Thomas Merton and Technology
Paradise Regained Re-lost
Fr. Ezekiel Lotz, OSB
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In two letters written between the years 1964 and 1965, one to a newspaper correspondent and the other to an Anglican woman, the Trappist monk and author Fr. Mary Louis Merton, better known to his reading public as Thomas Merton, ruminated about what and how he would have changed in his by-then-classic autobiographical "confessions," The Seven Storey Mountain, published some sixteen years before (Shannon 136). Merton contended that he would have "said many things differently" and that his "thought at the time was hardly mature." Shortly before he died in 1968, Merton writing to a high school student in California, noted that if he were to re-write his most popular book, and the work that had put him on the map as a spiritual voice to be reckoned with, he would "cut out a lot of the sermons…and sales pitch for Catholic schools and that."

And yet, as Merton scholar and past president of the International Thomas Merton Society William H. Shannon points out in his literary-critical biography of Merton entitled Something of a Rebel, The Seven Storey Mountainhas had ongoing appeal throughout the world right until today and has continued to play a major role in the conversion processes and vocational discernment experiences of men and women around the planet. Vivid and specific narrative accounts of his childhood and young adulthood, the personal sincerity and genuineness of the author, as well as the perennial human elements included in the book give Merton's masterpiece its ongoing appeal. As early as 1951, The Seven Storey Mountain had gone into its 254th printing (Shannon 171 ftnt. 3).

Monsignor Shannon's eight page reader's-guide to The Seven Storey Mountain included in Something of a Rebel provides the first-time reader with a good overview and some helpful hints about hidden, lost, as well as some of the more obvious and traditional themes that support and serve as framework for this post-Modern Confessions. But one major theme that Shannon fails to note and that many Merton critics seemed to neglect or ignore up until about a decade or so ago, even though it is a seminal component throughout the rest of his writings (journals and letters included) right up until the time of his death, is Merton's ongoing concern with what historian Peter Laslett has referred to as "the world we have lost." That is to say: a world operating on a natural and balanced level, untrammeled and held captive by a technology and science which all but seem to have surpassed the control of its creators and finally and very frighteningly run amuck.

The young Thomas Merton's childhood experiences growing up on a still predominantly rural

Long Island in New York, his sojourns amongst French peasants while a boy accompanying his artist-father on his painting expeditions through Europe, his confrontation with an increasingly frenetic, technologically advanced, albeit emotionally and spiritually bankrupt society while a young man at Cambridge and Columbia Universities all culminate in his decision to enter what was still at the time a medievally-structured Trappist abbey in rural Kentucky at the peak of the Second World War, a time when a good part of the planet literally felt that the entire world was coming apart at the seams.

The paradisiacal world of a garden wilderness which was being subsumed and demolished by increasingly meaningless modes of materialism, genocidal nationalist bigotry, and means of warfare the-power-of-which humanity had only had nightmares about in the past was regained by the new novice Mary Louis Merton upon his entry into the rigorously cloistered and liturgically rich life of Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey. Merton's friends and associates who attended his solemn vows and ordination to the priesthood some five years after his entry, noted during their celebratory conversations afterwards that the previously boisterous, unfocussed, rake who had been Tom Merton had literally blossomed and come into his own while living in a community where the inhabitants still grew their own food, made their own shoes, and arose in the middle of the night to chant psalms and sing hymns for sometimes as long as three hours at a shot.

Before long, however, there was to be trouble in Paradise, a not uncommon occurrence in supposedly paradisiacal settings in both modern and post-modern societies. But we will come to that issue in a few moments and discuss Merton's understanding of and reaction to it in more detail. First we should consider two important passages from the Seven Storey Mountain that both foreshadow and summarize the themes of technology and its effects on the world and its varied inhabitants in the modern and post-modern age. Reviewing these incidents in the young Merton's life will also supply us with an example of a forceful juxtaposition of experiences which powerfully affected and influenced the boy and then young man who was Tom Merton.

The first experience is that of a twelve year old spending the Christmas holidays of 1926 visiting his father in the village of Murat located in the old Celtic Province of the Auvergne.

As Merton describes it in the Seven Storey Mountain, this is a mountainous region of central France, whose valleys are richly pastured and whose mountains are "heavy with fir trees" or "covered in grass" (for what follows see Mountain 55ff.). The Auvergnats are traditionally scoffed at by the other French for their "simplicity and rusticity" and are, at least in Merton's estimation, very stolid but very good people. The village where the young Tom spent this holiday break was covered in snow that set off the grey and blue "slate-dark pattern" of buildings grouped along three hillsides. His hosts, M. and Mme. Privat were a typical Auvergnat couple, both no more than five feet tall, he broad shouldered, a solid column of muscle and bone; she "thin, serious, earnest, and quick" with a traditional sugar-loaf headdress perched on her head in seeming compliment to her husband's black broad-brimmed hat. What impressed itself upon the young Merton, and all of what stays with him over the next fifteen years until he enters Gethsemani and comes to write his early memoirs is this: "…I no longer possess any details about them. I just remember their kindness and goodness to me, and their peacefulness and utter simplicity. They inspired real reverence, and I think, in a way, they were certainly saints. And

they were saints in that most effective and telling way: sanctified by leading ordinary lives in a completely supernatural way, sanctified by obscurity, by usual skills, by common tasks, by routine, but skills, tasks, routine which received a supernatural form from grace within…" (Mountain 56-57). Merton would later return to live with this couple and their family for a two week period in the summer when they fed young Tom "plenty of butter and milk" but also nourished him with a supernatural love full of a delicate solicitude which the young monk-writer Merton is certain had an effect on his future conversion and vocation.

The second incident we will consider comes some eight years after Merton's short sojourn in the natural paradise of the Auvergne and finds him in what he describes as the "dark, sinister" atmosphere of Cambridge University. In fact, Cambridge is, in the metaphorical geography of The Seven Storey Mountain, the lowest circle of Hell. The institution and its people are like some kind of animal which gores him so deeply "that he felt that he would never recover entirely from the wound" (Mott 74). Merton certainly had become a different person by the time he entered Clare College at Cambridge in the autumn of 1933. Almost all of his friends at university seemed to be those who had made it onto the proctors' books for "the hundred and one university crimes that came under the general heading of 'conduct unbecoming of a gentleman'" (Mott 75). When he comes to write the The Seven Storey Mountain and ruminate on what exactly was wrong with Cambridge and the people who were there, why they were so "empty" inside, Merton relates the following incident:

   …when I had been away from Cambridge for about a year, I heard what happened to…a friend of mine…Mike was a beefy and red-faced and noisy youth…and was part fo the crowd in which I milled around…He was full of loud laughter and a lot of well-meaning exclamations, and in his quieter moments he got into long and complicated sentences about life. But what was most characteristic of him was that he liked to put his fist through windows. He was the noisy and hearty type; he was altogether jolly. A great eater and drinker, he chased after girls with an astonishing heaviness of passion and emotion. He managed to get into a lot of trouble. (After leaving Cambridge)…I heard how he ended up. The porter, or somebody, went down into the showers, under the buildings of the Old Court at Clare, and found Mike hanging by his neck from a rope slung over one of the pipes, with his big hearty face black with the agony of strangulation. He had hanged himself (Mountain 126-127).

All the important issues and images involving an ever advancing technological society and its insidious effects upon the natural world and those who populate it are in evidence here. And yet, even Merton himself at least at this point never really emphasizes them or gives them their due. Furthermore, as Merton's biographer Benjamin Mott has pointed out, Merton never objectively tells the reader of The Seven Storey Mountain just what that wound was that Cambridge and its inhabitants delivered to the young and ever-more-noticeably out-of-control Tom Merton. Merton's biographers and friends have suggested that Merton took part in a mock crucifixion scene while at Cambridge, at what he referred to in veiled references thereafter as the "Party in the Middle of the Night." The subject who was crucified was a very drunk and very confused Tom Merton. [Not contained in the Seven Story Mountain, but referred to obliquely in various conversations and journal entries over the rest of his life, is an event from that one year at Cambridge, before he was thrown out of the school and opted to return to the U.S. and Columbia

University, the so-called "Party in the Middle of the Night"---a drunken, out-of-control gathering in November of 1934---in which a mock crucifixion took place---a crucifixion which, due to the besotted state of the participants, became, or very nearly became, an actual one (Mott 78ff). Merton's naturalization papers for the U. S. government contain references to a scar on the palm of his right hand and his literary agent for twenty-five years, Naomi Burton Stone, on commenting on the mark to Merton once, noted that he referred to it rather uneasily as his "stigmata" (Mott 78-79). Various coded allusions (something for which he was famous throughout his writing career) about crucifixion crop up in Merton's writings at this time, both in prose and poetry, most especially in connection to characters and events linked to Cambridge. Indeed, certain pages that are now missing (either censored by the Church or by Merton himself—something else for which he was renowned throughout his writing career) from a draft of his early, unpublished novel The Labyrinth include just such a crucifixion scene---a scene which Namoi Burton Stone was unable to forget after having read it in the manuscript draft. Although nothing definitive can be proven about this incident, there is a "good deal of circumstantial evidence" that suggests that Merton had added genuine sacrilege to his list of other transgressions accumulated during his first and only year at Cambridge.]

Around the same time as the so-called "party in the middle of the night," Merton's great-aunt Maude Pearce (his paternal grandmother's sister) died and was buried at Ealing. Merton had used his Uncle Ben's and Aunt Maude's home as base for a period just before and then immediately after his own father's untimely death. It is significant that this favorite and influential relative died right in the middle of Merton's Cambridge experience when "every nerve and fibre of" his "being…was laboring to enslave" him "in the bonds" of what he called his "own intolerable disgust" (Mountain quoted in Mott 79). Aunt Maude was an emblem for Merton of an England different from the one that he was experiencing at Cambridge. She was warm, sensible, no-nonsense, innocent of heart. She represented the other England---the England of the "world we have lost" or was in the process of disappearing: the bucolic England of William Blake's "green and pleasant land" (Mott 45). Thus, when Maude comes to die, Merton notes in The Seven Storey Mountain, that, at the funeral, "They committed the thin body of my poor Victorian angel to the clay of Ealing, and buried my childhood with her" (Mountain quoted in Mott 79).

Merton's search for this lost Garden of Eden of his childhood, of that bucolic, green and pleasant land of Blake's poetry was at least partially achieved once he entered the cloistered grounds of Gethsemani Abbey. It is his life here at Gethsemani which we will now trace in terms of the restoration of this garden, of the life lived therein, a life of the "world we have lost," and we will observe it in terms of our themes for this conference: technology, ecology, and the monastic/contemplative life. Indeed, in a very uncanny and frightening way, the loss of this world of closeness to nature, of living on equal terms with the creation, and a sense sometimes of powerlessness in trying to salvage it and retain it in the face of an ever more chaotic technological society which we ourselves have created, was repeated in the monastery confines within the first five years of Merton's monastic life. We have already noted the almost medieval quality of life at Gethsemani when Merton entered in December of 1941. Horses and ploughs were still employed by the monks to work the soil and harvest the crops. The monks themselves lived in open dormitories with no central heating and private spaces created with thin partitioning. They slept fully clothed in their habits on straw mattresses. Their meals, which were

completely based on fresh vegetables and grains, were perhaps meager, but all of the food was homegrown and freshly prepared. Work, most of which was manual labor in the forests or fields that surrounded the monastery, was plentiful even if the food was not. Cloister was rigorously observed. Monks lived, died, and were buried there (Mott 206)---with no coffin, or embalming, and no name or date on the simple cross at the head of the grave. This was indeed a very different environment from that of Cambridge University with its drunken revels and perhaps not-so-mock-crucifixion-scenes taking place late on a November's night. Yet Gethsemani is where Merton found his home for the next twenty-seven years, and the importance of physical setting and place is something that cannot be exaggerated for Thomas Merton (Mott 205). Indeed, as William Shannon points out concerning the young novice's reaction to monastic life, "Merton loved every bit of it. He embraced the monastic discipline with the same enthusiasm as he had earlier thrown himself into the disordered, aimless pseudo-freedom of his youth" (Shannon 28).

According to twelfth century mystical theologian, Hugh of St. Victor, the recovery of Eden, whose very nature was unchangeable, was the aim of all human activity (Mott 205; NB: This theme of monastic enclosures serving as paradisiacal gardens pre-dates Hugh of St Victor by almost a millennium and is found in early desert fathers' writings as well as in those of early Celtic monks and hermits. (see Higgins 251ff and Deignan 34). The monastery of Gethsemani was to have been, quite literally, this unchanging garden, this walled Paradise for Merton and for so many others who entered there and were formed with him. Any sense of the classically monastic notion of a contemptus mundi, of turning one's back on the world and society because it only distracts from the one sole goal of the monk, which is God alone, does not last for long once Merton is inside the cloister walls. His early journal entries at Gethsemani abound in descriptions of the natural life around him and how it caused him to rejoice in the larger geography of God's garden (Weis 228). The young Br Louis writes after standing in the cloister doorway watching the sunset one evening, "I looked at all this in great tranquility, with my soul and spirit quiet. For me landscape seems to be important for contemplation […] any way, I have no scruples about loving it" (Weis 228 quoting Merton Entering the Silence216).

However, this place which appeared to be "so stable" in the "unstable world in 1941" (Mott 206) was very quickly and disconcertingly about to undergo significant and, for many of its inhabitants, disturbing changes within the first decade of Merton's life there. Along with the changes effected by 1951, a second wave of transformation (with buildings disappearing or others being gutted and altered) has made it next to impossible today to trace Merton's steps around the monastery environs as recorded in The Seven Storey Mountain or in The Sign of Jonas.

Although monasticism as lived at Gethsemani in the 1940's was far from perfect, the monks there experienced a simple and good life with most of the confreres living to an age far beyond the national average (Mott 209). It was truly a communal or communist ethic that was being lived out there in reality---from each according to his capacity, to each according to his needs. Thus, the transformations which characterized the 1950s, greatly disturbing this equilibrium of capacity and needs, created a "new restlessness" in Merton which the Gethsemani of 1941 had not only assuaged the anxiety of but had served to transform the young monk into a new man

who had blossomed and grown into an ever-more integrated and balanced human person. Merton, both at the time and later in retrospect, would refer to these years as an "Edenic" period in his own life and in that of the community at Gethsemani (Mott 208).

The changes commenced with the election of both a new abbot general of the Trappist Order in France and of a new abbot at Gethsemani. This latter figure, Dom James Fox, the new abbot of Gethsemani, was a graduate of Harvard Business School, and something of a prodigy in his field of expertise. He inherited a monastery that had survived on the heritage of its Alsatian-French founders for almost a hundred years, with little or no changes being made in its internal spiritual or external material existence. The result was that by the early 1950s, the monastery buildings desperately needed repair (especially with over 100 monks to house and feed in residence) and the monastery economy desperately needed immediate attention with the community being some $20,000 in debt (Mott 228, 245). Dom James, it seemed clear to everyone in the community, including Merton, was the man to effect the changes necessary. But were the compromises to the monastic life as it had been lived at Gethsemani for almost 100 years going to be worth it in the long run? Perhaps one could only answer that question with hindsight. However, for Merton and a few others within the community, the consequences, many of them perhaps of a tragic and even a catastrophic nature, were all too clearly evident from very soon after the initiation of Dom James' reform.

The monastery needed to work on an ever more efficient basis, thus it needed to commit itself to greater activity (Mott 246). Perhaps most significant was Dom James' decision to disband the old, medieval means of living self-sufficiently and instituting an active embracing of modern mechanized methods of farming and processing foods for personal consumption and commercial sale (Mott 246, 258). The changes, in a paradoxical way, paid off (for the time being) with wave after wave of novices applying for entrance to the cloister, so many in fact, that there was no room in the dormitories for them to sleep and so pup tents were set up in the cloister garden for occupation. Nevertheless, this sudden growth was indeed paradoxical since, once the men had arrived and got a sample of the radical changes that were occurring at the abbey and witnessed the rapidly deteriorating system of socio-pastoral structures and spiritual symbols which were disappearing while the economic life of the now mechanized abbey boomed and bustled, these very same vocations proceeded to leave in a steady exodus over the course of the next ten years (see Merton Dancing 128, 136-7 and esp. 294-5). As Benjamin Mott notes, the monastery had become not only one of economic soundness but one of actual financial prosperity. Yet, "(l)ike most financial achievements, this had costs which did not show up on the balance sheets. Some of the results of the changes were both spiritually and physically damaging. The achievement was an astonishing one, so much so that it tended to blind others" (Mott 259).

Merton, disturbed by the level of noise in and around the cloister brought on by the new heavy machinery in use, and further more by the fact that his own growing fame as an author was bringing in the needed cash with which to purchase the new jeeps, tractors, bulldozers, and combines, etc., "saw the cost" to the community and recognized that it was much more than that his own personal "pastoral idyll had been shattered" (Mott 259). Not only was Merton concerned by the shift over to big business that was characterized by the monastery's new food processing corporation "Gethsemani Farms" (which produced and marketed cheese, bread, bacon, and the

breeding of Belgian mares), but he was equally disturbed by the new methods of farming employed on the monastery farm proper. Insecticides and chemicals used by the monks seemed to give the crops a "forced color" (Mott 259). This bothered Merton as did the increasing number of dead birds that he found on the property while taking hikes through the woods. In response to these occurrences, he wrote to Rachel Carson in January of 1962 and even managed to have her ecologically provoking work Silent Spring read in the monastic refectory. The book was withdrawn, however, when the cellarer took issue with some of the figures and statistics which Carson quoted in her text (Mott 260).

Merton's letter to Carson, which he marked for inclusion as an appendix to his so-called "Cold War Letters," succinctly summarizes the situation as Merton saw it and served as a springboard for the many other reflections on technology and ecology that would weave themselves in and out of his writings for the next six years. First of all, he notes that there is a strange and perplexing paradoxical contradiction seemingly inherent in the inter-relationships of technology and ecology. There is the same mental process involved (Merton notes to Carson that he had almost written "mental illness" instead of process) in the human person's irresponsible propensity to "scorn the smallest values" while daring to use "our titanic power in a way that threatens not only civilization but life itself. This vicious circle of suicidal actions is repeated in our very attempts to cure the illness: "…it seems that our remedies are instinctively those which aggravate the sickness: the remedies are expressions of the sickness itself" (Merton Witness to Freedom 70. Also note Merton's journal entry for Dec. 11, 1962 in reference to wanting to obtain and read Carson's book: "Someone will say: you worry about birds: why not worry about people? I worry about both birds and people. We are in the world and are part of it and we are destroying everything because we are destroying ourselves, spiritually, morally and in every way. It is all part of the same sickness, and it all hangs together." Turning Towards the World 274f].).

There is a type of death wish, a Thantos Syndrome as Walker Percy termed it in his final novel, built right into humankind's most fundamental being. Merton compares it to the Christian concept of original sin, but notes that no matter what one's "dogmatic convictions," humans almost universally possess a "tendency to destroy and negate" themselves just "when everything is at its best, and that it is just when things are paradisiacal that" we use our technological powers in a horrifyingly destructive manner (Witness 71). Thus, there is a hatred of life lurking right under the surface of our optimism about ourselves and about our affluent society. But the economics, culture, philosophy of affluence is itself so self-defeating, contains "so many built-in frustrations" of its own that it "inevitably leads us to despair" (Witness 71). The "awful fruit of this despair" is even more "indiscriminate, irresponsible destructiveness" and "hatred of life" (including hatred directed towards the natural world) to the point that in order "to 'survive' we instinctively destroy that on which our survival depends" (Witness 71). Furthermore, this destructive activity not only savages the natural resources of the world around us, it also eradicates the religious, spiritual systems that have for thousands of years assisted humans in maintaining a healthy balance between themselves and the planet on which they live. In the words of Donald P. St. John, "The technological system that has shattered nature's system of checks and balances, and promised godlike powers to humans, has simultaneously eroded cultural systems which generate virtues and a perennial wisdom that attempted to guard humanity form its own excesses" (St. John 166).

The appeal to a sapiential way of knowing and behaving is of crucial importance here as Merton shifts his discussion to an intentionally theological one, familiar ground for the seasoned monk in his cloistered Paradise. To religious thinkers and sages, Merton notes to Carson, the "world has always appeared as a transparent manifestation of the love of God, as a 'paradise' of His wisdom, manifested in all His creatures…and in the most wonderful interrelationship between them." Merton now proposes what, in terms of Christian theology at least, has been dubbed the "Stewardship model" of human/rest-of created-being interrelationship. Humankind's vocation within the context of the cosmic creation is to be as an eye to the rest of the body (See O'Hara "Portents of Merton…" 109f). There is a "delicate balance" to maintain here however, and humans must understand their position as one of profound responsibility, using nature wisely, "ultimately relating himself and visible nature to the invisible…to the source and exemplar of all being and all life" (Witnesss 71). It should come as no surprise to us, however, that Merton was not naïve about humans' failure to take on this responsibility supported by both an ecological and a cosmic wisdom (St. John173). Indeed, "the modern reluctance to accept such a simple yet sublime vocation is an essential piece to the puzzle of our violent and destructive behaviour towards creation" (St. John 173). But humans have been blinded into thinking that they do see all the better because they have acquired so much technological know-how and power over the elements, and the blindness has led to the loss of our sense of "wisdom and cosmic perspective" (Witness 71). The stewardship model of ecological harmony and protection, no matter how well intentioned and theologically well-grounded does not always, perhaps even rarely, work in the cold reality of post-Modern technological society. As environmentalist William Schlesinger has so aptly stated, "Dominion over the Earth in Genesis didn't mean to leave this pillaged and smoking" (What a Way To Go-Video Documentary). Nevertheless, the seemingly innate desire of humans to torch the very thing which sustains them and with which they need to cooperate in order to live integrally always seems to supercede the wise and cosmic perspective.

Merton concludes his theological exposition by noting that "[t]echnics and wisdom are not by any means opposed. On the contrary, the duty of our age, the 'vocation' of modern man is to unite them in a supreme humility which will result in a totally self-forgetful creativity and service." He then poses the 10 million dollar rhetorical question: "Can we do this?" And speculates that "Certainly we are not going in the right direction" (Witness 71).

Three years after his letter to Carson, Merton ruminated at length in Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander about the profound dilemma modern man was facing in terms of technological development in the face of an ever-more pronounced ecological and societal disintegration (Conjectures 60-61). This remains perhaps the most developed commentary on these themes supplied by Merton in one place. For Merton, technology is falsely seen by most of society to be the "highest development of man" auguring a "golden age of plenty and perfect freedom." The technological achievements of modern man are indeed "astonishing" and "magnificent." On the other hand, viewed from the context of their "unbalance" with the other aspects of "human existence in the world" they are components of "disintegration." Too much power in the hands of men only leads to the abuse of that power at the expense of "wisdom, prudence, (and) temperance." What difference does technological advancement make if the men and women in the society that possesses them are still frustrated, bored, suicidal, and megalomaniacal. He concludes:

…it does us no good to make fanatic progress if we do not know how to live with it, if we cannot make good use of it, and if, in fact, our technology becomes nothing more than an expensive and complicated way of cultural disintegration. It is bad form to say such things, to recognize such possibilities. But they are possibilities, and they are not often intelligently taken into account. People get emotional about them from time to time, and then sweep them away into forgetfulness. The fact remains that we have created for ourselves a culture which is not yet livable for mankind as a whole (Conjectures 60).

In fact, the existence of a humanity ever more dependent on an emancipated technology for its necessities and its pleasures is one of "moral infancy, in total dependence not on 'mother nature' (such a dependence would be partly tolerable and human) but on a pseudonature of technology…" (Conjectures 64). The subsequent illusion that "mechanical progress means human improvement" is what ultimately "alienates humans their own being and their own reality" (Conjectures 202).

"It is precisely because we are convinced that mechanical progress means human improvement, that alienates us from our own being and our own reality. It is precisely because we are convinced that our life…is better if we have a better car…TV set…toothpaste…that we contemn and destroy our own reality and the reality of our natural resources. Technology was made for man, not man for technology. In losing touch with being with God, we have fallen into a senseless idolatry of production and consumption for their own sakes. We have renounced the act of being and plunged ourself into process for its own sake. We no longer know how to live, and because we cannot accept life in its reality life ceases to be a joy and becomes an affliction. And we eve go so far as to blame God for it (Conjectures 202).

Merton contrasts this equation of "technology equals manipulation of the created world equals progress equals happiness" to what instead should be an openness and a respect for the created world as God has given it to us. This respect and openness must be grounded in a real intuition of the act of being coupled with a gratefulness for and a contemplative perception of being. If this is not the case, Merton warns, then we can look forward to "further destruction and debasement of the world in the name of a false humanism which has no other fruit than to make man hate himself, hate life, and hate the world he lives in" (Conjectures 202).

The material included in Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander, however, is not Merton's final word on the topic of technology and the ecology. That is to be found in an occasional piece written for Center Magazine in July of 1968, five months before his untimely death in Bangkok. One would be hard pressed to call this Merton's "mature" thought on the themes we have been discussing here today, but it does demonstrate that Merton was far from finished with the matter and that some of his original propositions had changed and developed in the years since his letter to Rachel Carson. In what is ostensibly a review of Roderick Nash's book Wilderness and the American Mind, Merton delves more deeply then ever before into the questions of technological society and ecology and religion's, and most especially a contemplative religion's, role in the uniting and balancing of these two elements.

Merton begins his essay by once again noting the strange paradoxical nature of humanity's

current situation in a highly advanced technological society of affluence and unsurpassed power and control over its surroundings. It is an ambivalent culture full of self-contradictions especially in its treatment of the wild ("Wild" 95). We "confess our firm attachment to values that inexorably demand the destruction of the last remnant of wildness," but when someone suggests that this contradiction is itself an "indication of a sickness in ourselves, we dismiss them as fanatics ("Wild" 96-7). This sickness, Merton boldly states, is "rooted in our biblical, Judeo-Christian tradition" which he immediately notes is neither truly biblical nor Jewish nor Christian. Nevertheless, there is a nominally Christian approach to the world that at a deep and perhaps unconscious level is dualist in its metaphysics and as a result "profoundly destructive of nature and of 'God's good creation'" ("Wild" 97). Developing from their original Puritan fore-fathers' repugnance for spontaneity and so in turn for nature and the wild, the contemporary "American capitalist culture" finds itself "rooted in a secularized Christian myth and mystique of struggle with nature" ("Wild" 98-99).

The ambivalence continues with a second mystique layered on top of the first, this one being the cult of America the Beautiful, "America which must be kept lovely…So don't throw that beer can in the river, even though the water is polluted with all kinds of industrial waste. Business can mess up nature, but not you, Jack!" ("Wild" 99). Henry David Thoreau, one of Merton's favorite authors on the topics at hand, and the Transcendentalists offer a more realistic and truthful assessment of the situation, but even their work is quickly turned into cliché-ridden propaganda by the powers that be. Yet Merton does make particular note of Thoreau's belief that humans need wildness to balance out their more civilizing tendencies lest their propensity to "subject everything…to rational and conscious control" should "warp, diminish, and barbarize" them ("Wild" 101).

Ultimately, Merton holds up Aldo Leopold and his now classic book A Sand County Almanac as perhaps the best example of how we should approach the current conundrums of technology and ecology. Calling it one of "the most important moral discoveries of our time" Merton cites Leopold's "ecological conscience" as being "centered in an awareness of man's true place as a dependent member of the biotic community" ("Wild" 105-106). Leopold's rule-of-thumb ecological principle is that: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" ("Wild" 106). Merton claims that "In light of this principle, an examination of our social, economic, and political history in the last hundred years would be a moral nightmare, redeemed only by a few gestures of good will on the part of those who obscurely realize that there is a problem...[Compared] to the magnitude of the problem, their efforts are at best pitiful" ("Wild" 106). What is more, the old monster of self-contradicting hypocrisy rears its head again in that those who continue to rape nature, simultaneously honor the wilderness myth with the same gestures and "great earnestness" of an Aldo Leopold or Henry David Thoreau.

Merton then re-asks the same question he had placed before Rachel Carson in 1962, can Leopold's "ecological conscience become effective in America today." Globally the situation looks bleak, Merton allows, especially when one considers that an ecological conscience is tantamount to a "peace-making conscience" ("Wild" 107). But with the stark examples of crop poisoning, defoliation of forest trees, and the "incineration of villages and their inhabitants with

napalm" ever before his eyes, Merton does not hold much cause for hope. Acting locally may be the best we can hope for, and, at least in terms of his essay, wearing a "little yellow and red button" that proclaims "celebrate life!" and bearing witness to this exhortation is about the best we can do given the present circumstances.

These are not the most promising of parting words from Merton on this matter. Up until the composition of this essay, he had always seen the monastery and the witness of the contemplative and sapiential life lived therein as one of the most important and effective means of combating the technological onslaught.

The goal of the contemplative is, on its lowest level, the recognition of this splendour of being and unity—a splendour in which he is one with all that is…Science and technology are…admirable in many respects…but they can never solve (humanity's) deepest problems…without wisdom…(they) can only precipitate him still further into the centrifugal flight that flings him…into the darkness of outer space…(Preface Japanese Seeds 1965 pp. 100 and 103).

Already, by the time of Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander Merton had become deeply worried that monastic institutions were having their mission and effectiveness weakened by the adoption of "modern production technologies" (St. John 179 and Conjectures 25). If the cloister was to be a continual foretaste of Paradise until Christ's second coming, then it is our duty to "continue the work of paradise, by tending the garden" (Weiss 241). For, the garden, the wilderness, is essential for contemplation (Weiss 242), or in the words of P.F. O'Connell, "…the work of paradise is the protection of creation" (quoted in Weiss 241). As Merton was to conclude in his long essay "Wilderness and Paradise" written in 1967:

If the monk is a man whose whole life is built around a deeply religious appreciation of his call to wilderness and paradise…and if technological society is constantly encroaching upon and destroying the remaining 'wildernesses' which it nevertheless needs in order to remain human, then we might suggest that the monk, of all people should be…anxious to preserve the wilderness in order to share it with those who need to come out from the cities and remember what it is like to be under trees and to climb mountains (The Monastic Journey 150. Noted with different wording in Weiss 242).

Finally, Merton expressed in no uncertain terms this continuing concern with monasticism's ability to confront the conundrums of post-Modern society during an informal talk delivered in Calcutta a few weeks before his untimely death in Bangkok.

… In the West there is now going on a great upheaval in monasticism, and much that is of undying value is being thrown away irresponsibly, foolishly, in favor of things that are superficial and showy, that have no ultimate value…I will say as a brother monk from the West to Eastern monks…The time is coming when you may face the same situation and your ancient traditions will stand you in good stead (Asian Journal 307).

Perhaps most alarming, however, is a marginal note left in one of Merton's last working notebooks kept while at the hermitage here at Gethsemani. It is in this same notebook that Merton made his initial notations for what would become his article "The Wild Places."

The dreadful fact that I was born into this world at the very moment when the whole thing came to a head (and) it is precisely in my lifetime that civilization has undergone this massive attack from within itself. My whole life is shaped by this…it presses on the brain with a [near] darkness (Working Notebook 34).

Forty years after recording this observation, forty years after Merton's accidental death while visiting with monastic men and women from around the world, the "dreadful fact" of this "massive attack" continues to press in on our brains with ever increasing darkness. Merton, and I think most of us here would agree about this at least in part, had diagnosed the dilemma accurately and insightfully. He also sensed very deeply the almost desperate circumstances in which the technological/ecological crisis was and would continue to be played out. Nevertheless, there are no real solid programs or tactics for action that he suggested. Perhaps Merton would have come to suggest something once he returned to Gethsemani. We will never know. It is, I suspect, the hope of everyone gathered here for these days of listening and sharing that further consciousness raising will occur but also that some sort of preliminary steps towards some sort of action, whether local or global, personal or communal, that we can begin to take in our own daily lives may be broached. Some of the most fundamental, and perhaps the most effective of these actions is for us monks and contemplatives gathered here, already obvious.

I would like to give the final word this evening not to Thomas Merton, but to another brother monk, Fr. Bruno Barnhart, a Calmaldolese Benedictine of Big Sur, California. In his recent book The Future of Wisdom: Toward a Rebirth of Sapiential Christianity, Fr. Bruno sums up the life and work of Thomas Merton in this way:

…roughly during the last decade of his life---Merton began to move back toward the modern world which he had left behind, particularly those thinkers and writers with whom he felt a great affinity. He was moving further into the country of imagination, and at the same time apparently discovering the wide ecumenical territory of the sapiential, in which he was able to rediscover everything that he loved. The sapiential world, in the new sense in which he was coming to conceive it, included the mystery of Christ and the archetypal contemplative East; but it also included everything of value that had been left outside the walls of his earlier theological enclosure, labeled "Toxic-Secular." Merton was awakening to a new Christian wisdom in which the immanent force of incarnation has awakened divinity within the human person in the active, creative mode…Gradually the early Merton's Catholic and monastic triumphalism…gives way to a more sober experience of the life of faith and a deeper awareness of solidarity in the human condition…This is the threshold of postmodernity, of the post-Western mind, of global consciousness and global participation at every level (Barnhart 39).

It is Thomas Merton's exhortation to those of us gathered here this week, to meet the sometimes-horrific challenges of but at the same time to make fruitful use of the unique situations that constitute our postmodern world. This is a call to journey into that wide

ecumenical territory of the imagination and of the sapiential; to tap into the divine within each of us, allowing for an ever more profound sense of "solidarity in the human condition"; to recall, reinforce, and revive our own ancient traditions which will stand us in good stead as things around us grow ever more bizarre; to put on a global mind of
participation at every level before it is too late and the darkness has covered us completely.

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