion

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: "Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other men

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstakes

Now I realized what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. (CGB, pp. 156-157)

The names of the streets changed after Merton wrote that passage. The corner has since become River City Mall and Muhammad Ali Boulevard. In recent years the name "Fourth Avenue" has changed it once again! But the intuition is the same. As Merton put it in a late essay: "A City is more than something you do with space." The people of the city's apartments will be "crowded" — and nothing better — if they are alienated by the streets and one another. But such streets can be more than alienated space. For Merton, they can be inhabited by persons who have themselves overcome alienation.

The end of our searching, the Scriptures tell us, will again be a city of celebration: the New Jerusalem. Rather than submit to a secular city which anesthetizes and abuses persons in their true selves, people can "begin to make their life credible by changing their environments." For, "to live is to create one's own world as a scene of personal happiness."

All of which leaves us with the vision shared by the monk from the margins:

Celebration is crazy: the craziness of not submitting even though "they," "the others," the ones who make life impossible seem to have all the power. Celebration is the beginning of confidence, therefore of power.

. . . When we give one another joy by loving, by sharing, then we manifest a power which they cannot touch. We can be the artisans of a joy they never imagined.

We can build a fire of happiness in this city that will put them to shame.

. . . That is the beginning of the transformation. One day, you'll see it!²⁸

28. Thomas Merton, "The Street is for Celebration," *Love and Living*; edited by Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), pp. 46-53.