

The Wisdom of Contemplation

By **Malgorzata Poks**

Affluenza, defined as “a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more,”¹ has reached epidemic proportions. Ubiquitous noise attacks the ear in all public places; intrusive mechanical music drowns out conversations in cafes and bars, pollutes the environment in shopping malls; even public transport is not free from it, at least where I live. Facebook and other social networking sites keep us nervously checking the latest lest we miss some trivial gossip which becomes big news for the initiated or overlook a photo of our boss’s new girlfriend on an exotic trip. Even real-life interaction is often mediated by gadgets or focuses on them. Letter-writing, which served the purpose of a meaningful exchange of ideas, has been replaced by texting – short, often ungrammatical messages accompanied by indispensable emoticons – which hints at our inability to engage in more complex interactions. At this point I cannot help thinking about Thomas Merton. Dissatisfied with the quality of human communication in the space age, he quipped, on the occasion of the first radio conversation between an astronaut in his spaceship and his wife back on earth, that we have devised outrageously expensive ways of communicating about nothing.²

Thank God for Thomas Merton, his contemplative wisdom, and his silence. Merton knew that it is in silence that we learn to make distinctions and begin to reject the predetermined choices of consumer culture; we start to live deliberately; we find the courage and the strength to struggle for a more just, more meaningful world. It was silence that brought me to Merton. It is his wisdom that makes me stay. In times marked by a crisis of identity we keep asking ourselves all the more compulsively, helplessly and narcissistically: who am I? “Be still,” answers Merton. “Do not / Think of what you are / Still less of / What you may one day be. / Rather / Be what you are (but who?) be / The unthinkable one / You do not know.”³ Be, though you will never know, perhaps even do not need to know, what being means. Being is irreducible to, even irreconcilable with, having. It is not true that you are what you have (the right logo, the latest gadget), still less that if you are not on Facebook, then you do not exist. Merton matters because he offers an alternative to both the epidemic of affluenza and that of quietist withdrawal from a confusing, troubling, unjust world. Being is more important than having; contemplation is inseparable from action; and a religious person has an obligation to follow the voice of conscience, which is the voice of God, rather than meekly accept injustices sanctified by (unjust) laws. Merton matters because he offers a spirituality deeply engaged in this world, in making this world an antechamber of heaven. He matters because to him an individual is more sacred than an abstract crowd, because he elevates communion over mere togetherness and solidarity with the world in crisis



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over the innocence of a bystander. He matters because he reclaims for us the monastic virtues of hospitality, silence, poverty, stability and life-long conversion; because he teaches us to love all life and “worry about *both* birds and people,” as he put it in his reflections on Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*.⁴ Ultimately, Merton matters because he shows that the Sermon on the Mount still matters.

1. John De Graff, David Wann and Thomas H. Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2002) 2.
2. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 254 [6/6/1965].
3. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 280-81: “In Silence,” ll. 1, 14-21.
4. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 274 [12/11/1962].

Beginning at the End

By J. S. Porter

Whenever someone asks me how he or she might enter into Thomas Merton’s vast body of work, I usually recommend *The Asian Journal*.¹ (I make the suggestion when I know that the inquisitive person is familiar with Michael Mott’s *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*.²) It may seem odd to begin at the end, but I think I can make a playful case for such an unorthodox invitation. I stand with Robert Lax’s assessment that Merton in *The Asian Journal* is “most himself, most keen & observant, witty, lost, (found) erudite, enlightened, clean, natural, free, mature.”³ “[I]n his journals,” says Ross Labrie, “Merton came closest in a verbal medium to the spontaneous self-expression that he achieved in his calligraphies.”⁴

Compiled by his editor Naomi Burton, his private secretary Brother Patrick Hart and his publisher James Laughlin five years after Merton’s death, *The Asian Journal* draws on three separate notebooks: “A” – the public journal intended for publication; “B” – the private journal; and “C” – the pocket notebook. The book also fulfills Merton’s stated ambition recorded on July 17, 1956 to write an inclusive and expansive book: “And I have always wanted to write about everything. . . . a book in which everything can go. A book with a little of everything that creates itself out of everything.”⁵ Although very different in content, the only book I can think of as being roughly comparable in form is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Crack-Up*,⁶ compiled by his friend Edmund Wilson in 1945, five years after Fitzgerald’s death. It too is a book of everything – letters, poems, essays and notes.



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