

The Artist in a Time of Crisis: Thomas Merton's Artistic Response

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As Thomas Merton moved from the world-denying monk of the forties and early fifties to the world-embracing monk of the sixties he found that the language he had used previously in both his public and his personal writings was no longer adequate or appropriate. This is particularly noticeable in the metaphors he used to describe himself, especially his move from the role of an 'innocent bystander' to that of a 'guilty bystander.' The change was clearly evident in both his prose and his poetry. The quiet voice of monasticism that many catholic readers had associated with Merton's earlier work had seemingly disappeared into the Gethsemani woods and the new Merton was disturbing and could grate on his readers' sensibilities.

As Merton rediscovered the world he thought he had left behind outside the monastery gate in December 1941 he felt there was something fundamentally wrong with that society and culture. No longer were the pious platitudes of his early prose and poetry a sufficient response to the agonies of the time, even if it were possible to hear them over the growing technological babble, the degradation of human language and the breakdown of communication and communion between people. From his place on the margins of society Merton attempted to 'make others aware of the confusions, contradictions and absurdities of contemporary language and also of other negative aspects of present-day society and culture.'¹ Over the years Merton's poetry changed considerably from the early 'poetry of the choir,' through his 'poetry of the desert' to his later 'poetry of the forest' and finally his anti-poetry. The first of Merton's poems which could be described as anti-poems appeared in 1961 with the publication of 'Chant to be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces,' followed in 1962 with the publication of *Original*

Child Bomb, with further examples in his 1963 volume *Emblems of a Season of Fury*.

In Merton's two major works of anti-poetry, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, he tackled the abuse of language as well as the breakdown of communication and community by writing protest poems which attempt to alert the reader and warn them of what Merton perceived as the things fundamentally wrong with the society and culture of his day. In *Cables to the Ace* the central theme is that 'in the liturgy of modern life' with 'its ritual and frenzy' true communication has been destroyed. Anthony Padovano sums it up succinctly writing: 'We have forgotten the name by which God is to be called, the language by which the message we send can be read. The laws of technology have taken the place of the language of the heart.'²

With the major developments in media and communication in the last century and with the growing problems of language and its meaning, Merton felt it was no longer necessary to use poetic language to get his message across. Instead he felt it was sufficient to feed back 'garbled newscast as antipoetry' which could 'confront and shock readers.'³ The crises at the centre of *Cables* is the 'exploitation and abuse of language' which has 'resulted in its breakdown as a medium of communication and a cultural bond'⁴ and leads, through the destruction of communication, to a breakdown of the human community and its communion.

Padovano also sums up succinctly the theme of Merton's final volume of poetry, *The Geography of Lograire*. He describes it as 'the history of a human family tragically torn asunder but pathetically persistent in its dream for harmony.'⁵ In *Lograire*, Merton, through the use of the geographical points of the compass, encompasses the whole world — North, South, East and West. Conflict is found throughout the poem, in the North and South cantos it is racial conflict, whereas in the East and West cantos it is cultural conflict. The poem reflects the extent of Merton's reading and the broadness of his vision as he encompasses various cultures, races, ages, religions, in fact, the whole world, in a great vision of universal compassion.

Experimental images: Zen calligraphies, graffiti, ink-blots

Although not as well known to the majority of his readers the change and development in Merton's art work parallels the change in his prose, his poetry and his understanding of the monk's relationship to the

world. Over the course of Merton's writings his thinking about art stayed remarkably consistent, whereas his actual practice of art changed and developed in a way that was at times striking and radical.

In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton wrote that he had learned from his father 'that art was contemplation, and that it involved the action of the highest faculties.'⁶ In his reading of *Art and Scholasticism* by Jacques Maritain, as he was working on his master's thesis on William Blake at Columbia University, Merton found a theory of art that confirmed the view he had inherited from his father. A belief that 'art is the ability to see not merely what is apparent to the senses but the inner radiance of Being,'⁷ a consciousness of paradise, of the creative *logos*, the creative word. This understanding of art is evident in many of the authors to whom Merton was attracted – William Blake, Boris Pasternak, Louis Zukofsky and Edwin Muir. It is expressed in Rainer Maria Rilke's concept of 'inseeing' and in the 'inscape' of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

In one of Merton's lectures to the monastic community at Gethsemani in the mid-sixties on Rainer Maria Rilke, Merton described Rilke's 'inseeing' as a deep encounter between the poet and his subject, getting right into the center of the subject, right into the heart.⁸ It was this same spirit that attracted Merton to the Shakers. Their architecture and their furniture were made, so they believed, as God would have made it, it could not have been made better. Merton discovered a similar spirit in the Hindu tradition of art, where 'all artistic work is a form of *Yoga*': 'all art is *Yoga*, and even the act of making a table or a bed, or building a house, proceeds from the craftsman's *Yoga* and from his spiritual discipline of meditation.'⁹

He goes on, in words reminiscent of his comments on Rainer Maria Rilke, and influenced by his reading of A. K. Coomaraswamy, to add:

in the East it is believed that the mind that has entered into meditative recollection and attained 'one pointedness' has liberated itself from domination by the accidental, [and] the trivial ... in order to enter into the heart of being, and thus to be able to identify itself, by contemplative penetration, with any being and to know it by empathy from within.¹⁰

As Merton's prose and poetry developed so did his practice of art change, dramatically at times. With his conversion and entry into Gethsemani, as he gave up writing novels, he also gave up drawing cartoons, nudes and other 'secular' images, turning instead to explicitly

religious images during his time at St Bonaventure's. After his entry to the Abbey of Gethsemani he concentrated on strong but simple religious images in his early monastic years. In the late fifties and early sixties a marked change took place in Merton's drawings as his relationship to the world changed and he also discovered a new medium for his artistic expression in photography.

Thomas Merton rarely wrote about his own attempts at art. The majority of information that we have has to be gleaned from the many pages of his personal journals and from his voluminous correspondence. In an entry in Merton's personal journal for October 24th, 1960 he recalls a number of conferences he had given for visiting faculty from Bellarmine saying he spoke, 'boldly, offending pious ears ... urging a broadening of horizons in every direction — political leftism, peace (Gandhi), study of the Orient, creative work, writing, publishing and whatever else I could think of.'¹¹

A few days later the same issues were still at the forefront of Merton's mind as he records in an entry for October 28th 'wrestling quietly with the circumstances of my life. There is an attitude to be taken, there are decisions to be made. There is a radical refusal demanded of me somewhere.' After questioning his own position in the monastery in relation to the world he writes that he should be writing poetry and 'doing creative work' recording a marked change in his style of drawing saying 'Tried some abstract-looking art this week.'¹²

Just a few entries later he refers to 'spending some work time on abstract drawings for a possible experimental book.' Some of these drawings, which Merton would begin calling 'calligraphies' were semi-representational, but the majority were completely abstract.

The one time Merton wrote at any length or in any detail about his calligraphies was in the fall of 1964 as he was preparing for an exhibition of his drawings to be held at Catherine Spalding College in Louisville. The exhibition of twenty-six calligraphies opened in November 1964 and subsequently visited a number of other cities including New Orleans, Atlanta, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Santa Barbara and Washington D.C. The pictures were available for purchase with the money raised to be used for a scholarship for an African-American student to study at Spalding. Sales did not go well and Merton writes to John Howard Griffin saying,

none were sold in Milwaukee where the price was a hundred and fifty dollars. Now we are down to a hundred. If you wait until we

crawl out of Santa Barbara, Cal. in September they will be ten cents apiece with a sheaf of green coupons into the bargain.¹³

Subsequently the Abbey of Gethsemani funded the scholarship.

The essay Merton wrote was published as 'Signatures: Notes on the Author's Drawings' in his book *Raids on the Unspeakable*. It is an important essay as it contains Merton's only extended reflection on his own drawings, in particular on the drawings he was creating in the sixties. As such it is essential reading in attaining an understanding of what Merton was attempting to do with his drawings in this period. Merton begins by saying that the viewer is not to regard the drawings as 'works of art,' nor to seek in them 'traces or irony' or 'a conscious polemic against art.' The viewer is encouraged not to judge them, or to consider themselves judged by them. Before moving on to say what the drawings are, Merton makes a comment on the titles: 'it would be better if these abstractions did not have titles. However, titles were provided out of the air. The viewer will hardly be aided by them, but he may imagine himself aided if he wishes.'¹⁴

Merton then writes about his understanding of the drawings, and I will just quote here a few of the most incisive passages: 'These abstractions – one might call them *graffiti* rather than calligraphies – are simple signs and ciphers of energy, acts of movement intended to be propitious. Their 'meaning' is not to be sought on the level of convention of or concepts.

Again:

In a world cluttered and programmed with an infinity of practical signs and consequential digits referring to business, law, government and war, one who makes such nondescript marks as these is conscious of a special vocation to be inconsequent, to be outside the sequence and to remain firmly alien to the program ... they stand outside all processes of production, marketing, consumption and destruction.

Merton then adds mischievously that it 'does not however mean that they cannot be bought.' Words reminiscent, as is much of Merton's thinking in this essay, of some of the writings of Ad Reinhardt, the abstract artist, who once described his black paintings in similar terms: 'A free, unmanipulated, unmanipulatable, useless, unmarketable, irreducible, unphotographable, unreproducible, inexplicable icon.'¹⁵

Thomas Merton and Ad Reinhardt

Merton and Reinhardt first met at Columbia University in the thirties. Although Reinhardt graduated shortly after Merton's arrival at the University he continued to provide illustrations for the *Jester*. Merton makes a number of references to Reinhardt in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and in *Run to the Mountain*, his personal journal from this period. After an evening with Reinhardt in January 1940 Merton calls him 'possibly the best artist in America' writing, 'Reinhardt's abstract art is pure and religious. It flies away from all naturalism, from all representation to pure formal and intellectual values ... Reinhardt's abstract art is completely chaste, and full of love of form and very good indeed.'¹⁶

After Merton's entry into the Abbey of Gethsemani he sporadically stayed in touch with Reinhardt. A number of early letters from Merton to Reinhardt from 1956 to 1964 are preserved in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, along with some calligraphies Merton had sent him, and five letters to Merton from Reinhardt, all from the sixties, are preserved in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University.

In the mid-fifties Merton asked Reinhardt to design the cover of a pamphlet to be printed by the Abbey of Gethsemani, requesting also 'some small black and blue cross painting (say about a foot and a half high) for the cell in which I perch.'¹⁷ When the painting arrived Merton recorded in his journal:

Reinhardt finally sent his 'small' painting. Almost invisible cross on a black background. As though immersed in darkness and trying to emerge from it. Seen in relation to my other object the picture is meaningless – a black square 'without purpose' – You have to look hard to see the cross. One must turn away from everything else and concentrate on the picture as though peering through a window into the night. The picture demands this – or is meaningless for I presume that someone might be unmoved by any such demand. I should say a very 'holy' picture – helps prayer – an 'image' without features to accustom the mind at once to the night of prayer – and to help one set aside trivial and useless images that wander into prayer and spoil it.¹⁸

Merton wrote to Reinhardt thanking him for the painting saying:

It has the following noble feature, namely its refusal to have anything else around it, notably the furniture etc. It is a most recollected small

painting. It thinks that only one thing is necessary & this is time, but this one thing is by no means apparent to one who will not take the trouble to look. It is a most religious, devout, and latreutic small painting.¹⁹

Both Merton and Reinhardt were influenced by the apophatic mystical tradition – writers such as John of the Cross, pseudo-Dionysius and Nicholas of Cusa. Merton's references to apophatic mysticism are found in a number of his works throughout his monastic life, most notably his attempt at a theological study of St John of the Cross, eventually published as *The Ascent to Truth* and in the more recently published book, *The Inner Experience*. Reinhardt also makes references to the apophatic mystics in his writings, for example in 1965 quoting Nicholas of Cusa: 'How needful it is to enter into the darkness and to admit the coincidence of opposites to seek the truth where impossibility meets us.'²⁰

Writing to an artist friend in Lexington, Victor Hammer, Merton describes Reinhardt's work in the following terms:

His approach is very austere and ascetic. It is a kind of exaggerated reticence, a kind of fear of self expression. All his paintings are very formal and black. I certainly do not think he is a quack like so many others; on the contrary, he is in strong reaction against them.²¹

The influence of apophatic mysticism on Reinhardt has been referred to by critics of his work in recent years. Yve-Alain Bois suggested that what Reinhardt hoped to realize in his black paintings recalled the aspirations of negation theology, apophatic mysticism, a 'method of thought employed to comprehend the Divine by indicating everything it was not.'²²

In fall 1963 Merton sent one of his calligraphies to Ad Reinhardt who reacted enthusiastically writing:

when all of a sudden out of the clear sky and mailbox, comes your calligraphy, your beautiful calligraphy but too small, don't you know them fellows way down East used brushes bigger than anyone's big head, a big pot of paint size of a big sink, and in bare feet, dance over a piece of paper bigger and longer than Ulfert Willkie stretched from end to end ... I like your calligraphy because its pure.²³

Merton replied humorously:

I am again your friendly old calligrapher always small calligraphies down here, I am the grandfather of the small calligraphy because I

don't have a big brush and because I no longer run about the temple barefoot in frosts. But I am amiable and the smaller they get the more mysterious they are, though in fact it is the irony of art when a calligrapher gets stuck with a whole pile of papers the same size and texture

Merton then asked Reinhardt to send a variety of different papers to 'your dusty old correspondent who is very poor and got no papers any more except toilet papers for the calligraphy.'²⁴

In January 1964 Merton records in his journal a package that had arrived from Ad Reinhardt. Following up on Merton's request he had sent Merton 'all kinds of fine paper, especially some thin, almost transparent beautiful Japanese paper on which I have found a way of crudely printing abstract 'calligraphies' which in some cases turn out exciting – at least to me.'²⁵ Taking note of Reinhardt's comments about his calligraphies Merton also sent a new calligraphy to Reinhardt titled: 'slightly larger calligraphy.'

In contrast to friends such as Ad Reinhardt Merton reflected on how his artist friend, Victor Hammer, would react to these drawings. Merton writes in his journal on November 4, 1964:

One thing that saddens and embarrasses me – that he [Victor Hammer] will be shocked at my exhibition of drawings or calligraphies or what you will. There is no way to explain this to him, and in a way I am on his side, on principle. And yet they have a meaning, and there is a reason for them: an unreasoned reason perhaps.

He then continues with a note of humour:

I feel like writing to him and saying: if you heard I had taken a mistress you would be sad but you would understand. These drawings are perhaps worse than that. But regard them as a human folly. Allow me at least, like everyone else, at least one abominable vice, etc.²⁶

And in a letter to Hammer Merton warns him that,

If you should hear news of my exhibiting strange blobs of ink in Louisville, ignore the information: it is not worthy of your notice. As always my feelings about it are very mixed ... I think I have made it plain to all concerned that I do not regard it as 'art' and that they are not supposed to either.²⁷

But, having told Hammer to ignore the exhibit and that he did not regard the strange blots of ink as art, it is clear from other

correspondence of Merton's and from entries in his personal journals, that it was important to him and expressed for him his art in this period when his representational work was no longer sufficient, when it no longer addressed the anguish of the age. Both Merton and Reinhardt reacted to the climate of Cold War America through their work. Although rarely in touch with each other their stand on contemporary issues was remarkably similar. Reinhardt was actively involved in political and social issues throughout his life, he participated in the anti-war movement, he protested against the war in Vietnam and also donated his work to benefits for civil rights activities – all areas in which Merton was involved through the sixties – even, as already mentioned, selling his calligraphies to fund a scholarship for African-American students.²⁸

Merton had a similar experience with his poetry. He began to feel that language had become so abused, so overused, especially in the world of media and advertising, that it had become virtually meaningless. To compensate for this Merton began to use anti-poetry as a form of expression at this time.²⁹ Is it possible that Merton's calligraphies and drawings of this period are anti-art, like his anti-poetry, trying to express a form of art that made sense in the face of advertising and the media, and in the face of humanity's experience of the darker, shadow side so evident in the images of this period of the cold war, the bomb, racial violence, and the Vietnam war, an age characterized, according to Merton, by its 'destructiveness'?³⁰ Against this background he writes:

The artist may have a perfect right, perhaps even a duty, to protest as effectively and as vocally as he can against man's present state of alienation in a world that seems to be without meaning because of the moral, cultural, and economic crises of society.³¹

Adding, 'A valid religious art in our time will then be a 'creative expression of destructive trends.'³²

Merton first touched on this theme explicitly as he was working on his unpublished, unpublishable, book 'Art and Worship' and, in a chapter later included in his book *Disputed Questions*, he wrote:

In an age of concentration camps and atomic bombs, religious and artistic sincerity will certainly exclude all 'prettiness' or shallow sentimentality. Beauty, for us, cannot be a mere appeal to conventional pleasures of the imagination and senses. Nor can it be found in cold,

academic perfectionism. The art of our time, sacred art included, will necessarily be characterized by a certain poverty, grimness and roughness which correspond to the violent realities of a cruel age. Sacred art cannot be cruel, but it must know how to be compassionate with the victims of cruelty: and one does not offer lollipops to a starving man in a totalitarian death-camp.

Nor does one offer him the message of a pitifully inadequate optimism. Our Christian hope is the purest of all lights that shine in darkness, but it shines in darkness, and one must enter into darkness to see it shining.³³

In Merton's opinion, John of the Cross's Dark Night of the Soul, the experience of the apophatic mystics, was no longer confined to a spiritual minority. As Merton writes in *The Inner Experience*:

The contemplative life in our time is ... necessarily modified by the sins of our age. They bring down upon us a cloud of darkness far more terrible than the innocent night of unknowing. It is the dark night of the soul which has descended on the whole world ... In our contemplation, God must often seem to be absent, as though dead. But the truth of our contemplation is in this: that never more than today has [God] made [the divine] presence felt by "being absent." In this, then, we are most faithful: that we prefer the darkness and, in the very depths of our being, value the emptiness and apparent absence ... Leave nothingness as it is. In it, God is present.³⁴

The horrors of the twentieth century, the degradation of human life, was making manifest the darkness within each and every one of us and Merton through his anti-poetry, his writings on war and violence, and through his art work of this period was trying to stand and face the darkness and encouraging others to do the same. As he wrote in his introduction to *Raids on the Unspeakable*:

Christian hope begins where every other hope stands frozen stiff before the face of the Unspeakable ... The goodness of the world, stricken or not, is incontestable and definitive. If it is stricken, it is also healed in Christ. But nevertheless one of the awful facts of our age is the evidence that it is stricken indeed, stricken to the very core of its being by the presence of the Unspeakable.

Against this background Merton can speak words of hope: 'Be human in this most inhuman of ages; guard the image of man for it is the image of God.'³⁵

Photography

Thomas Merton showed little interest in photography until the final years of his life. It is a little unclear when Merton began taking photographs himself at the Abbey of Gethsemani. On October 10th, 1961 he records having taken 'half a roll of Kodacolor at the hermitage' wondering 'what earthly reason is there for taking color photographs? ... or any photographs at all.'³⁶ Yet, just a few months later in January 1962 Merton records taking photographs at Shakertown, finding there 'some marvelous subjects.'³⁷ 'Marvelous, silent, vast spaces around the old buildings. Cold, pure light, and some grand trees How the blank side of a frame house can be so completely beautiful I cannot imagine. A completely miraculous achievement of forms.'³⁸

Merton was obviously pleased with his results that day as in a later journal entry he says he is planning to have enlargements made of some of his photographs of Shakertown, describing it as 'very satisfying.'³⁹

Certainly by 22nd September 1964 Merton had regular access to a camera and records in his personal journal,

Brother Ephrem has fitted me out with a camera (Kodak Instamatic) to help take pictures for a book Dom James wants done. So far I have been photographing a fascinating old cedar root I have on the porch. I am not sure what this baby can do. The lens does not look like much – but it changes the film by itself and sets the aperture, etc. Very nice.⁴⁰

Just two days later Merton continues,

After dinner I was distracted by the dream camera, and instead of seriously reading the Zen anthology I got from the Louisville Library, kept seeing curious things to shoot, especially a mad window in the old tool room of the woodshed. The whole place is full of fantastic and strange subjects – a mine of Zen photography. After that the dream camera suddenly misbehaved.⁴¹

And Merton records that the back of the camera would not lock shut. Two days later he writes again, 'Camera back. Love affair with camera. Darling camera, so glad to have you back! Monarch! XXX. It will I think be a bright day again today.'⁴²

After a fall in January 1968 in which he damaged his camera Merton wrote to John Howard Griffin to take up an offer he had made to loan him a camera. In his letter Merton describes the kind of camera he would need:

Obviously I am not covering the Kentucky Derby etc. But I do like a chance at fast funny out of the way stuff too. The possibility of it in case. But as I see it I am going to be on roots, sides of barns, tall weeds, mudpuddles, and junkpiles until Kingdom come.⁴³

In response Griffin loaned Merton a Canon F-X which he described as 'a joy to work with.' Merton continues, 'The camera is the most eager and helpful of beings, all full of happy suggestions: 'Try this! Do it that way!' Reminding me of things I have overlooked, and cooperating in the creation of new worlds. So simply. This is a Zen camera.'⁴⁴

Merton's preferred photographic medium was black and white. Merton never did his own developing or printing, this was generally done for him either by Griffin, or his son Gregory. Griffin recalls that he and his son were frequently bewildered by the pictures Merton selected from contact sheets to be enlarged. 'He ignored many superlative photographs while marking others,' wrote Griffin,

we thought he had not yet learned to judge photographs well enough to select consistently the best frames. We wrote and offered advice about the quality of some of the ignored frames. He went right on marking what he wanted rather than what we thought he should want. Then, more and more often, he would send a contact sheet with a certain frame marked and his excited notation: 'At last — this is what I have been aiming for.'⁴⁵

Sadly, none of those original contact sheets have survived. They would have provided a fascinating insight into Merton's photography.

In January 1967 Thomas Merton began to develop a friendship with another local photographer, Ralph Eugene Meatyard. In his personal journal Merton recorded his excitement at Meatyard's work:

The one who made the greatest impression on me as artist was Gene Meatyard, the photographer — does marvelous arresting visionary things, most haunting and suggestive, mythical, photography I ever saw. I felt that here was someone really going somewhere.⁴⁶

From their meeting in January 1967 until Merton's death the following year Merton met Gene Meatyard numerous times and exchanged a brief but steady correspondence of over sixteen letters. During this time Meatyard took over one hundred photographs of Merton, some of the most enigmatic taken. These photographs capture both the paradox of Merton and Meatyard's surrealistic vision — Meatyard realized with Merton that he was:

photographing a Kierkegaard who was a fan of *Mad*; a Zen adept and hermit who drooled over hospital nurses with a cute behind ... a man of accomplished self-discipline who sometimes acted like a ten-year-old with an unlimited charge account at a candy store.⁴⁷

For Merton his photography, as his writing, became a way for him to explore and express his relationship with the world. In a journal entry from December 1963 Merton reflects on a saying of Merleau-Ponty: 'I am myself as I exist in the world.'⁴⁸ This leads him to question the position he had been taking, of being himself by withdrawing from the world, and stating that he agrees profoundly with Merleau-Ponty providing that the world he is referring to is not one of 'delusions and clichés.' He writes that 'to withdraw from where I am in order to be totally outside all that situates me – this is real delusion.' Merton's description of his camera as a 'Zen camera' fits very well with the Zen koan-like nature of this insight.

In Darjeeling, just a couple of weeks before his death, Merton struggled with the Mountain Kanchenjunga. In Kanchenjunga Merton saw an answer to his questions, the mountain holds paradoxes together. It has a side that is seen and a side that is not seen, it is a 'palace of opposites in unity,' 'impermanence and patience, solidity and nonbeing, existence and wisdom.'⁴⁹ As Merton tried to capture images of the mountain with his camera, he wrote:

The camera does not know what it takes: it captures materials with which you reconstruct not so much what you saw as what you thought you saw. Hence the best photography is aware, mindful, of illusion and uses illusion, permitting and encouraging it – especially unconscious and powerful illusions that are not normally admitted on the scene.⁵⁰

This is reminiscent of Meatyard's understanding of Zen and his way of dealing with illusion by his frequent use of masks in his photographs, most noticeably in his collection *The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater*.

In *A Hidden Wholeness* Griffin describes Thomas Merton's vision of photography:

His vision was more often attracted to the movement of wheat in the wind, the textures of snow, paint-spattered cans, stone, crocuses blossoming through weeds – or again, the woods in all their hours, from the first fog or morning, through noonday stillness, to evening quiet.

In his photography, he focused on the images of his contemplation, as they were and not as he wanted them to be. He took his camera on his walks and, with his special way of seeing, photographed what moved or excited him – whatsoever responded to that inner orientation.

His concept of aesthetic beauty differed from that of most men. Most would pass by dead tree roots in search of a rose. Merton photographed the dead tree root or the texture of wood or whatever crossed his path. In these works, he photographed the natural, unarranged, unpossessed objects of his contemplation, seeking not to alter their life but to preserve it in his emulsions.

In a certain sense, then, these photographs do not need to be studied, they need to be contemplated if they are to carry their full impact.⁵¹

From these comments by Griffin, and through looking at Merton's photographs it is clear that Thomas Merton used his camera as a contemplative instrument and he photographed the things he contemplated.

Thomas Merton's initial reaction to photography was negative as seen by his comments about taking photographs at the hermitage. Very quickly Merton's view of photography changed. As he discovered contemplative photography, and how to use a camera as a contemplative instrument, he produced images which had the same effect as his drawings and anti-poetry. The media and advertisers used images manipulatively to sell a story or an object. By contrast, Merton's images have nothing to sell, they cause us to pause, to stop, to see, to see what is right in front of us every day. Merton's discovery of the medium of photography in the sixties was used by him in a similar way to his calligraphies and his anti-poetry.

Conclusion

Thomas Merton's art parallels his spiritual journey. Moving from childhood drawings, through his Columbia cartoons, to devout, strong and simple images, to his experiments with Zen calligraphies and graffiti along with his use of a Zen camera expressing his mature relationship with God, the world and his own self. Merton's mature drawings and his photography, like his anti-poetry, serve as question marks, asking us to pause and to reflect on what we are seeing or hearing. The words of his poem 'In Silence,' with which I will conclude, serve to illustrate this well:

Be still
 Listen to the stones of the wall.
 Be silent, they try
 To speak your

 Name.
 Listen to the living walls.
 Who are you?
 Who
 Are you? Whose
 Silence are you?

 Who (be quiet)
 Are you (as these stones
 Are Quiet). 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...

 'I will try, like them
 To be my own silence:
 And this is difficult. The whole
 World is secretly on fire. The stones
 Burn, even the stones
 They burn me. How can a man be still or
 Listen to all things burning? How can he dare
 To sit with them when
 All their silence
 Is on fire?'⁵²

Notes and References

- ¹ Georg de Nicolò, 'Thomas Merton's Anti-Poetry: Genetic and Functional Aspects of *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*.' masters thesis (Universitat Regensburg, Regensburg-Harting, Germany, 1995) p.37
- ² Anthony Padovano, *The Human Journey Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century*. Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1984, p.111
- ³ George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993, p.157
- ⁴ Walter Sutton, 'Thomas Merton and the American Epic Tradition: The Last Poems,' *Contemporary Literature* 14 (Winter 1973) p.50
- ⁵ Padovano, *The Human Journey*, p.165

- ⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. London: Sheldon Press, 1975, p.203
- ⁷ William H Shannon, Christine M Bochen, and Patrick F O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopaedia*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002, p.9
- ⁸ In one conference Merton describes the way Rilke gets into the very centre of the thing he is describing. Taking a dog as an example this inseeing involves getting into: 'the dogs very center, the point from where it begins to be a dog, the place in which, in it, where God, as it were, would have sat down for a moment when the dog was finished in order to watch it under the influence of its first embarrassments and inspirations and to know that it was good, that nothing was lacking, that it could not have been made better.' Thomas Merton. *Natural Contemplation*. (Kansas City: Credence Cassettes, 1987)
- ⁹ Thomas Merton, 'Sacred and Profane.' *Stained Glass* 69.4 (Winter 1975): p.82
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.83
- ¹¹ Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years, Journals Vol. 4 1960–1963*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996, p.59
- ¹² *Ibid.* p.60
- ¹³ Thomas Merton. *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989, p.133
- ¹⁴ Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*. New York: New Directions, 1966, p.180
- ¹⁵ http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/date_work_md_133A1.html [Accessed January 23, 2004.]
- ¹⁶ Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation, Journals Vol. 1 1939–1941*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995, pp.128–29
- ¹⁷ Thomas Merton to Ad Reinhardt, July 3, 1956. Unpublished letter. Archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky
- ¹⁸ Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life, Journals Vol. 3 1952–1960*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996, pp.139–40
- ¹⁹ Joseph Masheck. 'Five Unpublished Letters From Ad Reinhardt to Thomas Merton and Two in Return.' *Artforum* 17 (December 1978) p.24
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), p.5. In another letter to Victor Hammer Merton suggests that both Hammer and Reinhardt would be 'in fundamental agreement' and regrets the fact that they have not had the opportunity to meet. *Witness to Freedom*, p.6
- ²² http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/date_work_md_133A1.html [Accessed January 23, 2004]
- ²³ Ad Reinhardt to Thomas Merton, October 3 1963. Archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky
- ²⁴ Thomas Merton to Ad Reinhardt, October 31, 1963, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989, p.281
- ²⁵ Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage, Journals Vol. 5 1963–1965*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997, p.58
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.162
- ²⁷ Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, p.10
- ²⁸ As Merton was attempting to find other galleries to host the exhibit of his calligraphies he wrote to Shirley Burden in California requesting his help.

- In Burden's reply to Merton he also noted that royalties from his book *I Wonder Why* had been earmarked for scholarships for African-American students. Burden to Merton, March 29, 1965. Unpublished letter. Archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky
- ²⁹ Elsewhere I have argued that Merton's development of anti-poetry developed at the same time as that of Parra in Chile, that his anti-poetry was not copied from Parra, and that in a relatively short period of time it matured in ways that Parra's never did. See 'Poetry of the Sneeze: Thomas Merton and Nicanor Parra.' *The Merton Journal* 8.2 (Advent 2002) pp.3-20
- ³⁰ Thomas Merton, 'Theology of Creativity.' *American Benedictine Review* 11 (September-December 1960) pp.197
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p.198
- ³² *Ibid.*, p.205
- ³³ Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960, p.164
- ³⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003, pp.121-122
- ³⁵ Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, pp.5-6
- ³⁶ Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, p.169
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.194
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p.23
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.147
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p.149
- ⁴³ Thomas Merton, *Road to Joy*, p.140
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.141
- ⁴⁵ John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970, p.90
- ⁴⁶ Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom, Journals Vol. 6 1966-1967*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997, p.186
- ⁴⁷ Ralph Eugene Meatyard. *Father Louie: Photographs of Thomas Merton*. New York: Timken, 1991, pp.34-35
- ⁴⁸ Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p.48
- ⁴⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey, Journals Vol. 7 1967-1968*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998, p.286
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.284
- ⁵¹ John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness*, pp.49-50
- ⁵² Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*. New York: New Directions, 1978, pp.280-281