

The Poetics of History:

Thomas Merton's Use of the Past to Imagine Possible Futures

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Introduction

Thomas Merton, in his Easter 1967 circular letter to friends, gave an account of his eremitic life in the hermitage. He explained in the letter that the 'life of a writing hermit is certainly not one of lying around in the sun or of pious navel gazing'.¹ This time of frenetic writing activity was at odds with Merton's aspiration to cut down on the number of projects, to reduce his correspondence and to limit the number of visitors to the hermitage.² The letter enumerated nine pressing projects, in various states of completion, scattered across Merton's desk 'besides my ordinary work'. It was contemplation that grounded Merton's scholarly life without which, he related to his friends, 'the rest becomes meaningless'.³

This paper proposes to read Merton's late essay 'The Cell' as an encapsulation of his *ascesis* or philosophical life as understood within the tensions of the times in which he lived. He postulates the cell of the solitary as a site of dialectical tension between confinement and liberation where subjectivity, guided by contemplative wisdom, transcends pseudo-freedom.⁴ His countercultural position challenged the techno-positivist rationality that dominated neo-liberal America, using the lessons of history not to recreate the past, but rather to re-imagine wisdom for our times. Indeed, in the last two years of his life, Merton repeatedly reaffirmed the importance of contemplative practice as providing a liberation from this prevailing view.

Merton's *ascesis* - 1967

Written in 1967, 'The Cell' was first published in *Sobornost*, the Journal of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, in London during the summer

of that year. The issue in which the article featured was edited by Anglican theologian Arthur Macdonald (Donald) Allchin, founding member of the Merton Society, who wrote prolifically on Christian spirituality and, in particular, the relationship between Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Christianity.

In May 1967, Thomas Merton was reading Michel Foucault's early work on the history of madness.⁵ In this work on the hermeneutics of the subject Foucault mapped out a genealogy of *ascesis* or the philosophical life within the Western philosophical tradition. His model of history is future-orientated in that it opens up possibilities for new forms of subjectivity enabling new conditions of freedom.⁶ Merton planned to use Foucault's historical approach to offer a critique of the increasingly rigid rules of Trappist-Cistercian monastic governance during the 19th century. Although this project was never written, he had hoped to show how Enlightenment positivism, in the form of structures and regulations in the spiritual life, worked against the contemplative traditions that monks had dedicated themselves to preserving.⁷

For over a decade Merton had regarded the wisdom of the Desert Fathers as offering an alternative future for ecclesiastical systems through a return to the primacy of personhood.⁸ Merton's *ascesis*, or philosophical life, represents a tradition, passed from master to disciple, of the experience of wisdom. His *Sobornost* essay's argument engages with a mystical theology that focuses on what God *is not*, rather than what God *is*, a characteristic of a seam of Christian mystical tradition from Evagrius in the 4th century, through John Cassian in the 6th century, to John of the Cross in the 16th century.⁹ The *Sobornost* essay reflects Merton's awareness of the centrality of personal guidance, the spiritual direction given by one of the Elders or a desert abba. As illustration, the essay is punctuated by aphorisms of the Desert Fathers stressing that the solitary's cell is the ground of his philosophical life. In the essay, 'The Cell', the hermit's cell becomes the space of the solitary's personal encounter with the divine within historical time.

Merton engaged in translating the wisdom of historical contemplatives to late 20th century secular culture in a manner approximating to an experiment in post-modernist theology that proposed new understandings of the divine at the limits of language. In 'The Cell' he invoked Old Testament theophany as a mystical prototype of the solitary's encounter with divinity.¹⁰ He presented a nuanced understanding of mystical theology in his forward to William Johnston's critical 1967 study of *The Cloud of Unknowing* as a counterpoint to the

pseudo-mysticism of the late 1960s exemplified by psychedelic escapism.¹¹ In this forward he associated the anonymous late medieval author of *The Cloud* to the tradition of the Rheinland mystics, Eckhart, Tauler and Suso.¹² This reprised a journal entry on 11 March 1961, when Merton gave an account of himself as rooted in a mystical tradition:

I am still a 14th-century man: the century of Eckhart, Ruysbroeck, Tauler, the English recluses, the author of the *Cloud*, Langland, and Chaucer — more an independent and a hermit than a community man, by no means an ascetic, interested in psychology, a lover of the dark cloud in which God is found by love.¹³

William Johnston, an Irish Jesuit living in Japan, was renowned for his active engagement with Christian/Buddhist dialogue. During the summer of 1965, Johnston visited Merton at Gethsemani where they discussed Christian/Buddhist dialogue, mysticism and Zen. Merton was eager to visit Johnston who was teaching at Sophia University in Tokyo, but this meeting never took place due to Merton's death in Bangkok.¹⁴ Merton, in his forward to Johnston's edition of *The Cloud*, stressed that its wisdom was not about 'narcissistic withdrawal'; rather that the true contemplative spirit was concerned with entering into authentic societal solidarity.¹⁵

America is burning — 1967

Thomas Merton's tranquil eremitical life contrasted sharply with the events of 1967. America was teetering on the brink of a race war and there was increasing civil disobedience manifested through nation-wide protests against the protracted war in Vietnam. Resistance to the selective service system intensified during 1967 when students in increasing numbers burned or returned their draft cards. In September, Noam Chomsky, linguistics professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a stalwart critic of the Vietnam War, wrote to Thomas Merton seeking his support for 'A Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority', one of the most significant indictments of the Vietnam War by the anti-war movement, denouncing American involvement in Vietnam as morally offensive.¹⁶ A section of the final version of the call was published in the *New York Review of Books* and the *Nation* in early autumn. By the year's end, the call had been signed by 20,000 Americans, including Merton.¹⁷ The call received added notoriety when it was placed in evidence at the

arraignment of the 'Boston Five', a group of signatories arrested for conspiring with 281 young men who had collectively turned in or burned their draft cards.¹⁸ This year of resistance culminated in the anti-Vietnam march on the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. on 21 October 1967. This event is the subject of Norman Mailer's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Armies of the Night*.¹⁹ Mailer identified the protestors as drawn largely from an alienated American urban middle class. Within this broad category, Mailer divided the protestors into a contradictory alliance between black militants, old leftists, members of Students for a Democratic Society, pacifists and moderate middle class liberals. This radical citizen army that marched against the Pentagon was 'assembled from all the intersections between history and the comic books, between legend and television, the Biblical archetypes and the movies'.²⁰ In the eyes of the defenders of the Pentagon, the protestors were reduced to an 'pullulating unwashed orgiastic Communist-inspired wave of flesh'.²¹ In *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer constructed a portrait of American society in which tensions and contradictions surfaced. By so doing, he exposed the myth of the American post-war consensus that defined the Cold War.²²

Radford Ruether's challenge to Merton

In March 1967, Rosemary Radford Ruether, theologian and feminist writer, challenged Thomas Merton to justify his solitary stance in the context of his protests against the Vietnam War. Merton rejected Ruether's perception of his retreat: 'As if I were living in a sixth-century virgin forest with wolves.'²³ In his response, he argued that he was not rejecting the responsibility of history by dwelling in the hermitage and abstaining from direct political action. Rather, his letter displays his faith in a future mediated by divine grace. He related that if he were to leave it would be a renouncement of the Kingdom.²⁴ Here, Merton is speaking his truth as grounded by his *ascesis*. In 'The Cell', Merton stresses: 'This implies a kind of mysterious awakening to the fact *that where we actually are is where we belong*, namely in solitude, in the cell.'²⁵ The solitary living in the woods is delivered from 'machine time', with its worldly illusions, and is restored to natural time within ecological balance.²⁶

Thomas Merton, who contributed to reclaiming the eremitic life as part of 20th century monastic life, appreciated that to 'learn from the cell' of the solitary meant 'first of all learning *that one is not a monk*'.²⁷ In this sense, the geographical desert was extraneous to the true personal solitude of the solitary; to consider otherwise was to refuse to see the retreat of the early Christian monks into the desert as a specific

phenomenon of history. In the opening of *Raids on the Unspeakable*, Merton quotes a passage from the 6th century Syrian ascetic, Philoxenos, on the monk following Christ into the desert 'to fight the power of error'. Merton comments: 'And where is the power of error? We find it was after all not in the city, but in *ourselves*.'²⁸ Neither the monastery nor the hermit's cell were bastions from which attacks could be launched on society; rather this battle was within the solitary himself, the same battle that society must wage against its own insecurities.²⁹

Conclusion

Thomas Merton, throughout his writings during 1967, perceived a time of crisis as unfolding a future-orientated *kairos*. Donald Allchin's *Sobornost* editorial stressed the significance of 'The Cell' as emphasising, for all Christians, the need to combat the illusions of the false self. In his editorial on the ethos of personal responsibility, Allchin quoted from Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966) in which he had written about

the heresy of individualism: thinking oneself a completely self-sufficient unit and asserting this imaginary 'unity' against all others. The affirmation of the self as simply 'not the other'. ... The true way is just the opposite: the more I am able to affirm others, to say 'yes' to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am.³⁰

The self-knowledge that the solitary seeks is a similar quality needed by all who would work for the unity of Christians. This aspiration has renewed ecumenical resonance in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). 'The Cell' presents the solitary's *ascesis* as participating in solidarity with society through brotherhood and intercession, and it opens up future possibilities for an interior monasticism open to all laypersons.³¹ The wisdom distilled from Merton's engagement with history shows us the potential that history offers to imagine alternative futures.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *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), p. 100.
2. Lawrence Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), p. 155.

3. Thomas Merton, *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), p. 100; Thomas Merton, *Echoing Silence: Thomas Merton on the Vocation of Writing*, ed. Robert Inchausti (Boston and London: New Seeds, 2007), p. 194.
4. Thomas Merton, 'The Cell' ['Solitude'], *Sobornost*, 5 (5), Summer 1967, pp. 332-38. It is also included in *Spiritual Life* 14 (Fall, 1968), pp. 171-78, and Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 252-59.
5. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (Abingdon, Oxford: Routledge, 2005, originally published, 1961).
6. Edward McGushin, *Foucault's Askēsis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007).
7. Robert Inchausti, *Thinking through Thomas Merton: Contemplation for Contemporary Times* (Albany: State University of New York, 2014), pp. 31-32.
8. Thomas Merton *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 3, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), p. 221.
9. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), p. 234.
10. Thomas Merton, 'The Cell', *Sobornost*, 5 (5), Summer 1967, pp. 335-36.
11. William Johnston, *The Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing*, forward by Thomas Merton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000, originally published 1967).
12. Merton, 'Forward', *The Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing*, p. xiii.
13. Thomas Merton, *Turning towards the world - The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 4, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), p. 99.
14. Johnston, 'Preface to Second Edition', *The Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing*, forward by Thomas Merton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000, originally published, 1967), p. viii. : 'I met the great Trappist at Gethsemani in the summer of 1965, and we talked about East and West, about mysticism and Zen. Already at that time Merton was eager to visit Japan but somewhat frustrated that his plans were not working out.' By July 1968, Merton had tentative plans that, after the Bangkok conference, he would return to America the following January, visiting Hong Kong, Japan and Indonesia en route.
15. Thomas Merton, 'Forward', *The Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. William Johnston (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000, originally published, 1967), p. xvi.
16. Section A – Correspondence, Chomsky, Noam, 1928-: 1967/09/06, Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.
17. Denise Levertov, 'The Intellectuals & the War Machine', *The North American Review*, 253, (1), (January, 1968), p. 13.

18. The 'Boston Five' were William Sloane Coffin, clergyman and peace activist; Benjamin McLane Spock, pediatrician and peace activist; Marcus Raskin, philosopher and political activist; teacher Mitchell Goodman; and seminary student Michael Ferber. Robert Barsky, *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998).
19. Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968).
20. *The Armies of the Night*, pp. 102-3.
21. *The Armies of the Night*, p. 270.
22. Christopher Brookeman, *American Culture and Society Since the 1930s* (London: MacMillan, 1984), pp. 166-67.
23. Thomas Merton, letter to Rosemary Radford Ruether, 19 March 1967 in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 506.
24. Merton, letter to Radford Ruether, 19 March 1967 in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 507.
25. Merton, 'The Cell', *Sobornost*, 5 (5), Summer 1967, p. 334.
26. Merton, 'The Angel and the Machine', *Season*, 5 (1967), pp. 5-11. The essay was reprinted in *The Merton Seasonal*, 22.1 (Spring 1997). In the essay Merton defines 'machine time' as 'the time created for us by the machines that "save time" for us . . . a time of new dimensions, a new spiritual measurement in which, curiously, all is breathless and thought is strangely distracted and confused.'
27. Merton, 'The Cell', p. 333. Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq, *Survival or Prophecy? The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002).
28. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 19.
29. Thomas Merton, 'The Cell', *Sobornost*, 5 (5), Summer 1967, pp. 337-38.
30. 'Editorial Notes', *Sobornost*, 5 (5), Summer 1967, pp. 303-04. The original quote is from Thomas Merton, 'The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air' in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: The Sheldon Press, 1977), pp. 140-41.
31. Rowan Williams, ' "Bread in the Wilderness": The Monastic Ideal in Thomas Merton and Paul Evdokimov' in *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville Ky: Fons Vitae, 2011), pp. 23-39.

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