

Introduction: Upon Hearing an Aeolian Harp

Gray Matthews

One day in 1851, Henry David Thoreau entered a deep cut in the woods carved out for railroad tracks and heard a telegraph wire vibrating like an Aeolian harp. He sat down and listened as the musical strain suddenly reminded him “of what finer and deeper stirrings I was susceptible” and “that there were higher, infinitely higher, planes of life which it behooved me never to forget.”¹ He explained that he had been listening to the wind “which was conveying a message to me from heaven” when it began to speak through the vibrating wire as it passed, and “I instantly sat down on a stone at the foot of the telegraph pole – & attended to the communication,” which said:

“Bear in mind, Child – & never for an instant forget – that there are higher plains infinitely higher plains of life than this thou art now travelling on. Know that the goal is distant & is upward and is worthy all your life’s effort to attain to.” And then it ceased and though I sat some minutes longer I heard nothing more. (Thoreau, *Journal* 221)

Reading these lines of Thoreau today is like listening to an Aeolian harp as I am reminded of how to contemplate in a world of technology. Thoreau transcended the purposes of both the railroad and the telegraph in order to pay closer attention to what was infinitely higher. He did not complain or criticize the intrusion of mechanical forces at this time because he had already been paying rapt attention to the wind to begin with before he listened to it touch and pass over the most modern form of communication technology of his day.

For Thoreau, it was an impossible experience to hold onto, but transformative to the roots. Five years earlier, Thoreau began preparing in earnest to be a more receptive listener while living in the woods around Walden Pond and developing a determination to simplify his life, live deliberately and practice the highest of the arts: “To affect the quality of the day” and make one’s life “worthy

1. Henry David Thoreau, *A Year in Thoreau’s Journal: 1851*, ed. H. Daniel Peck (New York: Penguin, 1993) 221; subsequent references will be cited as “Thoreau, *Journal*” parenthetically in the text.

of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour."² What I admire about Thoreau perhaps the most was his unflagging attentiveness *through* his positive or negative experiences.

Thoreau listened with the same attentiveness to the locomotive train as well as the Aeolian harp. He perceived the train, however, as a mythological beast making "the hills echo with his snort like thunder, shaking the earth with his feet, and breathing fire and smoke from his nostrils" (Thoreau, *Walden* 110). Thoreau chose a metaphorical name, Atropos, for the engine driving this train of technological progress: "We have constructed a fate, an *Atropos*, that never turns aside" (Thoreau, *Walden* 112). Atropos was the goddess "without turn" in Greek mythology, one of three sisters known as the Fates. Clotho spun the thread of human life, Lachesis measured its length and Atropos carried scissors and the authority to determine when to cut the life thread. But Thoreau's attentiveness led him to see subtle changes in human behavior brought about by adaptation to a seemingly new order of fate: "Have not men improved somewhat in punctuality since the railroad was invented? Do they not talk and think faster in the depot than they did in the stage-office?" (Thoreau, *Walden* 111).

In reference to Thoreau, Thomas Merton declared in a letter to Mark Van Doren that "I have read a little of Thoreau and know enough to lament that such good sense died so long ago. But it could still be ours if only we wanted it."³ To me, Merton is claiming that it is still possible to hear the Aeolian harp today, to hear the music of infinitely higher planes above and beyond the whirring of a vibrating technological culture, provided we still want to listen. Like Thoreau in many ways, Merton modeled the attentive, contemplative life and forsook an existence steeped in deafening noise. "But let the moons explode," he told Van Doren, "and the books be silent. Let the captains whirl in the sky, let the monkeys in the heavens move levers with hands and feet, and with their big toe explode cities, for a soft drink. . . . Let them beat on the box while the voice comes out in a stream of lighted numbers. I have resigned from all numbers" (*RJ* 45). In other words, let the world

2. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 2000) 86; subsequent references will be cited as "Thoreau, *Walden*" parenthetically in the text.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 45 [8/9/62]; subsequent references will be cited as "*RJ*" parenthetically in the text.

have its punctuality and fast thoughts; I am going to listen to the eternal strums of the Aeolian harp.

Music conceals a purpose, writes philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch, which is “to express infinitely that which cannot be explained.”⁴ Music is a mystery of communication and music communicates mystery. For Jankélévitch, such “musical mystery” is not the “untellable” (something we cannot say), but rather the ineffable, that which cannot be explained. The ineffable cannot be exhausted even with “interminable words and innumerable musics,” for one “delves without end into such transparent depths and into this heartening plenitude of meanings” (Jankélévitch 72). Silence, however, is absolutely essential if we are to hear anything at all, whether words or music, wind or telegraphs.

The most devastating critique of a perpetual culture of noise was made by Max Picard in his sublime meditations in *The World of Silence*. Picard sees silence as the origin of speech and the end of speech; speech is “not an enemy: it is only the other side, the reverse of silence. One can hear silence sounding through speech. Real speech is in fact nothing but the resonance of silence.”⁵ Music runs parallel to silence, says Picard, and gives sound to silence. Hence what the contemplative is always listening to hear *through* nature, *through* music, *through* language, *through* technology – through, not via – is silence.

Is it possible to hear silence *through* noise, in the midst of noise? Yes, says Merton, in reflecting on Thoreau, if we realize: “The silence of the woods whispered, to the man who listened, a message of sanity and healing.”⁶

The question of the place of contemplation in a world of technological action is the question this volume of *The Merton Annual* addresses. How do we contemplate mystery in an age of information? How do we hear infinitely higher planes above cloud computing? How large must our monitors be to take in the sky? How can we Google paradise? What is the difference between a human face and its image? How do we practice detachment in a wireless environment? How do we see when we are deceived? Merton did not have the answers, but he did suggest an approach.

4. Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003) 71; subsequent references will be cited as “Jankélévitch” parenthetically in the text.

5. Max Picard, *The World of Silence* (1948; Washington, DC: Gateway, 1988) 27.

6. “The Wild Places,” in Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter H. Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 100.

He writes in a letter to Alceu Amoroso Lima:

Everything healthy, everything certain, everything holy: if we can find such things, they all need to be emphasized and articulated. For this it is necessary that there be a genuine and deep communication between the hearts and minds of men, communication and not the noise of slogans or the repetition of clichés. Genuine communication is becoming more and more difficult, and when speech is in danger of perishing or being perverted in the amplified noise of beasts, perhaps it becomes obligatory for a monk to try to speak.⁷

The difficulties of communication have been multiplied since Merton's time, and the dangers of not being able to communicate genuinely have increased. But we can practice such communication if we are at first mindful of the music of the spheres above the noise of our world.

The following essays, in different ways, try to communicate with the hope that poet Philip Booth expresses in the final lines of his poem, "Saying It":

we wake at night, to
imagine, and again wake
at dawn to begin: to let
the intervals speak
for themselves, to
listen to how they
feel, to give pause
to what we're about:
to relate ourselves
over and over; in
time beyond time
to speak some measure
of how we hear the music:
today if ever to
say the joy of trying
to say the joy.⁸

7. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 243; see also the original version in Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 165 [11/61].

8. Philip Booth, *Lifelines: Selected Poems 1950-1999* (New York: Penguin, 2000) 179.

Each author tries to attend to the relational tensions between technology and contemplation as they probe the promises of contemplation in an increasingly technological world; each refuses to listen only to the sounds of technology or the chattering of their own vocal minds as they strive to contemplate the messages carried by the wind through their lives.

Preview

We begin with a full version of Merton's essay "The Wild Places," plus an article by Ping Ferry on "Technophiliacs," as well as an interview with Ferry conducted by Paul Wilkes. Each of these will be individually introduced in their turn.

Following these introductory articles by Merton and Ferry are six major essays from a conference held September 23-24, 2011 at Bellarmine University entitled: "Contemplation in a Technological Era: Thomas Merton's Insight for the Twenty-First Century." The theme of that conference provided the theme for this volume of *The Merton Annual* – contemplation and technology – and is anchored in a question raised by Merton in *Faith and Violence*: "Can contemplation still find a place in the world of technology and conflict which is ours?"⁹ The keynote address and conference papers from that conference are being published here¹⁰ to expand the discussion of Merton's question as a pressing concern to all who seek to find the place of contemplation in our lives, which we must find, Merton exhorts, if we are to remain human.

The conference keynote address was delivered by Albert Borgmann, Regents Professor of Philosophy at the University of Montana, author of *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* and other philosophical works on technology and ethical responsibility in postmodernity. Borgmann opened the conference with reflections on the significance of Merton as a model for contemplation in a technological world. Borgmann selects from Merton's writings a series of philosophical and prophetic insights

9. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 215.

10. Unfortunately we are unable to include, in conjunction with other essays from the conference, Claire Badaracco's charming visual presentation on hand presses. Badaracco, a Professor of Communication at Marquette University, spoke on "Equanimity and Technology" and offered an eloquent case study exploring the technological and cultural roles of the hand press as a humane aid to contemplative life. Her work is ongoing and is being shared in other venues, and we trust it will be made available in print form soon.

that suggest a theoretical vision that can help us practice contemplation in our increasingly technological culture. Like Merton, Borgmann understands that distraction is not so much an assault on the contemplative life as it is a normal aspect of reality. As our practice of contemplation deepens, Borgmann argues, our capacity to confront and respond to the fullness of reality increases in wisdom and in communion with others.

Phillip Thompson, Executive Director of the Aquinas Center of Theology at Emory University, brings Catholic intellectual thought to bear on questions of science and theology, and in his essay here, specifically the issue of technology and biological immortality. Thompson argues against the transhumanist movement that offers false promises of immortality and eugenic objectives for a radically technological, rather than contemplative, transformation of humanity.

Daniel P. Horan, OFM follows with reflections on the intersection of technology and contemplation in terms of identity formation in the digital age. He argues that the “digital self” is a contemporary version of what Merton called the “false self,” a predominant motif in his writings. Horan finds Merton’s voice to be still one of wise counsel for spiritual seekers today who wish to better understand themselves in a technological world of action.

Kathleen Deignan offers reflections on Merton as a technological prophet straddling the divide between modernity and postmodernity, and finds Merton disenchanted with technology’s promise to offer a more perfect world. She argues that the postmodern ascetic of the future will need to learn detachment more than ever before if humanity is to reach its full spiritual maturity.

My own contribution to the conference shifted from my original draft as I became moved during the conference to speak more spontaneously than planned. I felt a need to situate my thoughts into the flowing context of ideas energized by a full day of conversation; therefore, I revised my essay for this volume to reflect my remarks more accurately. While I did not diverge from my original thesis, I did choose to accentuate my arguments regarding what I contend is most threatening to the place of contemplation in our lives, a threat that has been heightened, but not caused, by the evolution of technological culture: Commotion, a modern, socially constructed cultural phenomenon that tends to overwhelm us with its power to divert us from confronting its ancient roots in the agitation of our souls.

Paul Dekar concluded the conference and day of reflection by considering the place of “The Christian in a Technological World.” In the interests of time, Dekar sacrificed sharing his entire essay in order to lead conference attendees in a set of final reflections and guiding meditation. His full essay, which focuses on how Merton leads us to consider the possibilities of using technology most wisely, should be of interest to the conference-goers who did not hear his full remarks as well as to the general readership of the *Annual*.

Four additional non-conference papers related to the theme of contemplation and technology are also included in this volume. Gary Hall and Gordon Oyer both attended the conference and participated in the substantial discussions between formal presentations as well as submitting sterling essays to this volume. Hall finds Merton’s personalist approach to questions of self-identity and relatedness with others as a fruitful place to begin probing issues of openness and freedom in a technological milieu. Oyer provides a substantial scholarly exploration of the significance and development of Merton’s views on technology cultivated during the now famous “peacemaker retreat” held at Gethsemani in 1964. Daniel Bogert-O’Brien presents a philosophical study of parallels in the thought of Merton and Ivan Illich against what he argues is a utilitarian mindset of technical professionalism in an age of simulacra. Jeffrey Kiernan’s essay provides a nice complement to the above works by relating his practical insights into discussing issues of technology and freedom with high-school teens today; he shares his experience of introducing teens, whom he identifies as “society’s greatest users and consumers of technology,” to the works of Merton and, perhaps unexpectedly, Pope Benedict XVI.

David Belcastro offers further food for thought in reflecting on our overall theme through his bibliographic essay “Fire Watch When the Web Goes Down,” followed by a very helpful collection of pertinent book reviews, including a review symposium spotlighting Monica Weis’ *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (2011).

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We swing in mid-air on a ladder to heaven made of rope. What do we know? In the first chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau directs our attention to this very question. One day while building his cabin and “having many communicable or scholar-like thoughts, singing to myself,” Thoreau mused on this matter:

Men say they know many things;
But lo! They have taken wings –
The arts and sciences,
And a thousand appliances;
The wind that blows
Is all that anybody knows. (Thoreau, *Walden* 39-40)

As technology makes its deep cut into creation and spreads a wireless net of human words and images throughout the cosmos, may we learn to listen to the breeze that vibrates the universe like an Aeolian harp while we continue climbing ladders of contemplation, singing with the music.