

Emblems for a Season of Fury: The Art of Thomas Merton

Paul M. Pearson

As Thomas Merton moved from the world-denying monk of the nineteen forties and early nineteen 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 not only in his prose of this period, but in his poetry and, as we shall see, in his artwork of this period as well. 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 - changes that have been magnified a hundred-fold in the years since Merton's death. 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 his early pious poetry, through his “poetry of the desert” to his anti-poetry of the sixties. The first of what could be described as Merton’s anti-poems appeared in 1961 with the publication of “Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces,” followed in 1962 by the publication of *Original Child Bomb*, with further examples in his 1963 volume of poetry, eloquently and expressively entitled *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 attempted to alert his readers 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* Merton’s central theme is that in “the liturgy of modern life” with “its rituals and frenzy,” true communication has been destroyed. “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 “confronts and shocks”³ his readers. The crisis 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

¹ Georg de Nicolò, “Thomas Merton’s Anti-Poetry: Genetic and Functional Aspects of *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*” (master’s thesis, Universität Regensburg, 1995), 37.

² Anthony Padovano, *The Human Journey: Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1984), 111.

³ George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton’s Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 156-57.

⁴ Walter Sutton, “Thomas Merton and the American Epic Tradition: The Last Poems,” *Contemporary Literature* 14 (Winter 1973): 50.

breakdown of the human community and its communion with one another and with the Divine.

Merton's final volume of poetry, *The Geography of Lograire*, describes "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, a compassion he expressed succinctly in a letter of 1963 to the novelist James Baldwin:

I am therefore not completely human until I have found myself in my African and Asian and Indonesian brother because he has the part of humanity which I lack.⁶

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 changes in his prose and his poetry - changes which expressed the transformation of his understanding of the monk's relationship to the world as he sought to bring contemplation to the world, and the world to the monastery. 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.

Thomas Merton's artistic worldview was no doubt inherited from his parents, Owen and Ruth Merton. Ruth was interested in interior decoration and design and Owen was a New Zealand painter with a number of exhibitions to his name. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton wrote that he had learned from his father

⁵ Padovano, *Human Journey*, 165.

⁶ *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993), 245.

“that art was contemplation, and that it involved the action of the highest faculties.”⁷ 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 in the nineteen thirties, 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,”⁸ 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.⁹ 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*,” writing:

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.¹⁰

As Merton’s prose and poetry developed so his practice of art changed, dramatically at times. With his conversion to Catholicism

⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975), 203.

⁸ William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 9.

⁹ In one conference Merton describes the way Rilke gets into the very center of the thing he is describing. Taking a dog as an example, he says this inseeing involves getting into:

the dog’s 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).

¹⁰ Thomas Merton, “Sacred and Profane,” *Stained Glass* 69.4 (Winter 1975): 82.

in November 1938, Merton gave up drawing cartoons, nudes and other “secular” images. During the year he spent at St. Bonaventure University as an instructor of sophomore English he turned instead to florid, explicitly religious, images. After his entry to the Abbey of Gethsemani in December 1941 strong but simple religious images dominated his early monastic years. His images from this period were traditional images of saints, prophets, monks, angels, the cross and Christ crucified. Most noticeably there was a large collection of groups, some containing over one hundred images, of the crucifixion, and of male and female saints, in particular the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Thérèse, St. John of the Cross and Mary Magdalene. Besides these images there are a smaller number of still life and landscape studies. The majority of Merton’s images from this period were unsigned, undated and untitled.

In the late fifties and early sixties a marked change took place in Merton’s drawings as both his relationship to the world changed and as he journeyed into other faiths, most notably his attraction to Zen Buddhism. In the sixties he would also discover 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 College in Louisville, 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.¹²

¹¹ Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 59.

¹² *Ibid.*, 59-60.

After questioning his own position in the monastery in relation to the world he writes that he should concentrate on writing poetry and “doing creative work” and records a marked change in the style of his drawings, writing: “tried some abstract-looking art this week.”¹³ Just a few entries later in his personal journal Merton refers to “spending some work time on abstract drawings for a possible experimental book.”¹⁴ Some of these drawings, which Merton would begin calling “calligraphies,” were semi-representational, but the majority were completely abstract. From this time onwards Merton would never again draw the explicitly religious images that had thus far dominated his artistic output at the Abbey of Gethsemani; his journal entry for October 28th 1960 marks a precise point of departure for Merton.¹⁵

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. This exhibit possibly came about through Merton’s friendship with the artist Ulfert Wilke who was, at this time, on the faculty of the University of Louisville. In a letter of September 1964 Merton noted his knowledge of Wilke’s work, writing that his own drawings were “extremely abstract” with “something of the nature of the abstract ‘calligraphies’ which Ulfert Wilke... was doing for a while.”¹⁶ Certainly Wilke assisted Merton with some of the practicalities for this exhibit, including the selection of frames.

The exhibition of twenty-six calligraphies opened at Spalding College 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

¹³ Ibid., 60.

¹⁴ Ibid., 63.

¹⁵ Although many of Merton’s works were undated it is clear from careful analysis of the drawings and calligraphies at the Thomas Merton Center, from the testimony of friends, and from Merton’s correspondence that no further explicitly religious drawings, like those that dominated his early years at the Abbey of Gethsemani, were created after October 28th 1960.

¹⁶ Thomas Merton to Sr. Mary Charlotte, September 7, 1964. Unpublished letter. Archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.

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.¹⁷

Subsequently the Abbey of Gethsemani funded the scholarship. Merton periodically replenished the exhibit as works sold. When the tour eventually ended in Washington, D.C. in 1967 Merton entrusted the remaining works to Rosemary Radford Ruether who, after Merton's death, auctioned them to raise money for the Daniel and Philip Berrigan Defense Fund.¹⁸

The brief essay Merton wrote to accompany this exhibit was subsequently 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 abstract drawings and calligraphies he was creating in the sixties. As such, I think it is really 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 of 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, writing:

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.¹⁹

Merton then writes about his understanding of the drawings, and I will just quote here a few of the most incisive passages:

¹⁷ *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 133.

¹⁸ *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether*, ed. Mary Tardiff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), xix.

¹⁹ Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 180.

These abstractions - one might almost call them *graffiti* rather than calligraphies - are simple signs and ciphers of energy, acts or movements intended to be propitious. Their “meaning” is not to be sought on the level of convention or of concept.

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.²⁰

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.²¹

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 campus humor magazine *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

²⁰ Ibid., 181.

²¹ Nancy Spector, “Ad Reinhardt” *Guggenheim Museum*. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. 1st August, 2007

http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_work_md_133A_1.html.

values... Reinhardt's abstract art is completely chaste, and full of love of form and very good indeed.²²

After Merton's entry into the Abbey of Gethsemani he sporadically stayed in touch with Reinhardt. Copies of a number of early letters from Merton to Reinhardt from 1956 to 1964 are preserved in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, and five letters to Merton from Reinhardt, all from the sixties, are preserved in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, along with fourteen calligraphies Merton had sent to Reinhardt, which were donated to the Merton Center in 2005 by Reinhardt's widow.

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."²³ Reinhardt obliged and 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 any 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... 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.²⁴

Merton wrote to Reinhardt thanking him for the painting, saying:

It has the following noble feature, namely its refusal to have anything to do with anything else around it, notably the furniture etc. It is a most recollected small painting. It thinks that only one thing is

²² Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 128-29.

²³ Thomas Merton to Ad Reinhardt, July 3, 1956. Archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.

²⁴ Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 139-40. In his personal journal Merton wrote: "Seen in relation to any other object the picture is meaningless" - "any" was wrongly transcribed as "my" in the published version.

necessary & this is true, 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 latreutic²⁵ small painting.²⁶

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* (1951) and in the more recently published book, *The Inner Experience* (2003). 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.²⁷

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.²⁸

The influence of apophatic mysticism on Reinhardt has been referred to by critics of his work in recent years suggesting that what Reinhardt hoped to realize in his black paintings recalled the aspirations of negation theology, apophatic mysticism, a "method of

²⁵ "Latreutic" means "conductive to divine worship."

²⁶ Thomas Merton to Ad Reinhardt, November 23, 1957. Archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.²⁵ Thomas Merton to Ad Reinhardt, November 23, 1957. Archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.

²⁷ Joseph Masheck, "Five Unpublished Letters From Ad Reinhardt to Thomas Merton and Two in Return," *Artforum* 17 (December 1978): 24.

²⁸ *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), 5. Later in the same letter 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*, 6.

thought... employed to comprehend the Divine by indicating everything it was not.”²⁹

In the autumn of 1963 Merton sent one of his calligraphies to 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.³⁰

Merton replied humorously:

Here 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 the 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.³¹

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.” Throughout his monastic life Merton had to rely on the materials available to him at the monastery. Many of his drawings were drawn on the reverse sides of page proofs for his books which Merton was reusing due to the lack of more appropriate materials at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

In January 1964 Merton records in his journal the arrival of a package 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.”³² Taking note of Reinhardt's

²⁹ Nancy Spectator, “Ad Reinhardt” <<http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/>>

³⁰ Ad Reinhardt to Thomas Merton, October 3, 1963. Archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.

³¹ Thomas Merton to Ad Reinhardt, October 31, 1963. Merton, *Road to Joy*, 281.

³² Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 58.

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 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.

Merton 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.³³

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 plain to all concerned that I do not regard it as “art” and that they are not supposed to either.³⁴

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

³² Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 58.

³³ *Ibid.*, 162.

³⁴ Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, 10.

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.³⁵

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.³⁶ 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"?³⁷ 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.³⁸

Merton then goes on to add:

A valid religious art in our time will then be a "creative expression of destructive trends."³⁹

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ 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): 3-20.

³⁷ Thomas Merton, "Theology of Creativity," *American Benedictine Review* 11 (September - December 1960): 197.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 198.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 205. Merton is quoting here from Paul Tillich's *Theology of Culture*.

Merton first touched on this theme explicitly as he was working on his 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.⁴⁰

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 this emptiness and apparent absence... Leave nothingness as it is. In it, [God] is present.⁴¹

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

⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), 164.

⁴¹ Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 121-22.

to stand and face the darkness and encouraging others to do the same.

Conclusion

Thomas Merton's art parallels his spiritual journey, moving from his Columbia cartoons, nudes and other secular images, to devout, strong and simple images in the first fervor of his conversion and monastic vocation, to his experiments with Zen calligraphies and graffiti in the sixties. His art from the final years of his life expresses his mature relationship with God, the world and his own self. Merton's mature drawings, like his anti-poetry, serve as question marks, asking us to pause and to reflect on what we are seeing or hearing. They invite us to break through the media hype, the techno-babble, and the pseudo-community, to that inner radiance of being, that consciousness of paradise within each and every one of us.

In his introduction to *Raids on the Unspeakable* Merton writes:

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 proclaims his contemplative message of hope. I want to leave the final word to Thomas Merton as he reminds us of the "seeds of hope" sown by God:

Be human in this most inhuman of ages... guard the [human] image for it is the image of God.⁴²

⁴² Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 5-6.