

Merton and Time

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I began to think about Merton's idea of time while attending a university graduation ceremony for one of my sons, at which the principal speaker was Carol Shields, the Pulitzer-prize winning novelist who grew up in the United States and who now lives in Canada. Shields' theme was about time. She recalled her own graduation from a small Midwest college in the 1950s at which the invited dignitary urged the students to become aware of their need to achieve success within the limited time that lay before them. Reflecting on her own life as writer, wife and mother, Shields remarked to the students of the 1990s that, allowing for accident and disease, most of them would live, according to the statistics, a good many years. In this context, she said, they should regard time as something to be lived and enjoyed, treated not as an enemy to be conquered, but rather as a friend. Such is Merton's view of time, which he valued as an opportunity to achieve the growth and transformation that only the possibility of change afforded by time can make possible. In addition, distancing himself from those who see time in utilitarian terms, Merton conceived of time as of value in itself as an aspect of the goodness of the created world and of its creator.

As with almost everything else about Merton, his idea of time was eclectic, drawn from a wide variety of philosophical, religious and literary sources. In part, with its attachment to intuition and to consciousness, Merton's idea of time resembles that developed by the French philosopher Henri Bergson, with whose thought Merton was familiar. For Bergson, especially as expressed in *Duration and Simultaneity*, published in 1922,¹ time was intimately connected with intuitive consciousness, which, unlike rational consciousness, could link

1. Henri Bergson, *Duration and Simultaneity with Reference to Einstein's Theory* (trans. Leon Jacobsen; Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

the separate moments of experience into a necklace of unfolding motion and meaning which Bergson called duration. For Bergson, and for Merton, physics converted time into separate, measurable points that obscured its underlying unity. While not disputing that time involves a succession of moments and changes, Bergson posited a unifying continuum that endured within and throughout succession and change. Similarly, in his early journal *Run to the Mountain*, Merton presented time as a durational continuity, observing that in time we 'follow an action from its beginning to its end—from the time it is insensibly born out of some other action, until it is insensibly lost in another action with a different meaning still'.²

It was in Merton's rejection of time as an abstraction that he seems most to separate himself from thinkers like St Thomas Aquinas, with whom in some other respects he felt himself in harmony, having described himself in an essay on Blake, for example, as one who still clung to some central aspects of scholastic philosophy.³ For Aquinas, the mind came to a knowledge of things by abstracting ideas of them from images.⁴ Merton's emphasis on intuitive as opposed to rational, deductive knowledge, which might seem to place him closer to Kant than to Aquinas, found an echo, if indeed not an influence, in the writings of his friend Jacques Maritain, a Thomist with an unusual respect for intuitive understanding, particularly through art. In his lecture on the Easter service in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*⁵ Merton indicated that he had read and appreciated Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. For Maritain, art had its origin in the intuitive, 'preconceptual' life of the intellect that permitted a fusion of the artist's intuitive knowledge of the self and the external world, a process that in the finest art gave rise to a 'flash of reality'.⁶ Like Merton, Maritain argued that artistic intuition was not directed towards 'essences' detached from 'concrete reality' but rather towards 'concrete existence' as 'connatural' to the soul. In particular, the destination of the artist was durational, the presentation of a 'complex of

concrete and individual reality' captured in the 'total unicity of its passage in time'.⁷ For both Merton and Maritain such creative intuition stretched towards an 'infinite reality' seen to be present and 'engaged' in any 'singular existing thing'.⁸ Similarly, as Merton put it in his lecture on *The Sound and the Fury*, through a Christian faith that was lived intuitively—or mystically—one could eventually move through the experiential concreteness of the aesthetic, moral and liturgical to an 'intuition of the ultimate values of life, of the Absolute Ground of life, or even of the invisible Godhead'.⁹

For Merton, intuitive consciousness dictated an unequal valuing of passages of time based upon their perceived significance. Typically in Merton's writings, especially in his poetry and journals, certain, selected moments of action and perception were expanded to enlarge their significance. An example is the evocative early poem, 'The Reader', in *The Tears of the Blind Lions* (1949) in which, preparing to read aloud from the lives of the saints at mealtime Merton hears his fellow monks approaching: 'With robes as voluble as water/ I do not see them but I hear their waves.'¹⁰ The image both captures and expands the particulars of the moment by imagistically melting the usual boundaries of the material world, thereby predisposing the reader toward an awareness of the spiritual. It is in the uniting of the moment with durational continuity—a continuity that here stretches to the infinite—that Merton expresses both his mysticism and his Romanticism. The passage also indicates the way in which the literary impressionist in Merton allowed him to use space, here present in the ocean wave imagery, to dilate the moment.

For Merton, memory was crucial in forming the continuity of consciousness that in turn corresponded to a perceived, external unfolding of history or time. In this respect, as a Romantic writer Merton was especially attracted to the power of memory in rescuing the otherwise lost fragments of experience and of time. In an entry in the fall of 1939 in *Run to the Mountain*, he wondered: 'What is this terrific importance memory seems to have for me?'¹¹ In *Run to the Mountain* Merton reflects insightfully on the relationship between time and the gestation of an idea in consciousness. 'We think we possess some

2. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation* (ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995), p. 57.

3. Thomas Merton, 'Blake and the New Theology' (1968), in *idem*, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 3-11 (9).

4. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 85.1 (see *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation* [ed. Timothy McDermott; London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1989], p. 1).

5. William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Cape and Smith, 1929).

6. Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon, 1953), pp. 4, 115.

7. Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, p. 126.

8. Maritain, *Creative Intuition*, p. 126.

9. Thomas Merton, "'Baptism in the Forest": Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner', in *idem*, *Literary Essays*, pp. 92-116 (101).

10. Thomas Merton, 'The Reader', in *idem*, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 202.

11. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 58.

idea', he observed, and then, by a series of accidents, through a long 'desert of difficulties', 'we come upon little scraps of intuition' which are finally integrated into the 'same old idea' which has been germinating in consciousness. In this way, Merton writes, we are really 'living that idea, working it out in our lives'.¹² Merton noted that fragments of time and consciousness are sometimes brought together by moments of intuitive insight that allow us to perceive the 'truth' of things in a 'flash, in a whole'.¹³ In Merton's writings the mind's struggle against the dissolution of the past, either through forgetfulness or through an inability to piece the past together, was only occasionally successful, but these moments of success represented a triumph over the tendency towards fragmentation and the erasure of continuity.

At least as significant as memory to Merton, though, was the role of the imagination not simply in recording the unfolding of events but in revealing the curved unfolding of time's meaning. If memory recovered the past, albeit selectively, imagination was a faculty 'deeper than memory', as Merton put it, in its transformation of perceived fact into significance.¹⁴ At the same time Merton regarded the operation of memory and imagination as overlapping. Imagination made the relevance of reconstructed past experience to the meaning of the present apparent, and that reconstruction, particularly in art, depended upon the interfused working of both memory and imagination. Merton praised the poetry of Edwin Muir, for example, for reconciling the world of the present with that of the past, adding that in the artistic imagination the heroes of Homer and the biblical patriarchs coexisted with each other in the contemporary artist's imagination in a way that illuminated the 'crisis' of the artist's own life and culture.¹⁵ In this way the unifying force of the imagination united the past and present fragments of experience in a durational continuum that in the best art illuminated the direction taken not only by an individual life but that of a cultural period or optimally of the whole human community through great stretches of time. In Merton's view the greatest artists were those who, like Edwin Muir, were constantly aware of the 'beginning and the end of all things' so that the moments

12. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 339.

13. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 339.

14. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 57.

15. Thomas Merton, 'The True Legendary Sound: The Poetry and Criticism of Edwin Muir', in *idem*, *Literary Essays*, pp. 29-36 (33).

selected for the artist's subject were shot through with a full understanding of the durational path which provided both direction and meaning. Duration inevitably involved the linear development of events, and for Merton this depended at some point on the articulation of the significance of the passing moments of experience even when these moments seemed quite mundane. Speculating in *Run to the Mountain* about the usefulness of recording ordinary moments of experience in his journal, he concluded that whether or not these entries would have any lasting value for anyone else, they had at least clarified the content of his daily life by transmuting this content into unfolding 'words and sentences', thereby giving them a durational narrative and syntactic form as opposed to their often 'formless existence in the mind'.¹⁶

In some respects, Merton felt, art resembled the intersection of the divine and the human in religion. Speaking of Fra Angelico's painting of St Anthony, for example, he pointed out that the action in the picture, though drawn from the past, had as a work of art 'no past and no future'. Furthermore, although it captured a frame of movement, it did not itself move and was thus both in and out of time. The painting would, like Keats' Grecian urn, presumably, always be in the viewer's present, 'not remembered, not hoped for', but 'continually there'.¹⁷ Because of the capacity of art to funnel past memories and future hopes into the present, it was always for Merton a human activity that, like religious liturgy, could saturate the present with enlarged possibilities for action and meaning.

In Merton's writings one of the distinctive differences between memory and imagination is the access which the imagination provides not only to the past but also to the present and future as well, where alternate patterns of duration may be discerned. Frequently, Merton spoke of the ability of artists, particularly since their imaginations were so incandescent, to anticipate the future prophetically, not necessarily through explicit prophecy—though Merton was not averse to this in his own writings—but more characteristically through their ability to grasp the 'momentous predictions hidden in everyday life', as Merton put it in his well-known essay, 'Message to Poets'.¹⁸ One of Merton's great gifts as a writer lay in his ability to perceive intuitively the distress and alienation felt by the human soul

16. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 35.

17. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 57.

18. Thomas Merton, 'Message to Poets', in *idem*, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 155-66 (159).

under the onslaught of technological culture, something that is not a future event but that lies hidden within a culture in which a potentially nourishing solitude, for example, is made to look demeaning and anti-social. In Merton's view, what is remarkable about the artist's grasp of these hidden grains of reality in the surrounding culture is that often the artist does not become aware of what he or she discerns until the work of art has been produced, an occurrence which Merton described as a 'spontaneous explosion' of the artist's hopes.¹⁹ Such a situation seemed to Merton analogous to religion, where the fluidity of the relationship of past, present and future could often be paradoxical as the soul groped towards meaning and fulfillment. *The Seven Storey Mountain* is filled with such fluid movements of time and consciousness whereby in moving towards his future as a Trappist monk, for example, Merton finds himself excavating his past for early signs of his having been on such a journey—rather like the artist who only discovers the durational meaning of a work once the work has been produced.

In Merton the reality of time issued from God as the provider of time. Merton's emphasis on the acceptance of time as a reality beyond as well as in consciousness recalls the Canadian philosopher George Grant's observation that in pre-technological society people did not think that they 'made the world valuable', but rather that they 'participated in its goodness'.²⁰ Similarly, in one of the most remarkable and gracious passages Merton ever wrote, a sentence in his essay, 'Prometheus: A Meditation', he observed that there is nothing that we can steal from God because 'before we can think of stealing it, it has already been given'.²¹ While the passage expresses eloquently the largeness of Merton's soul, he cautioned against the tendency of human beings to see time as a mere projection of their own desires and obsessions and thereby inevitably impose a 'paralysis' on time that would 'ruin the world', as he put it in his essay, 'Herakleitos: A Study'.²² Merton added that all order based only on a human conception of reality was merely 'partial' and would lead to chaos.

In order to highlight the independence of time from human origin, if not from human consciousness, Merton tended to visualize time in images of nature. In his well-known essay 'Atlas and the Fatman', he

19. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 155.

20. George Grant, *Time as History* (Toronto: CBC, 1969), pp. 44-45.

21. Thomas Merton, 'Prometheus: A Meditation', in *idem*, *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 15-23.

22. Thomas Merton, 'Herakleitos: A Study', in *idem*, *The Behavior of Titans*, pp. 75-94 (82).

juxtaposed natural time, symbolized by Atlas, with technological time, indicating the shallowness and illusoriness of time appropriated by the human ego: 'We made believe', the speaker says in the essay, 'that it was six o'clock. We made believe that it was midnight. Atlas must have deigned to smile on our efforts'.²³ While Atlas speaks in a musical idiom, a harmonious version of the rhythm of time, he is aware of human beings listening not to his music, that of the created world of nature, but rather to 'clock and cannon', a dissonance that alliteratively links clock time directly with technology and destruction. Both the clock and technology—here the technology of war—distance human beings from the created world and hence from the creator, who in Merton is the author of reality.²⁴ Similarly, in *Opening the Bible*, in a discussion of Dilsey's intimation of time in Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*, Merton observed that Dilsey's superior and realistic perception of time is to be measured not by the clock but by the process of living and of 'organic growth'.²⁵ At the same time, although Merton regarded nature as valuable in allowing us to transcend the prison of either the individual or collective ego, nature is not itself equivalent in Merton's writings to the innate, pantheistic divinity that attracted most Romantic writers, a potential source of confusion in his portrayal of nature that Merton worried about in his depiction of Atlas in the Prologue to *Raids on the Unspeakable*. Atlas was not God 'by any means', Merton wrote.²⁶ Nature, exemplified by the rhythm of the seasons, Merton further explained in *Seasons of Celebration*, is only capable of reminding us by its cycle of renewal and death that 'death is the end of all'.²⁷

Nevertheless, incorporated into Merton's conception of time is an attitude of acceptance, not only of the independently created reality of time but of the superiority of a natural maturation throughout time. In *Opening the Bible* Merton urged that we accept the rate of maturation of things and of consciousness without attempting to force either into a premature development, awaiting the time—not passively, but not aggressively either, when the fruit was 'finally ripe'.²⁸ In a lecture

23. Thomas Merton, 'Atlas and the Fatman', in *idem*, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, pp. 91-110 (92).

24. Merton, 'Atlas and the Fatman', p. 101.

25. Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970), p. 48.

26. Merton, 'Atlas and the Fatman', p. 1.

27. Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), p. 50.

28. Merton, *Opening the Bible*, p. 49.

on Faulkner later entitled 'Time and the Unburdening and the Recollection of the Lamb: The Easter Service in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*', Merton wrote that the Bible is concerned with time's fullness, with the time for an 'event to happen, the time for an emotion to be felt, the time for a harvest or for the celebration of a harvest'.²⁹ Time's purpose, from Merton's point of view, was to enable growth and transformation, the fruitfulness that change can accomplish. In human lives the curve of growth allows for the connecting of the fragments of time into a unity of purpose which will ideally bring the soul's ripening into line with the pattern desired by the divine mind. In Merton, there are two parallel lines of duration, one embedded in human consciousness, the other in the divine mind, the drama of a human life thus being that of a potential but by no means certain maturation through which these two lines might and ideally would converge. As Patrick O'Connell has perceptively noted in his analysis of Merton's poem, 'Elias—Variations on a Theme', the 'task of human freedom in Merton's writings is to actualize, to incarnate, the true self eternally known and loved by God'.³⁰ A poignant example of this aspect of Merton's thinking can be seen in his poem, 'On the Anniversary of my Baptism', in *Figures for an Apocalypse* (1947) in which after perceiving his birth in a Catholic town in the Pyrenees as having providentially 'marked' him for the 'cloister', Merton imagines the divine hand preparing the waters of his baptism:

The day You made the waters,
And dragged them down from the dividing islands
And made them spring with fish,
You planned to bless the brine out of the seas
That were to be my death.³¹

The death mentioned here is presumably that of the old self, a precondition for baptism. The passage captures the dimensions of the curve of duration, which here involves not only the intersection of the forward motion that brought Merton from childhood to his monastic calling—together with his subsequent memory of that development—but also the mind of God itself, imagining Merton's life before his

29. Thomas Merton, 'Time and the Unburdening and the Recollection of the Lamb: The Easter Service in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*', in *idem*, *Literary Essays*, pp. 497-514 (500).

30. Patrick O'Connell, 'The Geography of Solitude: Thomas Merton's "Elias—Variations on a Theme"', *The Merton Annual* 1 (1988), pp. 151-90 (183-84).

31. Thomas Merton, 'On the Anniversary of my Baptism', in *idem*, *Collected Poems*, p. 157.

birth with its own future-looking curve of duration, a stunning act of divine hope and submission to time.

In Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*, Jason Compson, Merton contends, forces everything, including time. In Merton's view Jason has much in common with modern technocrats in that both see time as an enemy, interfering with the sovereignty of the mind over the world.³² The Christian, on the other hand, should not, Merton wrote in *Seasons of Celebration*, see time as an antagonist but rather accept the attrition of time, including the death in which that attrition inevitably culminates. Christian worship, he continued, is 'at peace with time' because the *lapse* of time no longer concerns the Christian whose life passed through time by having been 'hidden with Christ in God'.³³ Merton's phrasing here is revealing in that he does not present life as a sequence of attrition and subsequent release but rather as a drama whose outcome is centered on the present. Unlike Romantic writers such as Proust, Merton was interested in time not only because it illuminated the matrix of the past but also for its revealing of the *present* and particularly of those choices embedded in the present which have been generated by the past and whose moral coloring is revealed in one's partial knowledge of an eschatological future.³⁴ The relationship of the present to durational time marks the apogee of Merton's conception of time—as enacted in religious liturgy, for example. In the liturgy, Merton wrote, the present moment has something of the 'character of eternity' in which all reality is present at once. In this way are reconciled and intertwined both the 'universal' and 'personal' aspects of time.³⁵ For Merton the liturgy revealed the fullness that was implicit in yet also hidden in time. By being opened to the fullness of life present in the liturgical act, the participant in the liturgy was suspended in the intersection between time and eternity, whose form is not that of a sudden catapulting into the future but rather an expansion of the possibilities of the present.³⁶ Merton brought out this aspect of the relationship between religious liturgy and time in his previously mentioned lecture on the Easter Service in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. In that essay he defined the impact of the Revd Shegog's Easter homily in the following way:

32. Merton, 'Time and the Unburdening', pp. 500, 502.

33. Merton, *Seasons of Celebration*, p. 47.

34. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 57.

35. Merton, *Seasons of Celebration*, p. 56.

36. Merton, *Seasons of Celebration*, p. 47.

now he is simply saying not only what they know, but what is present among them! Now: he is re-creating in them their realization of the great truth: *Jesus lives!* ... The Word of God breaks into time, into the community of the chosen, into those who belong to God. It reveals the beginning and the ending: *at once!* It reveals the *meaninglessness* of time and the *full meaning* of time.³⁷

In an early poem, 'A Mysterious Song in the Spring of the Year', in *Figures for an Apocalypse*, Merton depicted the intersection of the finite and the infinite in the present moment as an access to eternal energy made possible by the contemplative soul's ability to slip angularly between the hands of the clock.³⁸ Similarly, at the Easter service in *The Sound and the Fury* Merton perceives Dilsey in a rare moment of such intertwining as seeing both the beginning and the ending of her own, of the Compson family's and of humanity's struggle through time.³⁹ In Merton's view Jason Compson lives entirely 'by clock time, by telegrams, telephones, timetables', thereby making it difficult for him to measure what is 'real, significant, full of meaning'. Clock time, Merton adds, cannot permit one to live in 'expectation, anticipation, fullness' and thus is severed from the durational curve of growth and maturation that alone confers meaning.⁴⁰

From Merton's vantage point the problem with Jason Compson's and with the technocrat's perception of time is that it reduces time to an abstraction symbolizing a succession of moments believed to be inherently useless in themselves unless driven by the intentions of the individual or collective ego. In his 'Message to Poets', Merton wrote: 'As for the technological Platos who think they now run the world we live in, they imagine they can tempt us with banalities and abstractions.'⁴¹ Similarly, in his essay on the Easter service in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* Merton remarked that for the most part in contemporary Western culture there was no 'real' experience of time since our relation to time was 'wholly linear' and 'wholly abstract'.⁴² In Merton's view the rational intellect with its dependency on abstraction obscured our perception of the concrete unfolding of time in nature and in the involuntary, 'natural' parts of the self. For Merton an excessive reliance on abstraction robbed us of our experiential

knowledge of time, a knowledge that artists particularly attempted to provide.

Since Merton valued the existential, creational aspects of his existence as channels towards the infinite, he was reluctant, even reactionary, in responding to technological culture, which characteristically altered time by wanting to speed it up. In an evocative poem entitled 'Night-Flowering Cactus' Merton focused on the hidden, nocturnal life of nature in an effort to highlight time in nature as a paradigm of the role of an intuitive, unreasoned, self-abandonment and acceptance that are involved in genuine maturation. The exquisitely beautiful flower, which is unseen on the one night on which it blooms, reflects an existence that belonged 'neither to night nor day', as Merton put it:

I neither show my truth nor conceal it
My innocence is descried dimly
Only by divine gift
As a white cavern without explanation.⁴³

The imaginative trope of the flower as a spiritually kenotic white cavern silhouettes the limits of rational understanding. To attempt to explain the strangeness of the cactus's flowering would be to subsume it within the same sort of intellectual abstractness which the technocrat is prone to. Merton's attitude here recalls Thoreau's famous passage on time in which Thoreau, a strong influence on Merton, described reason as a cleaver that 'rifts' its way into the 'secret of things'.⁴⁴ Along with Thoreau, Merton insists on a respect for the transcendental mystery at the base of things in order to prevent the mind from foreclosing hastily on reality. The point of the mystery for both Merton and Thoreau was not to celebrate mystery itself but rather to keep the mind attentive and open to further reflection and growth in its own durational unfolding. All of this was emphasized in a beautiful passage from Merton's early journal, *Run to the Mountain*, in which he reflected that in the time of Advent 'sweetness falls from the skies of Time's darkness like a radiance that is just beyond our vision'.⁴⁵

Time, in the technocrat's view, on the other hand, Merton believed, was a *tabula rasa* regarded with both frustration and contempt—which is the way Jason Compson treats it in *The Sound and the Fury*—an

37. Merton: 'Time and the Unburdening', p. 512.

38. Thomas Merton, 'A Mysterious Song in the Spring of the Year', in *idem*, *Collected Poems*, p. 160.

39. Merton, 'Time and the Unburdening', p. 513.

40. Merton, 'Time and the Unburdening', p. 500.

41. Merton, 'Message to Poets', p. 161.

42. Merton, 'Time and the Unburdening', p. 499.

43. Thomas Merton, 'Night-Flowering Cactus', in *idem*, *Collected Poems*, p. 352.

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

45. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 459.

obstacle perversely put in the way of human progress and individual enterprise. This contempt for time often takes a collective shape—as can be seen in Merton's peripatetic poem, 'Kandy Express', which was originally included in his *Asian Journal*:

We rush blindly
In a runaway train
Through the great estates
Headlong to the sea.
That same sea which Queen Victoria
By a miracle of steam
Changed into sodawater.⁴⁶

The portrait of English colonialism shows a blindness to the scale of time and nature which predated the coming of the English to Ceylon, a background whose beauty and majesty Merton depicts as having devolved into racially separated social clubs with their whiskey and soda water.

The abstractness of the English view of India and Ceylon is ironically paralleled by what Merton perceived as an analogous tendency in the great French paleontologist, Teilhard de Chardin, whose optimistic evolutionism seemed to Merton to overlook the concreteness, and especially the moral turpitude, of history. Teilhard's 'scientific mystique', as Merton put it in an essay on 'The Plague of Albert Camus' did not 'delay overlong to worry about the death of a few thousand here and there'.⁴⁷ Merton's model of time required a fine balance between the concrete and the abstract, the still and the moving, as when in rejecting a too abstract idea of time, he declared biblical time to be refreshingly and realistically concrete in the way in which it grounded itself in narrative events.⁴⁸

Although Merton's idea of time is durational, he did not necessarily see time as a *smooth* curvature of unfolding. Merton's dynamic view of time and history is a good example of the mingling of the Christian and Romantic aspects of his thought. On the one hand history was dynamic in a Christian sense because of the friction between the divine intention and the egocentricity of individuals.⁴⁹ On the other hand, Merton found himself identifying with the pre-Christian,

46. Thomas Merton, 'Kandy Express', in *idem*, *Collected Poems*, p. 721.

47. Thomas Merton, 'The Plague of Albert Camus: A Commentary and Introduction', in *idem*, *Literary Essays*, pp. 181-217 (217).

48. Merton, *Opening the Bible*, p. 49.

49. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 167.

ostensibly pantheistic vision of Heraclitus. In 'Herakleitos: A Study', Merton supported the Heraclitean view of the cosmos as a 'conflict of opposites' that was in fact a 'stable and dynamic harmony'.⁵⁰ In this essay Merton interwove the Christian and Romantic strands of his view of history by presenting Heraclitus as a Greek philosopher whose dynamic view of history was compatible with Christianity. Was Christ, who 'came to cast fire on the earth', Merton wondered, 'perhaps akin to the Fire of which Herakleitos spoke?'⁵¹ Where Bergson had portrayed duration as the 'fiery path' traced by a shooting star,⁵² Merton provided a nexus between the Heraclitean image of fire and durational time in the image of the infusion of the eternal into the present moment as a 'seed of fire'.⁵³

In thinking about time Merton found himself drawn to certain general aspects of Einstein's thought, especially the idea that the universe had no 'center and no limits', as Merton put it in a letter to Ernesto Cardenal in 1963.⁵⁴ One consequence of Einstein's theory of relativity that appealed to Merton's imagination was that time and space were no longer viewed as separate, independent entities but rather as related to each other in a four-dimensional continuum of space time. Any such overcoming of barriers always appealed to Merton, especially when part of a dynamic cosmology. This did not mean that Merton began to see the cosmos as dominated by process. In a well-known essay entitled 'Blake and the New Theology', he went out of his way to say that he regarded God and the universe as driven by act rather than process, a distinction that seemed to Merton to intensify the dynamic character of the universe.⁵⁵ Merton's alternating view of time as both act and process presents the reader with something of a problem since the durational flow of time would seem to point to process rather than act. What reconciles these views in Merton's thought is his perception that the divine act of creation fuses time to the eternal so that the incomplete, durational movement through experience is somehow shot through with the fullness, decisiveness and instantaneity of the eternal. In Merton's writings the signs of the eternal within the finite are in the intuitive mind and consciousness

50. Merton, 'Herakleitos: A Study', p. 82.

51. Merton, 'Herakleitos: A Study', p. 91.

52. Bergson, *Duration and Simultaneity*, p. 50.

53. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), p. 361.

54. In *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers* (ed. Christine Bochen; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), p. 143.

55. Merton, 'Blake and the New Theology', p. 9.

and to some extent, as has been suggested, in nature. Merton was attracted to the presence of the numinous in intuitive consciousness and in nature not just because of his belief in the Incarnation but because as a Romantic he believed in the essential goodness of the inner self, what he called the 'deep transcendent self', and of nature.⁵⁶

Merton's religious imagery often incorporates a fluid and dynamic quality immersed in pools of illuminating, absolute meaning that steady the movement of particles through space and time. An example is that of the old trailer in Merton's poem, 'Elias', which while it moves 'faster and faster', yet mysteriously 'stands still', a paradox based not only on Christian theology but on Einstein's modernist view that a moving object may seem to be still or to move at various speeds depending on one's vantage point.⁵⁷ While Merton imaginatively embraced the shifting dynamics of perception implied in Einstein's theory, he felt that these diverse perspectives were all aligned and steadied by their relationship to God, the generative and yet stabilizing force in Merton's turning world.

In his Alaskan journal Merton set forth a distinction between the contemplative view of time—a meeting of the eternal and the temporal in the present which suspended the flow of time—and a prophetic view of time in which, looking at the sweep of past, present and future, 'we see salvatoin history at work'.⁵⁸

In much of his writing Merton had a sense of the present period of history as climactic, a time in durational terms of 'finality and of fulfillment'.⁵⁹ In writing to Daniel Berrigan in November 1961, in the midst of the Cold War, Merton felt that the end might well have been at hand; '*venit nox*', he wrote, 'maybe the total *nox*'.⁶⁰ The apocalyptic edge in Merton's writing derived from his sense that he lived in an age of two radical, superimposed eschatologies: that of 'secular anxieties and hopes and that of revealed fulfillment', as he put it in his

essay, 'The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room'.⁶¹ While Merton listed a number of different crises faced by contemporary culture, including a pervasive emptiness, predatory commerce and self-breeding technological warfare, he summed up the primary danger faced by contemporary peoples in the prologue to *Raids on the Unspeakable* as that of 'dehumanization'.⁶² Ironically, though, Merton felt that there was one major advantage to the attack against human dignity and meaning posed by the modern world, that contemporary perils and horrors might alert us in this generation to the eschatological choices which we have to make and which we might otherwise overlook in a more benign-looking secular culture. Merton's view here was somewhat analogous to that of Flannery O'Connor, whose grotesque characters were meant to shake the sleeping reader into an awareness of the apocalyptic stakes which were involved in human experience. Similarly, in Merton's view, Christians over time had lost the sense of drama felt by the early Christians who lived, he noted, in the imminent expectation of the return of Christ. This expectation, Merton argued in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, freed the early Christians from conventionality so that they were more easily aware of and detached from the usual pressures and constraints of living. Over time, though, he added, because of the impact of Hellenistic philosophy with its dominant rationality—here one thinks of Aquinas particularly—Christianity, according to Merton, became experienced 'statically' rather than 'dynamically'.⁶³

Paradoxically, Merton held the view that Marxism—at least as set forth by Marx—was as much a part of a biblical eschatology as of a secular one, having been strongly influenced by what Merton called the traditional idealism of 'Judeo-Christian messianism'.⁶⁴ For Merton, history, either at the present time or at some time in the future, was moving inexorably towards a final 'accounting' in which in biblical duration the 'injustice of oppressors' would be punished and those they oppressed would 'receive their just reward'.⁶⁵ Differing with Marx, Merton believed that the problem with a secular view of history was that it was likely to be centered on the past, a rut into which we inevitably returned in a fruitless search for meaning. In an

56. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 7.

57. Merton, 'Elias—Variations on a Theme', in *idem*, *Collected Poems*, p. 242.

58. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska* (New York: New Directions, 1988), p. 79.

59. Thomas Merton, 'The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room', in *idem*, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, pp. 65-78 (65).

60. Thomas Merton to Daniel Berrigan, 10 November 1961, in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (ed. William Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 71.

61. Merton, 'The Time of the End', p. 65.

62. Thomas Merton, 'Prologue', *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p. 3.

63. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), pp. 18-19.

64. Merton, *Opening the Bible*, p. 41.

65. Merton, *Opening the Bible*, p. 41.

essay entitled 'Faulkner and his Critics', Merton interpreted Faulkner's early fiction—that which preceded *The Sound and the Fury*—as caught in this sort of Spenglerian stasis, a 'closed universe of cyclic and tragic involvements'.⁶⁶ The difference, Merton argued, between the intervention of Christ into history and that of other heroes hinged upon the difference in their effects on time. As Merton put it in *Seasons of Celebration*, Christ's redemptive action was not merely a 'past historical fact with a juridical effect on individual souls' but rather an act that continued to permeate the present with meaning and choices which offered the possibility of hope for the future—an escape from the Spenglerian cycles of history with their repetitious, durational dead-ends.⁶⁷ While Merton perceived the past as frozen in what he called 'necessity', nevertheless the unifier of experience, that which animates moments into a coherent story is more, Merton wrote, than a 'blind life force'. Rather, the animating spirit of history was the 'free and loving will of God', the divine imagination that, Merton writes, 'thought each moment of my existence before I was', and engraved the image of this divine thought on the heart of every human being where it is especially readable in moments of solitude.⁶⁸ The ontological choices between secular and religious eschatology Merton presented in terms of the notion of crisis in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, crises of choice that loomed for us whether or not we were aware of them either as individuals or as a culture. Pondering the historical crisis faced by the Christians in the Roman Empire who were overwhelmed by the barbarian invasions, Merton reflected that if Christians were 'good enough', either then or now, the barbarians couldn't help becoming Christians.⁶⁹ While Merton's vision darkened somewhat in the 1960s, he stated eloquently that in spite of the massing armies in the contemporary world the 'eschatological banquet' was not that of the 'birds on the bodies of the slain', but was rather the 'feast of the living', the summons of The Great Joy, the 'cry of deliverance'.⁷⁰

Merton's idea of time is integral with those Romantic elements of his thought that involve an ontological consciousness of and longing for the unity of all things. About the surge of reverence for the idea of

unity in the West, however, G.K. Chesterton had some insightful, cautionary words in an essay entitled 'What Is Right with the World':

There has crept into our thoughts, through a thousand small openings, a curious and unnatural idea. I mean the idea that unity is itself a good thing; that there is something high and spiritual about things being blended and absorbed into each other ... Now union in itself is not a noble thing; but love is not union. Nay, it is rather a vivid sense of separation and identity. Maudlin, inferior love poetry does, indeed, talk of lovers being 'one soul', just as maudlin, inferior religious poetry talks of being lost in God; but the best poetry does not. Dante meets Beatrice, he feels his distance from her, not his proximity; and all the greatest saints have felt their lowness, not their highness, in the moment of ecstasy ... Division and variety are essential to praise ... There is nothing specially right about mere contact and coalescence.⁷¹

While Chesterton, with his penchant for antithesis and paradox, exaggerates the ways in which love is not a unity, he does call attention to one of the ways in which Christianity and Romanticism are different. For Christians, unity is something that must be earned through piety and the practicing of virtue prior to a final judgment that in the Christian view awaits all. While the Romantic in Merton led him to suppress the note of a final, separating judgment and to instead register his own longing for the unity of all being, he was not completely Romantic in that he grounded his conception of reality in the external world and in a God whom he saw as existing separately from as well as in the cosmos. At the same time, as has been suggested, Merton was elsewhere in his writings acutely conscious of the sanctity of creation, especially within the hidden and shy recesses of the self and in the beauty of nature. For Merton, as for Emerson and Whitman, such alternating currents in the spiritual life were not signs of contradiction but of inclusiveness. Typically, when forced to choose between a pantheistic and a transcendental model of time, as in the essay on Blake quoted earlier, Merton opted for a Christian transcendental model. But on the whole he preferred not to choose. For a contemplative like himself, time intersected with the eternal in the impressionistic receptivity of consciousness to the beauty and power of the created world within which, Merton assures us, the face of God can still be recognized.

66. Thomas Merton, 'Faulkner and his Critics', in *idem, Literary Essays*, p. 120.

67. Merton, *Seasons of Celebration*, p. 48.

68. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 269.

69. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 127.

70. Merton, 'The Time of the End', p. 74.

71. G.K. Chesterton, 'What Is Right with the World', in P.L.J. Kavanagh (ed.), *A G.K. Chesterton Anthology* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985), pp. 342-49 (346).