'No such thing as innocent by-standing': the Bystander Motif in the Social Writings of Thomas Merton

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Introduction

Thomas Merton's poetics echo through the opening of the 'Cassandra' section of Seamus Heaney's poem 'Mycenae Lookout' where the bystander-poet acknowledges his complicity in violence, 'No such thing/as innocent/by-standing'.[1] The poem 'Mycenae Lookout' is a significant text in the Heaney literary canon. The social function of the poet, which was Heaney's recurring preoccupation, is viewed at a moment of closure in the history of Ireland. Evocations of the violence of the Trojan War are aligned with oblique references to the recent history of the conflict in Northern Ireland euphemistically called 'the Troubles'.

The poem evokes the ceasefire and emerging peace process in Northern Ireland during 1994–95. Its inspiration was *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus, the Classical Greek tragedian, which recounts the return of king Agamemnon from his victory in the Trojan War. Heaney uses poetry to reflect on the psychological effects of violence throughout history. The figure of Cassandra resembles many of the people of Northern Ireland who became unwilling participants and victims of violence for 25 years. Cassandra, despite being able to prophesy, is tormented with the curse that no one will listen to her, and her significance as a marginalised spokesperson for her society, warning against forthcoming violence, parallels the position of Heaney, the poet-bystander as watchman. The conflict in Northern Ireland had undermined democracy and free speech.

Heaney expresses his frustration in 'Mycenae Lookout' that systematic violence renders speech impotent and irrelevant. Heaney's search to break through the impotency of words within the political landscape of the Troubles led him to discover the dissident poetry of Czesław Miłosz at the time of the Irish Republican hunger strike in 1981 and this encounter marked a departure point in Heaney's subsequent poetry.[2] If Miłosz served as a master for Heaney then 20 years earlier Czesław Miłosz had guided Thomas Merton to maturation as a social commentator.[3] The phrase 'innocent bystander' resonates throughout the correspondence of Miłosz and Merton. Their friendship between 1958 and 1968 was cherished by Merton who valued Miłosz as an authentic witness to the hostilities of the Second Word War, the spread of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe following the war, and the emergence of the Cold War that was to define the late 20th century.[4]

This paper will survey the bystander motif as a recurring theme throughout Thomas Merton's social writings. Merton nuanced the motif to express the implications of truth-telling, both for self-examination as a writer-monk and for his wider engagement as a 'contemplative activist' with fellow intellectuals.[5]

Thomas Merton as a bystander

I will briefly consider how Thomas Merton constituted authentic civic engagement before examining how he constructed the bystander motif in his writings. Thomas Merton's social writings between 1958 and his accidental death in 1968 argue that the crises of the Cold War had psychological dimensions. Merton believed that the Cold War was deadening the consciences of its supporters. His writings typify interests of radical intellectualism during the period by showing concern for the effects of technology on culture and the environment, racial segregation in America, conscientious objection to the Vietnam War and Christian-Marxist dialogue. What makes Merton unique as

a social commentator is the extensive range of his social concerns. Paradoxically, Merton largely engaged with the pertinent issues of the 1960s as a bystander. Although he was engaged, between 1958 and 1968, in fostering an intellectual correspondence network of international dimensions, it was from the bystander's remove of a Trappist monastic community in rural Kentucky.

Merton scholars highlight the importance of Thomas Merton's letter to Pope John XXIII, dated 10 November 1958, for understanding Merton's rationale for engaging in civic discourse. Merton confided to the recently elected pontiff that he had begun to engage in a letter correspondence with 'a circle of intellectuals from other parts of the world' which was essentially an 'apostolate of friendship'.[6] This proposal was issued during a period in American Catholic history when a debate was raging, triggered by an essay by Monsignor John Tracy Ellis on Catholics and the intellectual life.[7] Ellis's thesis was that American Catholics had been defensive about their faith and so concerned about the issues of caring for a largely immigrant church that they had neglected the intellectual life. That neglect resulted in an under-representation of American Roman Catholics in public life, in the scholarly world, and in the world of intellectuals.[8] Merton proposed reinvigorating a dynamic spiritual and secular dialogue.

Thomas Merton understood authentic dialogue as grounded in the ethos of friendship. As novice master in Gethsemani Abbey between 1955 and 1965, Merton was at the forefront of historically reclaiming the spirit of early Christian monasticism for a contemporary monastic context. His seminars on John Cassian, a medieval translator of Egyptian monasticism to the Latin West, discussed the virtues of friendship. Merton characterizes the conviviality of virtuous friendship as *diathesis* or superabundance. In this context, *diathesis* incorporated *agape* or universal love even including the love of enemies. Here, Merton considered the reciprocal quality of friendship as constituting its ethical ground. The dynamic of 'spiritual friendship' was created by mutual empathy conjoined through a shared virtuous purpose.[9]

A treatise on spiritual friendship, *De Spirituali Amicitia*, by St Aelred of Rielvaulx, a 12th-century Cistercian writer familiar to Merton, is a reminder that the ethics of community participation should never be exclusive, but should always remain open to the potential presented by the stranger.[10] The philosophy of 'personalism', as espoused by Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker movement, founded in America in 1933, was a secular manifestation of monastic friendship.[11] Merton's letter writing fulfilled a number of aims. It was, firstly, a medium for forging friendships by encountering the stranger. Letters initiated a dialogue while sustained letter correspondence built up a reciprocal relationship in which letters helped to nuance an intellectual position. The intention of letter correspondence was to foster authentic solidarity and community building, while for a writer-monk seeking to understand the psychology of the Cold War, letters served as a mode of self-authoring. Fundamentally, Merton's intellectual engagement with the wider world may be understood as a set of parrhesiastic discourses concerned with self-authenticity and truth-telling.

According to Michel Foucault, the 'parrhesiastic game' requires some friend to play the role of a parrhesiast to assist us in ridding ourselves of self-delusions.[12] The classical ethos of *parrhēsia* as 'fearless speech' constituted part of the tactics of resistance to knowledge/power that Michel Foucault surveyed from 1981 until his death in 1984. In 'Discourse and Truth', a seminar delivered, in English, at the University of California at Berkeley between October and November in 1983, Foucault discussed how classical ideas of the parrhesiast or truth-teller had contributed to Christian confessional practices. A necessary requirement for the potential truth-teller was self-examination of motivations in order to achieve self-knowledge. Foucault cites John Cassian's advice to his monks to scrutinize and test their own representations like a doorkeeper or a money-changer. 'For in order not to be trapped by what only seems to be innocent, in order to avoid the devil's counterfeit coins, the Christian must determine where his thoughts and sense impressions come from, and what

relation actually exists between a representation's apparent and real value.'[13] Foucault's example of Cassian in exemplifying parrhesiastic discourse has implications for understanding how Merton, a scholar of John Cassian, regarded his own role as a cultural bystander and, by extension, of roles performed by bystanders throughout history. Letter writing was a medium by which Merton was able to define and refine an authentic civil engagement through a network of trusted correspondents who comprised a growing circle of *parrhēsia* within civil society.

Dilemmas of an 'innocent bystander'

The motif of the bystander had been established in Merton's consciousness by 1959 when he shared his essay 'Letter to an innocent bystander' with Czesław Miłosz. In a letter to Miłosz, dated 28 February 1959, he writes, 'I realize it might seem a great impertinence to offer this ['Letter to an innocent bystander'] as reading for people behind the Iron Curtain, and when I wrote to you about it in my last letter I had not considered that fact. However, if it is understood that it was written for other intellectuals on *this side* of the curtain, it might not seem so inappropriate ... And tell me if it is really a piece of presumptuous complacency. I have no way of getting a real perspective otherwise.'[14] Merton sent Miłosz, 'Letter to an innocent bystander' as a response to reading Miłosz's controversial book *The Captive Mind* in 1958. Written in Paris in 1951–52, during Miłosz's exile from Poland, *The Captive Mind* articulates a denunciation of Stalinism by Miłosz that outraged many European critics at a time when they were becoming drawn to the politics of Communist Russia. *The Captive Mind* critiques the psychology of Communist ideology as a politicization of aesthetics. Merton was one of the first to read the book in English and to acknowledge its wider significance for pointing to the limits of anti-Communist propaganda in the West.[15] Miłosz gratefully accepted the essay and translated it for *Kultura Paryska*,

a leading Polish-émigré literary-political magazine, in France.[16] Miłosz, unsure how to translate 'bystander' into Polish, wrote to Merton for clarification. Merton replied that in English the special implication of a bystander 'is that of one who stands by while a crime is being committed.' Merton continues, 'I am glad you can use it for *Kultura*, but I feel ashamed of it, when I realize that it may be read by people who have a real problem.'[17] Merton's comment reveals an astute self-awareness of his own bystanding. Merton, in a letter to Miłosz dated 21 May 1959 stresses the ethical responsibilities of the writer who has a parrhesiastic duty to speak truth to power 'otherwise we are not writers but innocent (?) bystanders'.[18] This essay had a central role in Merton's social consciousness. In 1959, Merton also shared the essay with his friend Victoria Ocampo, publisher of the literary magazine *Sur* in Buenos Aires; Argentina.[19] Merton revisited 'Letter to an innocent bystander' for republication in his essay collections *Behaviour of Titans* in 1961[20] and *Raids on the Unspeakable* in 1966.[21]

'Letter to an innocent bystander' confronts the passive waiting of bystanders who think their tacit resistance is a form of action. It is written as a monologue by the author encountering the reader as stranger, echoing Albert Camus. Its plea is made on behalf of an activism that calls for wisdom. Merton questions: 'Is non-participation possible? Can complicity be avoided? You in your country and I in mine – you in your circle and I in my monastery: does the fact that we hate and resent tyranny and try to dissociate ourselves from it suffice to keep us innocent?'[22] The dilemma of the innocent bystander arises from every definite programme being a potential deception, every precise plan a trap and every easy solution intellectually suicidal. The bystander's 'innocence' is to avoid any definitive plan or solution and to keep speaking truth to power by keeping dialogue open, but not being betrayed by easy answers and simple solutions to complex problems. This position was not without its dilemmas. An example of this can be seen from Merton's response to the self-immolation

of Roger LaPorte, a young volunteer with the Catholic Worker movement and former Cistercian novice, before the United Nations building in New York City on 9 November 1965 in protest against the escalation of American military intervention in Vietnam designated as 'Operation Rolling Thunder'. LaPorte's self-sacrifice mirrored acts of self-immolation by South Vietnamese Buddhist monks, seeking religious equality, most notably that of Thích Quảng Đức in Saigon on 11 June 1963. Merton, shocked by LaPorte's death, initially acted to distance himself from the peace movement, but later recanted his rashness, seeking to work with the peace movement from a position of autonomy.[23]

The 'innocence' of the bystander reappears in Merton's 'Message to poets' written for a gathering of young Latin American poets in Mexico City in February 1964. It called on poets to resist the temptation to exploit language for narrow ideological purposes and to retain their 'innocence' by which Merton meant retaining an immediacy of experience that cannot be expressed either through abstractions or reductive slogans.[24] In this context, 'innocence' consecrates the writer as a parrhesiast or truth-teller.

Complicities of a 'guilty bystander'

As Thomas Merton was beginning to engage in social questions he was also beginning to more deeply question his own role as a monk in Cold War America. After 1957, it was Merton's writer's self that accused his monk's self of piousness and over-simplification of the world.[25] The self-image that Merton began to cultivate during the 1960s was unmistakably existential, that of a bystander whose failure to address the crises, crimes and confusions of his contemporaries became a tacit admission of guilt for his complicity in a collective suffering. This was a post-modern self-image, no doubt borrowed from Merton's enthusiastic embrace of Albert Camus: that of a stranger whose frail protestations of innocence and pleas of non-

involvement only implicated him further in crimes he had never committed.[26] Merton transitioned into a less self-conscious humanist who, true to his ethos of an 'apostolate of friendship', shared with his contemporaries his own uncertainties of living in turbulent times and who became harshly critical of all obligatory answers to the most pressing questions of the decade.[27] In 'Letter to an innocent bystander' Merton contended that the term 'innocent bystander' was an oxymoron, and that witnesses to a crime had become accomplices by their inaction.[28]

The Holocaust defines the bystander for history. Here, the 'bystander' epithet does not apply to leading Nazis or guards in concentration camps, but to 'ordinary' citizens. In the post-Holocaust awareness that the 'normal' life was proceeding while millions of people were being murdered on an industrial scale, the bystander becomes an especially haunting figure.[29] Merton's encounter with the Holocaust, principally through Hannah Arendt's report of the trail of Adolf Eichmann, and Merton's correspondence with American sociologist Gordon Zahn, made him conscious of the responsibility that human beings bear for one another, and he wrestled with how to practice that responsibility in modern life.

Hannah Arendt, writing about the Jewish Councils which executed the commands of the Nazis in the hope of limiting Jewish suffering but over time became one of the tools of the genocidal machinery, noted that it is not possible for an organization to be involved with a destructive system without being co-opted and corrupted.[30] Merton, in a journal entry for 27 March 1963, responded to Arendt's controversial assessment through a parrhesiastic discourse with himself by concluding that the 'loss of moral senses, the abdication of conscience are signs of the proximate extinction of the human species itself, unless there is a change, a moral recovery'.[31]

American sociologist Gordon Zahn questioned why almost no German Roman Catholic had refused to participate in Hitler's wars.[32]

Zahn's hypothesis was that individual Roman Catholics were subject to constant and multiple pressures from the totalitarian Nazi state to socially conform. Merton, writing to Zahn in 1962, underscored the significance of Zahn's research: 'We have to face the fact that we have traveled a long way from the real Christian center. Centuries of identification between Christian and civil life have done more to secularize Christianity than to sanctify civil life.'[33] Zahn highlighted Franz Jägerstätter's conscientious objection as an act of solitary witness against totalitarianism.[34] Merton commented: 'Jägerstätter is to me a moving symbol of a lonely isolated Christian who was faithful to his conscience, in the supremely difficult question of the most real and the highest kind of obedience.'[35] The case of Franz Jägerstätter testified to the duties of personal conscience in *Gaudium et Spes* ('Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world'), the final document issued by the Second Vatican Council, in 1965.

The testimony of witnesses and bystanders played a pivotal role in the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem beginning in April 1961. Convicted in December 1961 for crimes against the Jewish people, Eichmann was hanged in May 1962. The legal mission of the District Court in the Eichmann prosecution was to depict a core image of a relatively new type of criminality, crimes against humanity, by changing the paradigm offered in Nuremberg to one that would render the testimony of victims relevant to establishing guilt and integrating them into the trial.[36] Eichmann was psychologically assessed as being sane. In 'A devout meditation in memory of Adolf Eichmann' (1964), Merton questions the value of sanity when disconnected from compassion in Swiftian satirical tones.[37] Hannah Arendt spoke of Adolf Eichmann in the past tense while Thomas Merton speaks of Eichmann in the present tense.[38] For Merton, Eichmann represented a recurrent character-type in history that was complicit in a structural violence manifested through technocratic systems cloaked in euphemistic language.

The bystander motif developed as a more foregrounded concern post-Eichmann.[39] Merton revisited his journals written over the

previous decade when composing *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966). Here, Merton the writer explicitly implicates his monk's guilt in that of the bystander through parrhesiastic self-examination. Over the decade Merton had refined his realistic understanding of the relationship between monastery and society, detectable in his parrhesiastic discourses with Czesław Miłosz.[40] Merton understood Western monasticism as historically originating as a protest movement in Late Antiquity. Merton's critique of American culture was entwined with an honest criticism of his own complicity within its institutional structures.[41] By 1962, Merton was disturbed by Gethsemani Abbey becoming implicated in American capitalism. Not only was Merton concerned by the shift over to big business that was represented by his monastery's new food processing corporation 'Gethsemani Farms', but also was equally disturbed by the adoption of new methods of farming which included insecticides and chemicals. The 'illusion' of monastic perfection, for Merton, was rooted in the procedures of monastic observance that can protect monks from probing more deeply into their own cultural complicity. To Merton, the monastery was not a bastion from which attacks were to be launched on society. Rather, the battle was to be fought within the monk himself, and it is the same battle that society ought to wage against its own insecurities. Merton writing as a hermit in 1967 drew on the Irish hermit tradition to argue that learning from the hermit's cell involved transcending the illusion of self-representation.[42]

Conclusion

Thomas Merton's social writings operate as ongoing multivalent conversations on the world from the remove of a reflective bystander. He raised awareness of the bystander as a liminal subject who critiques culture, not from a position of judgment, but as someone aware of his own complicity by nature of being an historical subject. Merton assessed the complexity of the Cold War by being neither Communist

nor anti-Communist because he saw this framework as built upon ideology for both regimes. Bolshevist 'socialism' may have implied the loss of human freedom, but the advance of 'democratic' capitalism was bringing an increase in world poverty. Merton's bystander is a paradoxical figure who stands apart, but who cannot turn away from injustice because it manifests suffering in which he too is implicated through shared humanity. These ethical tensions enfolding the bystander will continue to remain a vital legacy of Merton's social writings.

Notes

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10. Thomas Merton, 'St. Aelred of Rielvaulx and the Cistercians' *Cistercian Studies*, pp.20–4 (1985).
11. Ivan Illich, 'Friendship' in *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich*, ed. David Cayley (Ontario: Ananse, 2005), p.148.
12. Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), p.135.
13. ibid., pp.161–2.

14. *Striving Toward Being*, pp.19–20.
15. Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001).
16. 'List do niewinnego swiadka,' trans. Czesław Miłosz, *Kultura* (Paris), pp.5–10.
17. *Striving Toward Being*, p.34.
18. *Striving Toward Being*, p.43.
19. 'Carta a un espectador inocente', trans. Virginia María Erhart, *Sur,* 256 (January–February 1959), pp.36–41.
20. Thomas Merton, 'Letter to an innocent bystander', in *Behaviour of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp.51–64.
21. Thomas Merton, 'Letter to an innocent bystander' in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) pp.53–62.
22. ibid. p.56.
23. John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: the Hermitage Years of Thomas Merton* (San Antonio: Wings Press, 1993), p.38.
24. Thomas Merton, 'Message to Poets' in ed. Patrick O'Connell, *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays* (New York: Orbis Books, 2013), pp.172–6.
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