

“In the Night of Our Technological Barbarism”: Thomas Merton’s Light on the Matter

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The topic “Contemplation in the Technological Era” is one of the most critical issues for those of us concerned with human spiritual evolution, and so it was for Thomas Merton. Like you, perhaps, my fascination is not just what Merton has said about this topic, but imagining what he *might* say, had he the chance to be in our assembly and especially to meet our keynoter, Dr. Albert Borgmann, who has spent so much of his life examining the topic we have come here to explore.¹

Dr. Borgmann’s intellectual concern has been engaged in the critical and constructive task of disclosing the ubiquitous reach and power of the culture of technology, proposing interpretative frameworks for being able to perceive it, and articulating a new vocabulary to aid us to speak of it – this wildly complex phenomenon which signals the end of one historical era, indeed an Earth era, and the tentative emergence of another. Like our biblical ancestors, twenty-first-century humankind is in exodus, trekking an uncharted frontier to reach what Dr. Borgmann calls the post-modern divide rising from the unsustainable but captivating plains of modernity, that we might cross over and build a more promising and life-enhancing technological world on the other side (see Borgmann, *Power Failure* 2). But in our haste to out-pace the ancient plagues that have ever scourged us – the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (see Borgmann, *Power Failure* 23) – more

1. See Albert Borgmann, *The Philosophy of Language: Historical Foundations and Contemporary Issues* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974); *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) (subsequent references will be cited as “Borgmann, *Technology*” parenthetically in the text); *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) (subsequent references will be cited as “Borgmann, *Crossing*” parenthetically in the text); *Holding on to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003) (subsequent references will be cited as “Borgmann, *Power Failure*” parenthetically in the text); *Real American Ethics: Taking Responsibility for Our Country* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

contemporary pathologies are racing with them in hot pursuit: the one-eyed legions of demonic progress, the trouble-making minions of post-modern Pharaoh's high-tech empire. There is no sacrificial lamb whose blood will insure a chosen people safe passage through this perilous night of our generation's flight from modernity's imploding platforms, though innocent blood is everywhere in and out of sight. There is no Moses up ahead laying down the new Law of sustainability and justice, or mediating a hi-tech Torah spelling out Ten Commandments of right being and doing in the post-modern Promised Land. There is no God-sent hero parting the sea of ecological troubles which rise up all around us as we leave in our wake a world of waste: the carnage of species; manufactured landscapes and the desolation of landscape; war-weary and traumatized generations; the threatening collapse of a global technological economy and the primordial economy of creation on which it is predicated; toxic pollution; geological instability; a new epidemic of commercial and sexual slavery; and catastrophic climate disruption of the life-support system of the only living planet within light years of our cosmic neighborhood.

We, the exiles of modernity, have been transformed and transported to the edge of this precipitous divide by the technology that has become our second nature, if not the end of nature itself (see Borgmann, *Power Failure* 37). We know not if we are simply wandering in a post-modern wilderness which borders on a truly promising world, or if we are completely lost in a desert made more barren by our own psychic disorientation as the decades go by, a wasteland of what we had intended to be wonderland, uninhabitable now in so many reaches, by human or other-kind.² This is neither hyperbole nor exaggeration – the facts are everywhere available. It is the state of things especially for the 80% of our kind who are largely hidden in plain sight of the affluent world. It is what Merton might call "the night of our technological barbarism,"³ had he access to the chilling matrices that we have to measure the swath of our current global crisis.

Clearly, in this discourse we will not be hearing from Thomas Merton the nature mystic. Rather we attend the voice of Merton the technological prophet, the one who came to Gethsemani to

2. See Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989).

3. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1977) 38; subsequent references will be cited as "MJ" parenthetically in the text.

escape the technologically mediated barbarism of history's cruellest century, with Thoreau in his hip pocket, and in his hands, John of the Dark Nights, and the Bible, opened to the Apocalypse.⁴ As Merton once wryly put it to Henry Miller: "There are no problems in the apocalypse, just monsters. This one is a monster."⁵

Yet Merton never declared all technology barbarous or monstrous; he often affirmed and celebrated technological achievements that enhanced the human spirit, and shared a certain Teilhardian perspective on the noetic evolution of the species aided and demonstrated by the dramatic complexity of our technics. Indeed, the cyber-revolution of which he wrote is no monstrosity in itself, nor the algorithmic marvels involved in mass communications which connect the planet with the ring or tweet of a smart phone. Neither is the cochlear implant of a hearing aid that lets someone take the call, nor the laser surgery that lets yet another somebody read the tweet. Nor is heart by-pass surgery monstrous, or the transplant of organs and limbs, or the Hubble telescope that surveys the heavenly realms still birthing, or all the wondrous paraphernalia that has brought us the sequenced genome, or an mp3 of the Brandenburg Concerti that allows us to have Bach in our ear via our iPod. Although Merton had little good to say about the TV, which he admittedly hardly ever saw, the movie lover in him would never call cinema-tech monstrous, since more often than not each showing reveals to us something of human grandeur or folly.

Like most of us, Merton lived in this emerging divide between the cultural climates of modernity and post-modernity. He could affirm on the one hand the real and salutary achievement of technological innovation, which over two centuries had made good on a promise of liberty and prosperity to aid at least some of humanity in bearing the burdens of existence. Our various technologies

4. See Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 143-44 (subsequent references will be cited as "CWA" parenthetically in the text): "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."

5. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) 169; subsequent references will be cited as "CWL" parenthetically in the text.

serve our health and safety, our transportation and recreation needs, our work and creativity, education and welfare, even our very understanding of human potential and destiny. He could rejoice in the commodities that enhance our lives and heighten the experience of self, community and creation. Though he had no personal tech-toys himself – no phone, radio or TV; no AC, DVD, mp3, computer or dishwasher – he nevertheless was able to see the dark side of our technological bubble that can induce and trap us in a techno-trance. He noted how it could deaden our spirit and sensibility, lower our vitality, and leave us fatigued and enervated.⁶ He saw in modernity's refugees how such a techno-trance can degrade our human experience and alienate us from self and other in diversion, frivolity and triviality (see Borgmann, *Technology* 246). He was alert to technology's power to distract us from the real world of human complexity and suffering and cocoon us in our own "private Idaho."⁷

As Dr. Borgmann's work makes clear, technology can liberate us or enslave us, free us for our most cherished focal concerns or fill the center of our lives with enthralling but ultimately meaningless devices and diversions. While Thomas Merton had no Borgmann to codify the crisis brought on by such trivial pursuits, he warned with a seer's authority that it can lure us away from our most essential need and vocational mandate: the urgent inner work of spiritual development and maturation. His uncanny cultural intuition led him to see that only by rousing ourselves from "the sleep of the machine" can we restore the vibrant consciousness of a truly awakened species, healed of our fretful afflictions and dehumanizing addictions, to become ourselves healers, at home in this Living Earth, our plundered yet still palpable paradise.

Merton underscored over and over again the alienation and somnambulism that characterized our generations whom he called "technological pagan[s]" (CWA 32). He was deeply disturbed by

6. See Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 16; subsequent references will be cited as "CGB" parenthetically in the text. This volume is rich with Merton's meditations on the challenge of technology to spiritual thriving.

7. See *Urban Dictionary* (on-line): "This is a phrase from the 1980 dance pop song 'Your Own Private Idaho' by the B-52s which means 'living inside an Idaho potato,' or a very small space. Metaphorically, it refers to someone who is not paying attention because he is daydreaming, or under the influence, or otherwise wrapped up within his own very narrow sphere of interest or frame of reference."

the troubling “blank passivity and indifference” (CWA 33) which he saw masking the modern mass cohort whose despair he sensed, even as they trekked through the visitors’ precincts and even the novitiate of Gethsemani: languid, depersonalized people incapable of authenticity. He noted this to his dialogue partner Abdul Aziz, adding that the technological entrancement of his fellow Americans made him worry for the soul of a nation so technologically strong and spiritually weak.⁸ Therefore, he summoned us, his readers, into the wider fields of psycho-spiritual liberty, where the conditions of solitude and silence would bring us to a sanity beyond the lunacy of social conditioning; where we could dwell with equanimity in stillness, healed of the need to keep running beside ourselves, frenzied and fractured, never knowing our own integral unity, our communion with everything. Most of all Merton taught us how to divine our way toward divinity dwelling within and all about – the encompassing mystery of God, hiding in plain sight for all to see, if we took the time to look deeply at this Paradise entrusted to our care and keeping and learn again how to be with, keep faith with, the Creator in the cool of the day.

Clearly, from Merton’s perspective the promise of modern technology which has been the great historical experiment of nearly two centuries, has not delivered us to an inner ground of meaning, but has left us more alienated and estranged. “[T]he storm of history has arisen out of our own hearts,” he writes to his Latin American correspondent, the poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra. “It has sprung unbidden out of the emptiness of technological man.”⁹ Merton would leave no room to divert from the contemplative challenge posed by our stunning technological achievement and dislocation. Some of his last reflections record his penetrating understanding of this moment of spiritual crisis and crucial choice:

We are in grave danger of losing a spiritual heritage that has been painfully accumulated by thousands of generations of saints and contemplatives. It is [the challenge of faithful persons] in the modern world to keep alive the contemplative experience and to keep the way open for modern technological

8. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 51 [4/4/62].

9. “A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants,” in Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 372.

man to recover the integrity of his own inner depths. Above all, it is important that this element of depth and integrity – this element of inner transcendent freedom – be kept intact as we grow toward the full maturity of universal man. We are witnessing the growth of a truly universal consciousness in the modern world. This universal consciousness may be a consciousness of transcendent freedom and vision, or it may simply be a vast blur of mechanized triviality and ethical cliché. The difference is, I think, important enough to be of concern to all religions, as well as to humanistic philosophies with no religion at all.¹⁰

What, then, is contemplation in the technological age? This question is the novel challenge of our Christian generation – and doubtless for generations to come. None of our spiritual ancestors – not even the prescient Merton – can answer this question for us, nor the mystics or the great teachers of our or any wisdom tradition. It is our particular work, and ours alone; a question to be lived into. In this question, Merton the Spiritual Master meets Merton the Prophet, for in our time, contemplative life and practice are explicitly oriented toward the prophetic ministry of healing and liberating the technologized self and psyche. In that regard, it will be a life of *inner* struggle to excavate one's own depths and make space again for an unnamable and unknowable Presence that is the ubiquitous and ineffable matrix of this incarnate realm. As we are stretched for survival's sake toward our mystical potential, we become contemplative explorers not just of the vastness of outer space which has been the rapturous preoccupation of recent generations, but of inner space, to explore the buoyant groundlessness of our own being and of all beings. In this solemn adventure we dare to suffer the fact and feeling of impermanence – the one truth we so deny. Taking root in such rootlessness, we are gradually liberated from the lie of the hi-tech priesthood that proclaims 24-7 from the blaring minarets of mass media, their gospel of denial of such radical contingency. Since in our contemplative labor we taste the paradoxical sweetness of being ourselves impermanent within a womb of endless becoming, we are no longer seduced by the charlatans who promise to save us from the conditions of

10. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 317; subsequent references will be cited as "AJ" parenthetically in the text.

mortal, sentient existence: anxiety, pain, limitation, disappointment, disease, decrepitude, baldness, unwanted facial hair, arthritis, depression, and death itself. We hear the hollowness of their proclamation: this is what saves – power, pleasure, possessions! We no longer race for the cure or reach for the fantasy of immortality. In contemplative practice, we have already tasted it – the extinction of want and why; the extinction of the fear of being, the fear of life itself. In contemplative re-birth we become a new race of humankind: *Homo Sapiens sapiens*.

Contemplation for post-modern generations will require its own conscious asceticism to rebirth ourselves as such a new species. It will necessitate the careful use and sometimes renunciation of the goods and privileges of our affluent culture, the careful discernment of how the many voices and devices can free us from or ensnare us in the narcissism of our hi-tech over-development, and buffer us from the burden of human “anguish” which is the lot of our kind, the ground of empathy and compassion (CWA 35). We will learn, as Meister Eckhart taught, that the soul grows by subtraction.

Contemplative life for our time must of necessity have not just a profound inner horizon, but an expansive outer reach, not just to my neighbor, but to the strangers afar who subsidize my table, make my clothes, assemble my iPad, traffic my drugs while being trafficked themselves for sex and organs and house work, who choke on the waste of my toxic hi-tech trash, because “NIMBY.” My contemplation will have to be able to mediate these necessary and life-giving strangers to me, and my practice will have to mediate me to them in conscious gratitude, affective and political solidarity and action that are the expression of my contemplative heart, for my own liberation and theirs. Such contemplation will also challenge me to work with my agitated flight from the terror of boredom and unfulfillment that lies at the root of the consumption compulsion, so that when it stirs I will have the mindfulness to resist the urge “to buy something else, or turn another switch, or open another bottle, or swallow another pill” (CWA 243). It will summon me to experiment with the grace, equanimity and presence that spring up when I refuse to communicate the contagion of my obsessions, aggressions, egocentric ambitions and delusions that are the engine and the fuel for a global economy of much mindless, wasteful consumption and hyperactivity (see CWA 164). The produce of the technological harvest of this global

economy – goods and services, comfort and security – reach only the richest 1% of the world's adults who own 40% of its wealth, because 50% of the world's adults own barely 1% of global wealth. In our hi-tech global economy, women, who are 50% of the world population, likewise own 1% of its wealth and assets, and in the American sector, the average CEO's annual paycheck is \$10 million while his or her employees make on average about \$33,000 – a 325 to 1 gap of justice. Such is the new awareness that has arisen as the "99%."

It may seem a bit Marxist to bring up suspicions about who owns what during a spiritual direction session, but this is exactly where Merton wants contemplative consciousness to go in the technological age. He worried not only about how we were to live among machines while preserving the true affluence of our sacred humanity, identity, dignity; he also worried about how we were to deepen our solidarity with marginalized and disenfranchised human beings, and other beings in general – a truly socialist and Christian concern (see *CWA* 37). He is grateful to Marx for seriously investigating in depth our dehumanization by technological means, and agrees with him that workers should own the means of production, and not become *a* means of production for someone else. His own Gospel-like aphorism exhorts us: "Technology was made for man [*sic*], not man for technology" (*CGB* 202).

Clearly for Merton, our predicament as citizens of technological mass society is that we are not laboring to reach our spiritual maturity. On the contrary, the modern person is "becoming fixed in infantilism and irresponsibility, in which he passively submits to systematic stultification" of freedom in the preoccupying pursuit of material security and satisfaction (*CWA* 36). In a rather shocking metaphor he notes that we enter anonymously into the process of production and consumption, becoming on one side a "bio-physical link" *between* machines, and on the other side, a mouth, a digestive system and an anus, "something *through which* pass the products of his technological world, leaving a transient and meaningless sense of enjoyment" – resulting in "moral infancy" (*CGB* 64). In this Merton echoes the perennial sacred mandate: *evolve or die*.

Alluding to Marx again, Merton would have us sharpen our contemplative suspicions about the marriage of the socio-economic mechanism and the technological machine, saying "we are still determined by the illusions of thought patterns, superstructures, devised to justify antiquated and destructive economic patterns"

(CWA 150). If we are to choose our authentic freedom to make ourselves, we have one duty, “narrowed down to one simple option, one basic commitment: the struggle against the (imperialist) world” (CWA 151). Here Merton magnifies the bifurcation of our technological reality and its consequence for a worldly contemplative. It affects us not just on the up-close micro-phase level, enthralling us by its devices and products. But there is a consequence on a less discernible macro-phase level as well, because we become in some sense the prisoners of the trans-national corporations that devise and produce these wonder-works, incarcerated in a maze of up-scale malls, shopping channels, and the ubiquitous world-web that has become a wide-open prison system of commerce and consumption in which our generations happily do time. We give the wardens no trouble; we simply ask for more and cheaper, keeping our friends in developing nations shackled to machines which – at least in the developed world – we no longer care to operate – more accurately, have no opportunity to operate even the means of our stuff’s production, because someone decided that it was more profitable to outsource it all elsewhere.

Merton the Prophet would not decry the machine itself nor the global legion of blue collar workers (factory slaves?) who drive and keep it running mostly in China, India and Southeast Asia. But he does rage against the monstrous way that it is employed by white-collar bosses who have made the machine monstrous in its reckless, feckless design and application: the rape and de-nature of the natural world. If this all seems a bit too apocalyptic, let us take a contemplative pause for a media-meditation that may illustrate the starkness of Merton’s vision. There are so many to choose from, but I recommend this brief video *lectio*, *Manufactured Landscapes*, which illustrates Merton’s insight perfectly.¹¹

Were Merton here in his historical mode to guide our contemplative conversion in the technological era, he might actually encourage us to do our *lectio* in YouTube media libraries where we could virtually open the Book of Creation and electronically read its splendid revelation. Take, for instance, the circum-polar northern boreal forest, an emerald eco-system which rings our northern western hemisphere. This northern sister of the Amazon is a Canadian wilderness the size of England, and within it there thrived for millennia (until about a decade ago) a host of other

11. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYwHR9yb0IM&NR=1>.

members of this Earth community which some call *The Body of God*.¹² Then, in our virtual practice of "natural contemplation," we could move from these Creation Mysteries to the Passion Mysteries of our Earth, beholding this same glory, this singular and unrepeatable incarnation of divine fecundity being technologically crucified and irrevocably desecrated by the insatiable thirst for oil amid the tar sands of this once pristine bio-region.¹³

In this contemplative practice of *video-lectio*, we could see the splendor of oceans, and with another click, their depletion. We could witness the majesty of mountains, and then, with another click, their decapitation. We could learn the names and see the faces of our 1000 relatives which go extinct each year, and even some human tribes likewise threatened with extinction beneath the unbearable and unsustainable footprint of the voracious human species. In such faithful opening of the Book of Nature, experientially or virtually, we could awaken to the Passion of the Incarnate Christ through Whom All Things Were Made, which seems to be the contemplative vocation of our generations.

In a contemplative exploration of cyber-space, we would discover a global community of kindred spirits and be drawn into forums of not just diatribe but of dialogue on the crises of our world, and begin to behold some of the real contours of our planet: who is minding it and blessing it, who is running or ruining it. In these video-meditations and explorations we could begin to see the hydra-like monster of Merton's apocalypse whose master-wizards move in mufti: the "white collar" cohort Merton warned us about. This highly organized multi-national presence operates beyond the reach of citizenry of even the most mature democracies which are rendered impotent before the corporate, business-like, cool, guilt-free MO of "a white-collar murder machine." In Merton's un-nuanced words, it is this globalized corporate machine "that threatens the world [*the living planet*] with [technological] destruction."¹⁴ These mass murderers of corporate enterprise, as Merton ferociously calls them, are almost entirely free of sanctions regarding what they make or take or fake or break. It is this white collar cabal – the captains of the interlocking directories of industry,

12. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DuRxxklojz54>.

13. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5aXo87N6nU.

14. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 7; subsequent references will be cited as "FV" parenthetically in the text.

technology, economy/banking, and government – who entrance and entrap the “captive mind” of our time, the liberation of which preoccupied Merton right up to his last speech in Bangkok on the day of his death (see *AJ* 326-43).

How might he counsel us now, not as dupes of Cold War political ideology, but as targets of media-driven consumer propaganda in service to the reigning capitalist regime? Would he see these corporate conglomerates as a new variety of totalitarianism? Might he warn us, as he in fact suggested, of a dictatorship of The Corporation, whose janus nature oscillates between benign nurturer providing for our every want and need, and then monster in its own right, whose enslavement of the human person plays out not only in the opiates of commodity and consumerism, but in the global confiscation of resources, land and labor to maximize the annual prize paid to its shareholders and CEOs? The “Mad Men” of Merton’s generation arose in great number in the 1950s, packaging and selling the American Dream that masked a post-war nightmare. Granted, General Electric brought “good things to light,” marching into our kitchens with its toasters, refrigerators and ovens. General Motors and Mobil made us mobile indeed, exploding the production and procurement of cars, which required roads to cut through our precious eco-systems and the extraction of oil, gas and metal at unprecedented levels. Like other dominant “corporate persons” that moved into our homes, garages and psyches in the last half-century, the Mad Men promoted an ethic of unregulated consumption and greed that has finally caught up with us. More disturbing to our monk who made his life a protest against war,¹⁵ they also spun an arms race to “protect our way of life,” and built a military arsenal and empire of world-wide reach and address, that siphons off investment in human and ecological aid and development. Mad men, indeed.

The United States alone spends about as much as the rest of the world combined on its very technologically advanced mili-

15. See Thomas Merton, “*Honorable Reader*”: *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Dagg (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 65-66: “It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of, a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole race of man and the 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 whole socioeconomic apparatus which seems geared for nothing but global destruction in spite of all its fair words in favor of peace.”

tary machine, engaging armies of scientists and engineers in the development of ever more destructive technics far beyond what any other country has. Such a military empire has required the conquest of land and resources to insure our status as the most prosperous and technologically advanced nation in the history of the world. Paradoxically, Merton says, "We waste our natural resources, as well as those of undeveloped countries, iron, oil, etc., in order to fill our cities and roads with a congestion of traffic that is in fact largely useless, and is a symptom of the meaningless and futile agitation of our own minds" (CGB 63). This is the covert face of the corporate-military-technological complex that Joan Rothschild perceived as the psychic force informing the character of the modern technological juggernaut – a fierce masculine aggressiveness without restraint or reserve, exposing the violence and cruelty of the modern, and perhaps post-modern, project.¹⁶ Is this Merton's monster of the Apocalypse whose unbridled aggression made hemorrhage of the twentieth century, and still threatens our own with its insatiable lust for power and progress that promises to bleed our planet dry? Is this the technological barbarism that has plunged the planet, and ourselves, into a pervasive psycho-spiritual dark night? As he warned of our dangerous proximity to rim of chaos,¹⁷ I have often wondered if Merton was aware of Dwight David Eisenhower's similar warning in 1961 on leaving office, which can be seen here in its stark sobriety – a prophetic teaching few if any heard, but wisdom for the technological contemplative.¹⁸

How Merton might counsel us today as citizens of the greatest techno-military empire the world has ever known can be inferred from his writings which ever returned to this exhortation: our contemplative work is to wake up and wake others up to the pseudo-millennium of peace and prosperity our military technology has purchased for us at the cost of imperializing the planet. He would remind us that there remains an unholy alliance of gov-

16. See Borgman's references to Joan Rothschild's anthology *Machina ex Dea: Feminist Perspectives on Technology* (Crossing 51).

17. From a prayer by Merton read in the United States House of Representatives, 1962: "In this fatal moment of choice in which we might begin the patient architecture of peace / We may also take the last step across the rim of chaos" (Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn [New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980] 269).

18. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8y06NSBBRtY>.

ernment, corporations and the military that is the ruling realm of our world. This empire of interlocking directories now blatantly outsources its defense to private entities beyond the measure of law or the reach of democracy – the Halliburtons and Blackwaters of the global capitalist regime. It will take contemplative clarity to perceive and resist such an empire, and it will be a profoundly heroic engagement, indeed an authentically spiritual crusade or jihad in this season of pseudo-crusade and jihad. The preparation for and acceptance of this contemplative struggle to emancipate our species – every species – from the occult barbarism of our time may be our historical destiny. As Merton embraced his – we are summoned to accept ours.¹⁹

We live in a time of no room, which is a time of the end. The time when everyone is obsessed with lack of time, lack of space, with saving time, conquering space, projecting into time and space the anguish produced within them by the technological furies of size, volume, quantity, speed, number, price, power and acceleration. The primordial blessing, “increase and multiply,” has suddenly become a hemorrhage of terror. We are numbered in billions, and massed together, marshaled, numbered . . . taxed, drilled, armed, worked to the point of insensibility, dazed by information, drugged by entertainment, surfeited with everything, nauseated with the human race and with ourselves, nauseated with life. As the end approaches, there is no room for nature . . . for quiet . . . for solitude . . . for thought . . . for attention . . . for the awareness of our state.²⁰

“Is this pessimism?” (*RU* 72), Merton asks – or is this what Albert Borgmann calls the post-modern virtue of focal realism where we keep our contemplative eye not just on the really real – but on the potentially real? (Borgmann, *Crossing* 116). Is it pessimism or the marvelous realism, however painful, of seeing the end of a world of unsustainable suffering and pathology? Might it be that our time is the time of courageous passage across that post-modern divide,

19. “That I should have been born in 1915, that I should be the contemporary of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Viet Nam and the Watts riots, are things about which I was not first consulted. Yet they are also events in which, whether I like it or not, I am deeply and personally involved” (CWA 145).

20. “The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room,” Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 70-71; subsequent references will be cited as “*RU*” parenthetically in the text.

and might we make the exodus confident in the greater Life living us, empowering us to meet the monsters of our own creation that dwell in the wastelands of our own making? If our tragedy now is that we have not been as wise as technologically strong, there is still time to summon *Sophia*, the primordial wisdom signed into our nature: *Homo Sapiens*. Yes, we are still young, and the hox genes very strong, our adolescent penchant for playing with fire. But we still may learn like Merton's Prometheus, that we need not steal the fire from the gods, for it is already given: it is our own inner light still radiating from the primordial flaring forth (see *RU* 84). In our contemplative practice we turn to that smoldering light that ignited us into being, and we begin to see even in the night of our technological barbarism a new way to be.

As long as we bifurcate the question of contemplation in the technological age, we will continue to flounder in this dark night. But if we turn it on its head, we awaken. The question then becomes an empowering visionary challenge: "*WHAT KIND of technological age are we contemplating?*" As Merton reminds us: "If technology remained in the service of what is higher than itself – reason, [humanity, creativity, solidarity, relief, healing], God – it might indeed fulfill some of the functions that are now mythically attributed to it" (*CGB* 64). But if it does not it will destroy us. So what kind of technological age are we contemplating? This is the question we must address from every quarter – education, the law, medicine, politics, economics, science, and technology itself, because "We live [*on a planet*] which seems to have reached the point of extreme hazard at which it may plunge to its own ruin, unless there is some renewal of life, some new direction, some providential reorganization of its forces for survival."²¹ The coming upheaval will soon sweep everything away.

Postscript

"All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

Once, while musing with Claire Boothe Luce on this daring promise heard by his favorite theologian Julian of Norwich, Merton confessed that he thought it may just be too late to make this turn, to wake up and radically re-orient. He underscores the enormous task of which we seem no longer capable because "Our sudden,

21. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 11.

unbalanced top-heavy rush into technological mastery has left us without the spiritual means to face our problems. . . . [W]e all stand as prisoners of our own scientific virtuosity, ruled by immense power we ought to be able to rule and cannot" (CWL 43). Yet he admonishes us to accept the responsibility to do everything we can – to speak on every occasion we can. Merton's realism is stark, noting that time is short and all the idols are moving; post-modern contemplatives had best be about this Great Work, however impossible it may seem. "Strange," he remarks to Henry Miller, "that the individual is the only power that is left. And though his power is zero, zero has great power when one understands it and knows where to place it" (CWL 170).

This is the status of a contemplative in *this* technological age, contemplating a *new* technological age: naught and nothing, yet looking with alert awareness to "Small beginnings, no power, tireless patience of the seed in the ground."²² Our charge and our destiny is to refuse to water the seeds of destruction which inseminate our planet and our psyches in our time. Rather, in the arduous labor of spiritual transformation, it is possible to become again, the gardeners and governors of a healed Earth, as Merton prophesied. Sowing new seeds of contemplative vitality in the fertile soil of our mystical desire and anguish, our collective dark night and felt impasse, we can work actively and consciously, "in a dedicated way, toward the accomplishment of the greatest mystery: the mystery so great that it must be a scandal to all. The impossible mystery of the resurrection, and the new creation" (CT 101).

From such seeds of hope there may bloom again some version of paradise, one redeemed by our work and sacrifice, so that in such a garden, we ourselves might be reborn: a new humanity – sane, whole, humble. "For we are in a mess," Merton says. There is no use being despondent about it, because that's a waste of time and "a waste of hope, and our treasure of hope is so small that we cannot afford to let any of it fall out of our hands" (CWL 44). Indeed, we post-modern contemplatives mandated to birth a new technological age, are, ourselves, this "body of hope and hope lives in spite of what we may be thinking: it does not need to be pushed any more than the grass does" (CT 204).

In the dark night of our technological barbarism, it comes down

22. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 199; subsequent references will be cited as "CT" parenthetically in the text.

to the energy of hope, the power of hope, the visionary virtue of hope that imagines the unimaginable, that remembers how it could be, that can sense its way in the dark when the lights go out. Such active hope can empower us, in our wasted world, to be like trees that continue to purify the air (*MJ* 38). Watering this seed of hope is our contemplative work now, to nourish the deep and subtle enlightenment awakening us to divine that everything in the world is transparent: "The ferocities of mankind mean nothing to the hope of light" (*CT* 204). Such wisdom will activate the soul to endure our crossing the post-modern divide. In the rising wave of new contemplatives, Sophia will awaken our original nature and lead us toward a new creation rising out of the ashes of our burnt-up world, our surrendered follies. Preserve your hopes, he encourages Miguel Grinberg, and all of us: "For this one must keep eyes open always and see. The new consciousness will keep awakening. I know it. . . . New consciousness. . . . Courage and joy. Big *abrazo* for everybody" (*CT* 204).