

Another Kind of Trifling

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*'Life is aimless, but one invents a thousand aimless aims and then mobilizes a whole economy around them, finally declaring them to be transcendental, mystical and absolute.'*¹

On 2 October 1963, Merton had been reading some of the script, written a couple of years previously, which was to become *Conjectures of a Guilty By-stander*. 'Most embarrassing,' he declares. 'Such triviality and lack of perspective.' The day hadn't started well for him, and in the journal he grumbles about Brahms, about Dan Berrigan's tone of 'facile and unserious eloquence,' about his 'unserious' liturgy book (*Seasons of Celebration*), and about his hurting shoulder. Only the woodpeckers, playing and feeding, seem to bring cheer to these recollections of a dismal day.

We might therefore take with a pinch of salt Merton's comments about the early version of *Conjectures*. Through the breaks in the cloud he acknowledges that 'some parts (the least political) are lively' but then continues in downcast fashion:

I begin dimly to be aware of my need to avoid (and very seriously!) this kind of trifling. One must be concerned about the events of one's time, yet there is a way of being so that is pure trifling, even though in some ways it may seem to be relatively serious, for the moment.²

Trifling it may indeed have seemed on that day. But the book has enriched and inspired many since its first publication in 1965. And one of the themes which continues to resonate in our markedly different context is this very (quaint) notion of 'trifling.' What might it mean here and now?

You may be here, but you're not interesting enough

Digital industry insider Mark Curtis considers Marshall McLuhan's reflections on the effects of the telephone, its potential to create loneliness and tension.³ The phone, concludes McLuhan, 'is a participant form that demands a partner... it simply will not act as a background instrument like a radio.'⁴

Curtis describes how people struggle to leave a ringing phone (or the vibration signalling a received text). The interruption once considered crass in face-to-face social interaction has rapidly become acceptable if machines are used. Curtis explains the inability to ignore a ringing phone in terms of the simple fact that 'we all wish to feel wanted.' And we need stimulation.

It is hard to argue with Curtis' bald assertion that the 'distraction of a mobile is caused not just by its ringing, but also

by its *potential* to ring. When a mobile is slapped down on a table between two people in a café, that potential is made explicit in a way that cannot help but impact on their (immediate) relationship.⁵ Curtis concludes that we avoid the present 'in preference for the *gratification* of getting that call, reading this text'. Consequently we cease to listen, because 'the world a fingertap or two away may just be more interesting than my current reality.'

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(physically) close to us. Re-reading *Conjectures* whilst negotiating my own kids' use of phones, consoles, ipods, laptops, television, I was arrested by his seemingly innocuous references to *trifling* which seem to speak into a world where interpersonal relations are modified by preoccupation with... what? Distraction? Stimulation? Instant gratification? 'Play' we sometimes call it. But play in a contemporary media-saturated, over-stimulated society is loaded with new meaning. Wired humans seem less adept at remembering how to play than do most other creatures—like those woodpeckers

Merton watched from his hermitage.

Just chill

A child's instinct for play, as well as the innate potential to develop into serious social creatures, is threatened or at least confused by an electronic gadget-saturated environment. This is no critique of technology *per se*, and certainly not of children and young people 'born digital.' It is rather an attempt to engage Merton in light of a prevalent social trend which may turn out to be more crucial than we care to own, as we blithely accommodate to climate crisis whilst dodging fallout from the online gaming at the heart of contemporary banking. Between playfulness and seriousness lies a range of activities which are somehow less free, less joyous, less *alive* than either play or seriousness.

When an adolescent 'just going to chill (leave me alone)' zones out into online social networking, a console or some other highly stimulating mesmerism, this kind of 'chilling' is less about a drop in temperature or excitation than it is a training in evasion and resistance, a kind of social grooming which continues well beyond adolescence. Whilst Merton did not live to see the extent to which mass technologies would so rapidly change society and human interaction, he did nevertheless have a great deal to say about the destructive, de-humanising potential of media technologies in his own time:

Action is not governed by moral reason but by political expediency and the demands of technology—translated into the simple abstract formulas of propaganda [which] condition the mass of

men to react in a desired way to certain stimuli.⁶

If Merton were commenting on our present era, pummelled by the aggressive activity of adrenaline-fuelled speculators of casino finance, he might have shifted the emphasis from 'action governed by political expediency and the demands of technology' to 'the demands of economic expediency which has annexed the power of technology.' Technological power is harnessed not so much for crude propaganda purposes as for distraction, the relentless promotion of trivia which can masquerade either as play or as serious activity—but manages to be neither. Bob Lax's gloriously sparse poem portrays the simpler, richer pattern Merton represented:

his work was play
his play was play
his play was work
his work was play
his work and play
were prayer
his prayer was
work and play
did he play
lightly?
he played
lightly
did he play
seriously?
he played
seriously
lightly and
seriously
at once?
lightly
and seriously
at once.⁷

Lacking the courage to play

Do we fear appearing to be unproductive? Do we tend to dress up a real need for playfulness—or daydreaming, or idleness—in habitual activity which in the end is *simply a lack of courage to play*? How much of what we imagine as *serious* (in classroom or office, stock exchange or church) is simply socially-sanctioned trifling?

In the third section of *Conjectures*, which develops and extends the second, Merton describes a collective mind which manages at best to concur with an emotional use of slogans and political formulas, persuaded and directed by a combination of pressure, fear and desire. We collude with propaganda and media pressure because 'perhaps we find it *interesting to do so*.' Interesting just as the 'world a fingertap or two away may just be more interesting than my current reality.' However we read it, 'interesting' can collapse into 'stimulating' and become merely 'trifling.' When an entire economy or culture is overwhelmed by a propensity for the kind of industrial-scale trifling that threatens our common humanity, then we learn to live with the discomfort by turning up the volume or retreating into a trance generated by flat-screen dreams or other virtual realities. We remember in our bones that we have the capacity to live otherwise and yet (as Merton writes, echoing St. Paul),

We think we know what we ought to be doing, and we see ourselves move, with the inexorable deliberation of a machine that has gone wrong, to do the opposite. A most absorbing phenomenon which we cannot stop watch-

ing, measuring, discussing, analyzing, and perhaps deploring! But it goes on.⁸

In typically exaggerated style, Merton describes his generation as 'living in the greatest revolution in history—a huge spontaneous upheaval of the entire human race.' Not quite the entire human race, he soon concedes, describing instead 'the crisis of Western civilization: more precisely of European civilization.'⁹ What Merton means is that condition which manifests in desperation, cynicism, ambivalence, attachments to images, idols, slogans or programmes that succeed only in dulling the general anguish temporarily. Electronic media devices perfectly suit that very need.

Against what he calls this 'basic distortion' neither reason nor love can prevail: 'Our sickness is the sickness of... self-love that realizes itself simultaneously to be self-hate.'¹⁰ He is naming a kind of nihilistic narcissism which, we might project, is more effectively and thoroughly unleashed in the distorting mirror of self-oriented communications media.

Are we having fun yet?

Merton dismisses the kind of vain and nostalgic wish that antiquated attitudes might be 'kept valid just by the determination to smile, even though the whole world may fall to pieces.'¹¹ Everything is changed, in other words, by the sheer momentum of technological development and its pervasive influence over cultural, inter-personal life.¹² By self-consciously sustaining outmoded attitudes and practices in Church and society we generate parody, another kind of trifling.

Like Merton, we too may consider

ourselves to be living through critical times. Merton's context—the context of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*—was 1960s America. And this is the author who in his peculiar way felt himself at least partly responsible for the Second World War.¹³

...the only way in which I can make sense in the unparalleled confusion and absurdity of the breakdown of Western culture is to recognize myself as part of a society both sentenced and redeemed: a society which, if it can accept sentence and redemption, will live. A society which has received the mercy of Christ and been unfaithful to Him. And if my society cannot face this truth, it will destroy itself and perhaps everyone else besides.¹⁴

Those were days overshadowed by Cold War anxieties which came to a head in such pseudo-events as the Cuban missile crisis. Conflicting ideologies—socialism, capitalist Christianity—are at the back of Merton's mind, mingled with the ever-present shadow of Nazism which continues to haunt him. Against this background, he writes:

A great deal of virtue and piety is simply the easy price we pay in order to justify a life that is essentially trifling. Nothing is so cheap as the evasion purchased by just enough good conduct to make one pass as a 'serious person.'¹⁵

This theme of seriousness—or rather, of 'not being serious'—was richly mined

by Archbishop Rowan Williams in his lecture published in a recent edition of *The Merton Journal*. Weaving variations around 'Barth's Dream,' (the first section of *Conjectures*), Williams reminds us that, 'It is Christ in life and death and resurrection who shows us how *unserious* we are, how little we can begin to do to justify ourselves because everything is a gift.'¹⁶ Is it the unbearable lightness of the gift of God in Christ that we seek to evade in trifling which we pretend is itself 'serious'?

From another perspective, we see a rejection of any religious effort or vital

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tradition because of a reluctance to appear serious. If piety and virtue can be 'trifling' then so can libertinism, vice and rebellion. These latter attitudes and behaviours differ in that they feel no obligation to justify trifling, despite amounting to the same. Between these poles, Merton fixes his gaze on puritan ethics of industriousness and thrift (with their concomitant rewards of 'comfort, pleasure, and a good bank account') and names the heart of the

problem: that we tend to generate a need to be active, and invent 'the myth of work (that) is thought to justify an existence that is essentially meaningless and futile.' In such a world,

people invent things to do when in fact there is very little to be done. Yet we are overwhelmed with jobs, duties, tasks, assignments, 'missions' of every kind. At every moment we are sent north, south, east, and west by the angels of business and art, poetry and politics, science and war, to the four corners of the universe to decide something, to sign something, to buy and sell.¹⁷

Busy doing nothing, we consume and are consumed. We note the inclusion of art and poetry in his list, as Merton the writer owns his participation in this frantic kingdom. Everything we generate and in which we participate is under scrutiny. How much trifling do we disguise as 'seriousness' whilst missing the one thing necessary? 'The more we seem to accomplish, the harder it becomes to really dissimulate our trifling, and the only thing that saves us is the common conspiracy not to advert to what is really going on.'

Trying hard to find lots of things not to do

The myth of work as source of meaning does not necessarily assume intentionality on the part of the worker. Some have little if any choice but to participate in useless or destructive industry for the sake of their own survival or maintenance. The fault—if fault there is—is corporate, shared. It is also quite possible that useful

or necessary work—sowing and harvesting, maintaining water supplies, nurturing and protecting young children—may become a source of meaning in an unhelpful, unhealthy way. Such existence cannot so readily be described as futile, and Merton's charge is more specific: 'People invent things to do when in fact there is very little to be done.'

The claim would be more palatable if those inventions were neither destructive, debilitating or overwhelming. The tendency in a commodity-oriented, consumer culture however is to lose sight of any frame of reference other than those of financial profit, gratification, sensation. It is all too easy to vilify as trifling and harmful (to the worker, the environment, the purchaser, the soul of a society) those

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industries relentlessly churning out pointless plastic and electronic widgets, but more complex to disentangle the condition of the worker deprived of land or liberty entrapped in a work-arid, money-shaped economy. The more pressing concern in an age overshadowed by ecological crisis is the hegemony of a culture of upgrade and disposal, consumer gadgetry and the unmitigated purchasing of experience, of always-on electronic media whose primary function is to captivate, fascinate, mesmerise, distract and sell. How many

of us can claim not to sustain that culture which, without reprieve, eats up ancient sunlight, creation's diversity and our children's options for liberty, life and creativity? Merton's critique cuts to the bone, though he never lived to witness the rate at which we would be consumed by consumerism.

What might once have seemed playful can turn out to suffocate playfulness. 'Entertaining' media, magazines, machines can become cocoons or fixations—paralysing us, rendering us attentive not to the glories of life and living but to the vibration of the mobile, the chime of a new text, or the celebrity life whose virtue is...celebrity? We invent things to do when in fact there is very little to be done. It seems no more productive to rail against those things which pollute the space between us and the prospects before us. We could be playing: instead we trifle.

'We fly in all directions to sell ourselves, thus justifying the absolute nothingness of our lives.'

The selling of ourselves has evolved on the one hand into an outlandish parody of coliseum or asylum—a global karaoke show masquerading as the measure of talent, perpetuating dreams of a life of trifling, detached from any threat of needing to contribute constructively to society. What may once have been 'playful' or just harmlessly silly has, under the spell of capitalism, lost its lustre along with any real vestiges of playfulness. Meanwhile we are encouraged in a crowded market to 'big up' our profile when encountering potential employees, schools or lenders. This social climate may *feel* tense and serious, but is merely another kind of trifling.

which to trifle and vegetate without feeling guilty about it. But because we do not dare try it, we precipitate ourselves into another kind of trifling: that which is not idle, but dissimulated as *action*.²²

What Merton describes as the demand for 'time to live' does not refer so much to the mushrooming leisure industry or assertion of a right to foreign holidays—a structured leisure which can contribute to the pressured experience of hyperactivity and, in the end, undermines its own stated intentions. It is more like the weary or bewildered voice saying 'I need more time *being*, not *doing*.' This voice we may have sympathy with, but what does it mean to have 'more time being not doing'? As long as we live, we are always 'being'—and what we are always being is human, male or female, the particular person we are. We are being this particular being all the time, and need not make any assertion of it. We are always *being* human in the same way that a tree is always being a tree. Any other kind of 'being' (a teacher, a priest, a parent, a writer) involves *doing* (something or other). In this sense, 'being' is not an alternative to 'doing.' It may seem pedantic to question the simple yearning, but if we accept that we are always *doing something* then we might more readily differentiate between activities which are trifling and those which are, on the other hand, either playful, restful, serious, creative, constructive, necessary and so on. Sitting, walking, thinking, praying, baking, reading, waiting, sleeping, tapping a keyboard, breathing, watching a screen, painting... always something.

So 'trifling' is not an alternative to *do-*

It could be argued that the systems created to distract ourselves may have a serious function *if only as relief of tension*—the tension experienced within an emotionally, psychologically overwhelming context, where what is required of us is agency, decision and action based on another frame of reference. Fidelity to that alternative frame of reference becomes less and less viable, until the 'logical end of this deterioration comes when conscious fidelity is replaced by an addiction—drugs, alcohol, sex, or just plain busyness.¹⁸ Or—we might add—the jolt of electronic stimulus.

The power and extent of that electronic pulse, the web of media saturation may be a tangible manifestation of that womb of collective illusion which Merton was describing in 'Rain and the Rhinoceros.'¹⁹ The critic must nevertheless beware, for there is no 'outside' perspective. And, as Merton cautions, 'some men make it their business to cover their own emptiness by pointing out the fraudulency of others.'²⁰ What we *can* say is that the new humanity abhors a vacuum. Whilst feeling oppressed by so much to be done (or to think about, respond to, pray for, decide upon), we collectively seem to find these critical times too 'interesting' to overturn or to confront effectively.²¹ In order to bear the strains, we create moments of reprieve. The reprieve may be the simple pleasure of a good film or music or simply 'time to live.' Which brings me to what seems a pivotal text of this section of *Conjectures*.

But it is precisely this idea that a serious life demands 'time to live' that is the root of our trifling. In reality, what we want is time in

ing nothing but to doing something else. When we yearn for more 'being not doing,' it's up to us to decide what constitutes the 'being' we seek and the 'doing' we want to avoid. We may then more accurately distinguish between the *activities* which are restful, refreshing or relaxed and those which pretend to be. Contemplation, meditation, prayer, paying attention, reading, and writing are things we might do. In our time, the vast industry of entertainment-communications technology is more liable to entice us into a different kind of activity designed to feed our participation in commodity capitalism which arguably is consuming our habitat and our hearts.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London, Sheldon Press, 1977), p.229.
2. Thomas Merton (ed. Robert E. Daggy), *Dancing in the Waters of Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton Volume V 1963-1965*, (New York, Harper-Collins, 1997), p.21
3. Mark Curtis, *Distraction: Being human in the digital age* (London: Futuretext, 2005), pp. 53f., quoting Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (new edition) (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994). Curtis at the time of publication was a director of mobile specialists Fjord.
4. See *Distraction*, p.54.
5. *Distraction*, pp. 54f.
6. *Conjectures*, p.63.
7. Robert Lax, 'Harpo's Progress: Notes Toward an Understanding of Merton's Ways' in Robert E. Daggy *et al.* ed., *The Merton Annual*, Vol. I (1988), (AMS Press, NY), p.40.
8. *Conjectures*, p.63.

9. *ibid.* p.66.
10. *ibid.* p.64.
11. *ibid.* p.65.
12. His generalisations about Europe, the European mind and Christendom (e.g. p. 68) tend to undermine the authority of some of Merton's proclamations on these matters.
13. A noteworthy and contrasting European equivalent of the era is Brother Roger, *The Dynamic of the Provisional*.
14. *Conjectures*, p.69.
15. *ibid.* p.191.
16. *The Merton Journal* Vol. 16, No. 2 (Advent 2009), p.22.
17. *Conjectures*, p.192.
18. *ibid.* p.193.
19. In Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, published around the same period as *Conjectures*.
20. *Conjectures*, p.192.
21. *ibid.* p.63.
22. *ibid.* p.192.

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