Thomas Merton and the West Coast Counter-Culture: Monastic Vocation and the Challenge to Conformity

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Thomas Merton's monastic vocation was born out of his own pre-disposition to non-conformity. He was at heart a solitary, a *monos*, one who stands alone, an independent thinker. Partly no doubt this was genetic, being born to parents who were artists who themselves made their own path in life. Partly perhaps it was reinforced by his encounters with death: the loss of his mother when aged six, his father when he was sixteen and later his brother too, from whom he'd already spent much of his life apart. Despite his gregariousness and his thriving social life as a young man in New York, Merton was one who stood alone. His conversion to Catholicism and subsequent entry into the monastery were his response to life and society in mid-twentieth century America. It was literally a flight from the world into the refuge of the cloister.

And yet, once inside it was not long before his non-conformist spirit began to react against the new conformity: the conformity of the Church and of monastic authority in particular, and the common life of the community. Merton increasingly felt the need for more independence, more solitude and, ultimately, more freedom. Coupled with this was a growing reappraisal of his relationship with the world, brought home to him most forcefully in his

famous epiphany on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in the late 1950s (1).

It is no surprise therefore that Merton should be drawn to others of a non-conformist disposition, others who questioned and even rejected conventional society and its values and mores. Similarly, it is no surprise that those of such disposition should be drawn to him (and perhaps many of us would count ourselves among their number). There are many parallels and links between Merton and the Beat Generation of the 1940s and 1950s that I (and others) have explored more fully elsewhere (2). For example, Robert Giroux of Harcourt Brace was both a contemporary of Merton's at Columbia and his first publisher as well as Jack Kerouac's first publisher and editor; Kerouac was also close friends for a time with Robert Lax; Kerouac refers to Merton's poetry in *Desolation Angels*; and Merton finds his way into Ginsberg's journals and (perhaps more disturbingly) into his dreams. In the early 1950s Lawrence Ferlinghetti wrote to Merton at the monastery but apparently the letter never got through. Ferlinghetti received only a note from a secretary in return (3).

More substantial contact with Ferlinghetti came with the publication of Merton's poem 'Chant to be used in

procession around a site with furnaces' in the first issue of Ferlinghetti's *Journal for the Protection of All Beings* in 1961. Merton's name heads a list of contributors to the *Journal* that included Bertrand Russell, Gary Snyder, Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Norman Mailer, Kenneth Patchen, Albert Camus and Shelley. Not all were members of the 'West Coast Counter-Culture' by any means, but this is certainly an impressive list of writers challenging the society in which they were situated.

Merton's poem is the first item in that *Journal* and is by no means out of place: in fact it sets the tone for what is to follow. Merton parodies the false logic and apparent sanity that provided for the calm, collected, cold-blooded murder of the victims of the Nazi holocaust. This poem is followed by a statement on nuclear war by Bertrand Russell in which Russell calls on readers to respond to 'this moment of supreme danger.' Gary Snyder offers a piece on Buddhist Anarchism; Kay Johnson a somewhat confused piece on 'universal spiritual & physical expression of love possible without sin, fornication, or adultery...'. There are interviews/dialogues between Ginsberg, Corso and Burroughs; a piece by Albert Camus on the artist as the witness of freedom; an involved socio-biological meditation on 'revolt' by Michael McClure; an enchanting account of the birth of his first child by David Meltzer; an account of a recent visit to Haiti by Ferlinghetti himself; and an open letter to John F. Kennedy and Fidel Castro by Norman Mailer. The *Journal* concludes with a number of 'Documents' reproducing 'The

Surrender Speech of Chief Joseph' (Nez Perce), Shelley's 'Declaration of Rights', a quote from Herman Hesse's *Demian* headed 'The Beginning Of The End' and, finally, a picture of Su Lin, the first giant panda to be brought out of China at age six weeks and exhibited in a zoo where he survived for less than a year – a representative of all the beings in need of protection, and a metaphor perhaps of the spirit of Ferlinghetti's new journal.

Merton was happy to have his poem included in the *Journal* - although he voices some misgivings over the violence that he feels is in the poem itself (4) - but he was not overly impressed by the other contributors. He was not dazzled by their approach, was disappointed to find much of the material to be off-target, and doubted the reality of the moral concern of those who wrote on the question of war (5). He felt that the problem of many contemporary American writers was that they sought a superficial reality by defining themselves over against 'square society' - though he acknowledges that it is more complicated than this (6). He recognized Ginsberg, for example, as 'one of the few American U.S. poets that has something to say to everybody' (7) but he neither felt at home with him nor liked him as he did César Vallejo or Nicanor Parra. In Ginsberg's work he recognized an authentic interpretation of a society from which Merton was equally alien, yet he found Ginsberg remote also. Ginsberg's merit, according to Merton, 'is that he is authentic and does not judge.'

Clearly the Abbot (James Fox) did judge and was not impressed at all by the *Journal* and decided that Merton was to contribute to it no further (8). The *Journal* is however an important document in bringing Merton more clearly into the milieu of the Beats and the emerging West Coast Counter-Culture. It illustrates the sort of agenda that was to occupy Merton for the remaining years of his life in terms of challenging the political, religious and literary establishments. When Merton himself later produced his own magazine, *Monks Pond*, it is no surprise to find Ferlinghetti, Kerouac and other counter-culture figures amongst his list of contributors.

At the exact same time that Merton was in correspondence with Ferlinghetti about publishing the 'Auschwitz' poem (August 1961), Jay Laughlin was in California visiting W.H. 'Ping' Ferry and Robert Hutchins at the newly founded *Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions* in Santa Barbara. There he showed them a copy of the poem which they much appreciated and made copies of. Laughlin got the distinct feeling that Merton should be involved in the new Center helping them as they sought to address the issues of the day (9). Yet he recognized that this was clearly impossible and suggested the next best thing would be for them to visit Merton. A correspondence followed between Merton and Ferry exchanging manuscripts, documents, pamphlets and other publications, and Merton came to use the Center - and Ferry in particular - as a sounding board for many of the ideas and experiences he was working through in the 1960s. The connection

also provided Merton with an informal way of getting his material circulated when he was having 'censor trouble,' beginning with copies of *The Cold War Letters* (10).

Much of their correspondence concerned the social and political issues of the day, in particular civil rights, nuclear weapons and the Vietnam War. But they also shared spiritual and literary interests: the early English mystics, Henry Miller, Chuang Tzu, Edwin Muir and Merton's early unpublished novel (*My Argument With The Gestapo*) were amongst the materials exchanged and subjects discussed in their letters (11). It was to Ferry that Merton turned in search of 'good, gaudy, noisy *ad* material' as he embarked on his later experimental poetry and anti-poetry (12). In 1967 when Merton began work on the extended poem that was to become *The Geography of Lograire* he sent tape recordings of himself reading the work in progress, and permitted Ferry to make copies (13). Later he sent the manuscript itself to have it typed up at the Center (14). Similarly with *Monk's Pond*, Merton used Ferry as a sounding board and asked him to 'stir up poets and creative types' to contribute – notwithstanding Merton's concerns with the censorious little fellow in the print shop who might have issues with any four-letter words Merton's *artisti* came up with (15). By all accounts Ferry was instrumental in the progress of both *Lograire* and *Monk's Pond* (16). Naturally the Center at Santa Barbara was high on the list for multiple mailings of the magazine as it came off the press.

A recurring topic in their correspondence and in the conversations during Ferry's visits concerned the tension Merton experienced in his own vocation – a tension typified by (but not limited to) his problems with censorship. They talked of priests who found themselves in dispute with the Church and who ended up leaving (17). Merton felt that authority had been abused for too long, and had for many people brought the whole religious enterprise into disrepute. But he felt that confrontations with authority were of limited value and unlikely to result in progress. Similarly, just walking away would only leave 'the curial boys in full command of the field.' (18) The real problem and challenge was, he thought, the reform of the 'Church people who remain inside.'

Merton's tensions reflected those of Ferry. In March 1967 Merton wrote in a letter to Ferry:

> I can understand how you feel about wanting to get out and be in some other country that can never own a bomb, never afford genocide, and lacks the joys of American know-how in alienating the rest of the universe. But wherever we might go we would take our America with us: there is no escaping that responsibility or that trauma. We are stuck with it. Might as well stay where the guilt is. (19)

It could almost have been the other way round, Ferry speaking to Merton. In fact, just six months later, Merton

writes to Ferry again, saying:

> In a burst of something or other I tried to get myself transferred to Chile, to live as a hermit in the Andes and get out from under this goddamn overkill society. The permission was indignantly refused (was told to stay and save society from within – i.e., to bust my skull against the impossible). Doesn't matter that much, really. Wherever one is, one is only an ambassador of affluence and napalm . . . (20)

Not for the first time was Merton considering leaving Gethsemani and, as we know, neither would it be the last. What is significant is that we see Merton again wrestling with the same 'involvement versus non-involvement' with society that took him into the monastery in the first place.

During Merton's crisis of 1966, his summer of love, he called on Ferry to come and help work through this new relationship (21). This was a crisis in Merton's monastic vocation - not the only one but perhaps the most serious, when Merton found himself faced with the possibility of not just a move to another monastery or another order or a more remote hermitage, but with the possibility of ceasing to be a monk altogether and 'returning to the world'. Ferry offered Merton a job at the Center in Santa Barbara and M. herself talked earnestly of Tom coming to live with her 'in the world'. No doubt Merton wrestled back and forth that summer, though he claims there was

never any real question. Two weeks after Ferry's visit he writes:

> Before dawn, in the dim light, I sat on the porch and looked out at the peaceful valley. I realized that no matter how much I may love M. and be attached to her, there has never for a moment really been any choice. If it is a question of leaving Gethsemani and trying to live with her, and staying here in solitude and doing whatever it is I am supposed to do, then the answer is easy. There is not even a credible question. (22)

And yet the question rumbles on, even after he has ended the relationship. In December 1966, Ferry arranged for Joan Baez and Ira Sandperl to visit Merton and they were eager for him to leave the monastery and come with them: 'Someone has to talk to the students,' they said, 'and you are the one.' (23) He says he can't fully explain (at least to them) why he doesn't go with them but reiterates his conviction that his solitude is God's will for him: it's not simply a case of obeying authorities and laws of the Church, it is about being true to himself and who he is – his 'monastic vocation'. It is about his own identity rather than conformity to anybody else's expectations, including those of the 'counter-culture'. Part of that identity is perhaps also the *tension* itself that constantly seems to question his vocation.

That is not to say that there weren't opportunities to resolve the tension, or

periods of contentment in his life. This comes through in his writings in the summer of 1965 when he had just moved full-time into the hermitage. Even before he officially moves, he expresses happiness at the decision and how it makes so much sense, and how fruitful it would be: 'I realize that I am extremely fortunate to be able to do exactly what I am supposed to do in life.' (24) A month after he moved he again comments how 'it makes immense sense', adding that it 'does not necessarily imply any kind of serious break with reality: quite the contrary, I am back in touch with it'. (25)

Back in touch with reality he may have been, and he certainly entertained an increasing number of visitors (who brought tensions of their own) but he still wrestled with what it meant to be 'out of the world.' Again the tension rises as he finds himself being refused permission to travel: he was invited to the *Pacem in Terris* conference in Geneva and Ferry had offered to pay but, like so many other invitations, it was a non-starter (26). At about this time he begins to understand himself as a 'stranger' and seeks to deepen his awareness of what this means for his solitude and his relationship with the world of contemporary society: 'I know I do prefer solitude,' he says, 'and I want my solitude to be authentic'. (27)

In 1968 the tension began to resolve itself again in a new way. The possibility of travel opened up for Merton with the election of a new Abbot. Ultimately bound for Asia, first he headed for California where he began to find a metaphor of his own

soul in the physical geography of the Coast: 'I miss the Coast! Understatement of the year . . .' he wrote Ferry after he returned (28). He headed west again in the autumn on his way to Asia. He explored the north Californian coast with Ferry looking for a possible site for a hermitage or even for a hermit colony; he visited Ferlinghetti at *City Lights* and met with numerous other personalities including Czeslaw Milosz. He was invited to speak at the Esalen Institute near *Big Sur* but replied that he couldn't do 'anything outside a house of the order'. (29) However he did agree to speak informally at Ferry's *Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions* in Santa Barbara in October.

Those present at this meeting - a number of Episcopalian bishops, academics and politicians - can hardly be regarded as counter-culture figures in the same way as the list of contributors to the *Journal for the Protection of All Beings*. Yet the meeting gave Merton an opportunity not only to talk about his forthcoming trip to Asia and what he hoped to achieve, but also to talk about his vocation as both a monk and a solitary. This led to wider questions concerning the viability of community and the extent to which society is necessarily idolatrous.

Merton traced the origin of the monastic movement back to the Constantinian integration of Christianity into the Roman Empire which triggered the counter-movement away from society into the desert. 'The monastic movement,' Merton said, 'is marginal in its denial of the thesis that

society has the right answers.' (30) In terms of the Church, the monk is outside the structures of hierarchy, nothing to do with the establishment. Yet, as Merton observed and as he experienced, it is not long before a new establishment and hierarchy begins to assert itself; hence the need for a continual renewal and a continual refusal of authority – notwithstanding the vow of obedience, which is both radical (in being counter-cultural) and open to abuse.

The monk is therefore essentially a marginal person, on the margins of society and on the margins of the Church. Merton expressed the reason for becoming a monk as:

> an unconditional breaking through the limitations that are imposed by normal society. You become a completely marginal person in order to break through the inevitable artificiality of social life . . . but, of course, the problem that you get into is that you get into another society that is equally artificial. (31)

Hence the tensions experienced in Merton's own monastic vocation. He tells his audience that what he is doing in this 'breakthrough' to Asia 'might be a sort of protest in reaction to the present situation within Christian monasticism in this country'. (32)

Peter Marin raises a wider question about community, about whether it can be genuinely supportive, as it is intended to be, or whether it is inevitably, by its very nature,

idolatrous, false. Marin says:

> I understand the impulse toward religion, but I have not in practice or in activity really found, within those terms, a building up of the kind of support, or of a degree of sureness in relation to the world, that I'm talking about. (33)

In reply, Merton concurs that he has seen little evidence of it in the Church, though he believes that it is possible mystically (?) and certainly eschatologically. This prompts the Episcopalian Bishops to raise questions about 'the extremely dull facets of established spirituality within the institutional church' and to say that 'the church is a colossal, smacking great bore,' to which Merton agrees. We need to take such comments in context and be wary of placing too much emphasis on them,. After all, Merton was still a member of the Church and presumably didn't find it totally boring. Similarly with the Bishops; though as Frank Kelly points out in the discussion, perhaps they are a little disillusioned by their proximity to the inner workings of the institution. The underlying point remains, about the danger of ideals becoming idols.

This not only applies to the Church but to all communities that are founded on any set of common perspectives or values, including the 'counter-culture' of the 1960s. Another participant in the discussion, William Gorman, expressed concern about young people of high spiritual quality committed to a mystique about revolution that itself

was in danger of becoming an idol. He also raised the logical philosophical point that if everyone were a monk, everyone a marginal person, then nobody would be marginal (34). The idea of the marginal person therefore presupposes the presence of society, of communities, or 'the world'. This points to the fallacy of establishing too sharp a distinction between the monastery and the world, or between the Church and society, or between the hermit and the community. If Merton's 'epiphany' of Fourth and Walnut taught him nothing else, and teaches us nothing else, it is that there is no escape from the world. There is no sense in which we can truly view life from the perspective of a bystander, guilty or otherwise.

Ultimately the monastic challenge to conformity, like the challenge of the 'counter-culture' in whatever form it takes, is a call to *authenticity* - an authenticity that continually refuses to conform to the shapes that society, the world, or other people demand of us. As early as the summer of 1961 when the 'Chant' was being offered to Ferlinghetti, Merton wrote: 'Gradually I will come more and more to transcend the limitations of the world and of the society to which I belong.' (35) The tension is between the words 'transcend' and 'belong'. Within a week he added: 'For my part, my vocation includes fidelity to all that is spiritual, and noble, and fine and deep.' (36) *Fidelity* is quite distinct from *conformity* though at first glance they may appear to coincide. Fidelity is a word associated with belonging and relationship, but it is also a word about the transcendence of the outward forms

and forces brought to bear upon us.

By the end of his life Merton came to understand the 'transcendence' aspect of fidelity in terms of the realization of a *universal consciousness* within the individual, within the solitary. The other side of the tension, the 'belonging' aspect of fidelity, is expressed in the task of the solitary to contribute this universal consciousness back into the community which, he says, 'is necessarily more involved in localized consciousness'. (37) In 1968 he saw this as 'a kind of dialectical development toward a more universal consciousness' - a development which, at the time, he thought not only highly possible but also necessary if we are going to solve the problems that face us as a global community.

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Sources

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Notes

1. CGB pp.156-157
2. Angus F. Stuart, 'Visions of Tom: Jack Kerouac's Monastic Elder Brother,' *The Merton Journal Vol. 8(1)*, 2001 pp.40-46. See also: http://www.thomasmertonsociety.org/kerouac.htm.
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David J. Belcastro, 'Thomas Merton and the Beat Generation: A Subterranean Monastic Community,' in *The World in My Bloodstream. Op. cit.* pp.79-91
3. Letter to Ferlinghetti, August 2, 1961 in CT p.269 [editorial note]

4. Letter to Ferlinghetti, August 2, 1961 in CT p.268

5. Letter to Ferlinghetti, December 12, 1961 in CT p.271

6. Letter to Ernesto Cardenal, September 11, 1961 in CT p.125

7. Letter to Ludovico Silva, January 17, 1966 in CT pp.227-228

8. Letter to Ferlinghetti, Dec. 12, 1961 in CT p.271; Letter to Laughlin, Sept. 19, 1961 in TM-JL p.179

9. Letter from Laughlin to Merton, August 11, 1961 in TM-JL pp.173-174

10. Letter to Ferry, December 21, 1961 in HGL p.203

11. Letters to Ferry dated July 13, 1962; Jan. 12, 1963; Jan. 26, 1966; July 23, 1966; July 20, 1968 in HGL pp.212, 213, 223, 226, 241

12. Letters to Ferry, Sept. 17 and Oct. 4, 1966 in HGL p.229 'Yes, for petesake no tearsheets from *Playboy*.'

13. Letters to Ferry, August 22 and September 24, 1967 in HGL pp.233, 235

14. Two letters to Ferry both dated July 28, 1968 in HGL pp.241-242; also see journal entry dated October 8, 1968 where Merton refers to 'Mae Karam who typed *Lograire* for me' in OSM p.199

15. Letter to Ferry, December 26, 1967 in HGL p.236

16. Letter to Ferry, February 21, 1968 in HGL p.237

17. For example see letters to Ferry dated Jan.26, 1966; March 11, 1966; Aug. 20, 1966; January 19, 1967 in HGL pp.223-225, 227, 230

18. Letter to Ferry, January 19, 1967 in HGL p.230

19. Letter to Ferry, March 14, 1967 in HGL p.231

20. Letter to Ferry, September 14, 1967 in HGL pp.234-235

21. Letter to Ferry, June 28, 1966 in HGL p.226: 'Thank you for your very good visit today – most enjoyable and most helpful . . .'

22. Journal entry July 12, 1966 in LL p.94

23. Journal entry December 10, 1966 in LL p.167: 'Two days ago ... Joan Baez was here – memorable day!'

24. Letter to Ferry, July 20, 1965 in HGL p.22

25. Letter to Ferry, September 20, 1965 in HGL p.222

26. Journal entry May 8, 1967 in LL p.231

27. *Ibid*.

28. Letter to Ferry, June 6, 1968 in HGL p.239

29. Journal entry July 19, 1968 in OSM p.142; see also letter to Ferry, July 28, 1968 in HGL p.241

30. The Center Dialogue in PAJ pp.48-49

31. The Center Dialogue in PAJ p.42

32. *Ibid*. p.49

33. *Ibid*. p.62

34. *Ibid*. pp.65-67

35. Journal entry July 31, 1961 in TTW p.146

36. Journal entry August 6, 1961 in TTW p.148

37. Center Dialogue in PAJ p.69