

9. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 245 [6/30/1963]; subsequent references will be cited as “RJ” parenthetically in the text. John XXIII was canonized on April 27, 2014.
10. See *J. F. Powers*, ed. Fallon Evans (St. Louis: Herder, 1968) 11, 14.
11. *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2013) 128-29; subsequent references will be cited as “*Evangelii Gaudium*” parenthetically in the text.

## Thomas Merton: Hedgehog and Fox

By Ron Dart

The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.

Archilochus

Already there are some who unabashedly compare Merton to the Fathers of the Church. In fact, this comparison is not far-fetched. It is simply an expression of the significance of what this compulsive writer from silence had to say, and a statement of his promise for the future.

Victor A. Kramer<sup>1</sup>

The publication in 1953 of Isaiah Berlin’s classic study *The Hedgehog and the Fox*<sup>2</sup> opened up fine pathways regarding the tensions that exist between those who think broadly and those who think deeply. The fox, of course, embodies those who think in a wide-ranging manner – the hedgehog burrows deeply into a narrow channel. Tolstoy, Berlin suggested, lived the tension of the fox and the hedgehog – so did Thomas Merton. Merton thought, read and wrote widely – his sheer breadth links him to the best of the Christian humanist tradition. Merton also, more than most, played a significant role in reviving and renewing the contemplative way of knowing and being – he was very much the contemplative hedgehog in doing so. I think the perennial significance of Merton is the way that he, like Tolstoy, was both fox and hedgehog.

There can be little doubt that Merton’s turn from the bustling and driven world of New York to the ordered silence of the Cistercians was a conscious turn to the *vita contemplativa*. Merton knew, in the depths of his mind and soul, that things were out of joint in Western civilization, and like the proverbial canary in the mineshaft, Merton felt the toxins in his heart and imagination. Many of Merton’s books, beginning with *What is Contemplation?*<sup>3</sup> and *Seeds of Contemplation*,<sup>4</sup> track and trace his longing to understand and live into the contemplative way both within the historic Christian tradition and, in the 1960s, in a more focused manner, the mystical way in other faith traditions. Daniel Adams, in his early book, *Thomas Merton’s Shared Contemplation*,<sup>5</sup> followed, like the



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proverbial hedgehog, Merton's fully catholic contemplative burrowings just as William Shannon's *Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative*<sup>6</sup> and James Finley's *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*<sup>7</sup> reveal the complex nature of Merton's contemplative clearings. *New Seeds of Contemplation*<sup>8</sup> and *Contemplative Prayer*<sup>9</sup> embody and reflect the subtler and more nuanced approach of Merton's contemplative journey.

Merton was too wise and insightful to reduce the contemplative pathway to a series of techniques. The much deeper process of sifting the wheat of the true self from the chaff of the false self was at the core and center of Merton's contemplative probes. In short, "Man's home-made image is his enemy. This must be destroyed / With straight words and paradox."<sup>10</sup> Or, to put the burning of dross of the actor ego from gold of the eternal in Christ-self into fuller prose: "Our external, superficial ego is not eternal, not spiritual. Far from it. This self is doomed to disappear as completely as smoke from a chimney. It is utterly frail and evanescent. Contemplation is precisely the awareness that this 'I' is really 'not I' and the awakening of the unknown 'I' that is beyond observation and reflection and is incapable of commenting upon itself" (*NSC* 7).

Merton thought deeply and widely about the contemplative way and he also wrote prolifically about such a journey – such a pilgrimage was, in many ways, at the heart of his monastic and human vocation. There is, of course, something quite perennial about the contemplative way and the recovery of it in an age in which most are addicted to the *vita activa*.

I think, therefore, one of the most significant contributions of Merton is the way he attempted to reverse the *vita activa* – *vita contemplativa* hierarchy that has come to dominate the modern world. Merton was very much the hedgehog as he grappled with this "one big thing." Merton was also the curious fox who covered immense terrain in his thinking, writing and life. The sheer breadth of Merton's interests and the speed by which he traversed a multiplicity of disciplines speaks much about a fully engaged humanist mind and imagination. Merton was poet, literary critic, novelist, correspondent, friend, biographer, autobiographer, historian, social critic, church reformer, journalist, agitator, ecologist, photographer, artist, liturgist, monk, master of novices and scholastics, patristic scholar, spiritual director, calligrapher, ecumenist, interfaith pioneer and farm worker. The rich harvest of Merton's life has, in fact, created a sprawling Mertonian scholarly industry and following. The many trails Merton the fox has created or followed have kept his trackers (and there are many) more than busy.



Merton was astutely aware of the need not to isolate the contemplative journey from the world of action. In his article "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal" (which initially appeared in *Commonweal* in 1958) had this to say: "true contemplation is inseparable from life and from the dynamism of life – which includes work, creation, production, fruitfulness, and above all love. Contemplation is not to be thought of as a separate department of life, cut off from all man's other interests and superseding them. It is the very fullness of a fully integrated life."<sup>11</sup>

The essence, of course, of the best of the Christian humanist way is “the very fullness of an integrated life.” E. Glenn Hinson has ably tracked Merton’s more complicated integrated journey from the pre-Fourth and Walnut Street years in his fine article, “*Contemptus Mundi – Amor Mundi: Merton’s Progression from World Denial to World Affirmation.*”<sup>12</sup> The fact that Merton went through a momentary and somewhat romanticized *contemptus mundi* phase must be set in the context of his much more integrated and consistent humanist and fox-like *amor mundi* faith pilgrimage – it is this probing fullness, this searching integration and authentic Christian humanism that makes Merton also perennially attractive. Merton was, in short, very much the free-rambling intellectual fox.

Why was Thomas Merton an appealing and controversial person both when he was alive and today? I think the fact that he combines the role of the contemplative hedgehog who knows “one big thing” and the curious and investigative fox who “knows many things” makes Merton a fascinating human being and a person who has yet much to teach us about life and our all-too-human faith journey. It is this depth and breadth in Merton that, in many ways, as Victor Kramer has mentioned, reminds us of the patristic tradition of the Church as embodied in the Fathers (West and East) of whom Merton was most fond.

1. Victor A. Kramer, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Artist* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987) 193.
2. Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953).
3. Thomas Merton, *What Is Contemplation?* (Holy Cross, IN: Saint Mary’s College, 1948); rev. ed. (Springfield, IL: Templegate, [1951] 1981).
4. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949).
5. Daniel J. Adams, *Thomas Merton’s Shared Contemplation: A Protestant Perspective* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1979).
6. William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton’s Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982).
7. James Finley, *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God through Awareness of the True Self* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1978).
8. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961); subsequent references will be cited as “NSC” parenthetically in the text.
9. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969).
10. Thomas Merton, “The Moment of Truth,” *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 777.
11. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 339.
12. E. Glenn Hinson, “*Contemptus Mundi – Amor Mundi: Merton’s Progression from World Denial to World Affirmation.*” *Cistercian Studies* 26 (1991) 339-49.

## **Silence as Attention and Antidote**

**By Paul R. Dekar**

An undergraduate from 1961-65 at the University of California, Berkeley, I heard Mario Savio inveigh against “the operation of the machine . . . so odious, it makes you sick at heart.” Naming as a great challenge “depersonalized, unresponsive bureaucracy,” Savio helped me name my issue. I sought in response intellectual mentors such as Saul Alinsky, Ivan Illich and Thomas Merton, who