What the Machine Produces
and What the Machine Destroys:
Thomas Merton on Technology*

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Introduction

> To discover *all* the social implications of the Gospel not by
> studying them but by living them, and to unite myself explic-
> itly with those who foresee and work for a social order—a trans-
> formation of the world—according to these principles: primacy
> of the *person*** — (hence justice, liberty, against slavery, peace,
> control of technology etc.). Primacy of *wisdom and love* (hence
> against materialism, hedonism, pragmatism, etc.).[1]

In the 1960s Thomas Merton expressed concern for many social
issues, including the need for criteria by which to evaluate and
control technology. Merton read books by thoughtful writers anx-
ious about social changes engendered by new technological de-
velopments. Merton's growing unease intensified after 1964 when
he read a pamphlet entitled *The Triple Revolution* in which thirty-
two prominent thinkers drew attention to three revolutions. The
first had to do with cybernetics. The second with new forms of
weaponry that cannot win wars but can obliterate civilization. The
third concerned the universal demand for full human rights.[2]

For Merton, *The Triple Revolution* offered an excellent starting
point from which to diagnose and ameliorate a pattern of illness
in the United States and elsewhere, namely, distortion of our true
humanity. Failure to develop a spirituality by which people might
resist negative consequences of technology has since given rise to
diverse symptoms of human distress. It is therefore worth return-
ing to the 1964 statement.

Merton's reaction to the pamphlet reflects his wider con-
cern with refusing to surrender to the exalted place of technol-
ogy in western society. His response to technology thus emerges

as a useful filter by which to read and understand his thought. Merton's views on technology, delineated especially in his later writings, are the subject of growing scholarly interest.[3] Merton remains a helpful companion as humankind wrestles with the ongoing significance of the triple revolution.

Merton on *The Triple Revolution*

In March 1964 Wilbur H. (Ping) Ferry, Vice President of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, California, sent Merton a copy of *The Triple Revolution* of which Ferry was the principal author. Replying to Ferry on March 23, 1964, Merton wrote that the message of *The Triple Revolution* was "urgent and clear and if it does not get the right reactions (it won't) people ought to have their heads examined (they won't). (Even if they did, it would not change anything.)" He added, "We are in for a rough and dizzy ride, and though we have no good motive for hoping for a special and divine protection, that is about all we can look for." Merton expressed concern that so-called Christians were totally invested in a "spiritually and mentally insolvent society."[4]

At the time, *The Triple Revolution* reflected widespread anxiety about technology, computers, human rights, war and the environment. The pamphlet grew into a textbook that went through more than one edition.[5] Signatories included activists such as Todd Gitlin and Tom Hayden of the Students for a Democratic Society, and Bayard Rustin, organizer of the August 28, 1963 March on Washington; economists such as Michael Harrington, author of *The Other America*, Robert Heilbroner, author of *The Great Ascent*, and Robert Theobald, author of *Free Men and Free Markets*; and 1962 Nobel peace laureate Linus Pauling. The authors regarded the three revolutions to be so disruptive in magnitude that society's response to them was proving totally inadequate. The authors addressed their concerns to President Lyndon B. Johnson. On April 6, 1964, Lee C. White, Assistant Special Counsel to the President replied that the President was taking steps to deal with the areas of poverty, unemployment and technological change.

The phrase "cybernation revolution" expressed the combination of the computer and automated self-regulating machines. The pamphlet concentrated on this first revolutionary phenomenon because authors anticipated possible abuses of computer systems in the other two arenas. The authors stated that a new era of pro-

duction had begun. Its principles of organization were as different from those of the industrial era as those of the industrial era were different from the agricultural. A key challenge was the fact that machines can achieve potentially unlimited production without humans. The signatories anticipated that industry would progressively require less human labor, contribute to the loss of jobs and lead to the reorganization of the economic and social system. The authors also recognized a historic paradox, that a growing proportion of the population subsisted on minimal incomes, often below the poverty line, at a time when sufficient productive capacity was available to supply the needs of everyone.

Conventional economic analysis denied or ignored the existence of this inner contradiction. With others, African Americans had marched in Washington for freedom and jobs, yet many were falling behind. Unemployment was far worse than the figures indicated. The gap between rich and poor was growing. This division of people threatened to create a human slag heap but the authors could not tolerate the development of a separate nation of the poor, unskilled and jobless living within another nation of the well-off, the trained and the employed.

The authors called for a new consensus and for major changes in values and institutions. They also called for policies that anticipated the probable long-term effects of the triple revolution such as the large-scale displacement of workers, inadequate public resources for human services and environmental degradation.

Merton shared the conviction of the authors of *The Triple Revolution* that humanity was at a historic moment. A fundamental reexamination of existing values and radical action was needed. To discuss the spiritual roots of protest in the face of technology, Merton met on retreat with some friends at the cottage that would become Merton's hermitage from November 17-19, 1964. The group included Ferry; a Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder; A. J. Muste, former Executive Director of a pacifist organization, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), and John Oliver Nelson, one-time FOR national chairperson. Catholics included Dan Berrigan, Phil Berrigan, John Peter Grady, Jim Forest and Tom Cornell. Merton wanted Martin Luther King, Jr., to attend. On the eve of leaving for Oslo, Norway where he was to receive the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, King could not participate. However, King was aware of the three revolutions and mentioned them in "Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution."[6]

In his formal comments at the opening of the retreat, Merton began by asking, *Quo Warranto?* By what right do we protest? We protest because we have to: "for within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot." (Jer 20:9). Merton further asked whether technological society by its very nature is oriented to self-destruction or whether it can, on the contrary, be regarded as a source of hope for a new sacral order, a millennial city in which God will be manifested and praised? At the time, Merton did not believe that technology was either morally, or religiously promising. "Does this call for reaction and protest; if so, what kind? What can we really do about it?"[7]

As a partial response to these questions Merton called for *metanoia*. By this Greek word he did not mean conversion, as translators often mistake. Rather, Merton had in mind total personal transformation. Merton believed that a radical turn was needed to the Gospel of peace, sacrifice and suffering in redemptive nonviolent protest. Other participants responded to *The Triple Revolution*. For example, John Howard Yoder commented that Christians must live the Gospel, pure and simple. Yoder proclaimed the Cross, the unique element that Christianity brings to the mystery of the pursuit of peace and justice in a world ruled by perverse power.

The retreat proved to be "near legendary," "a watershed," a "memorable experience" although it did not shape the specific ways Catholic resistance to the culture of technology would subsequently take. Yet, at some point in their lives, most of its participants would serve time in prison for anti-war protests. Merton would be the exception. Indeed, for Merton, the retreat was a last fling. His superiors were not favorable to his continuing to address social issues. In the sense that he did not join movements or take to the streets, Merton was not an activist. This was not simply a matter of obedience. Merton believed in the need, ethically and evangelically, to define his limits. In a letter dated October 10, 1967, he wrote Dan Berrigan,

In my opinion the job of the Christian is to try to give an example of sanity, independence, human integrity, good sense, as well as Christian love and wisdom, against all establishments and all mass movements and all current fashions which are merely mindless and hysterical.... The most popular and exciting thing at the moment is not necessarily the best choice.[8]

Merton responded to *The Triple Revolution* in ways other than direct action. He developed an analysis of the three revolutions as separate but linked. The cybernation revolution invalidated the general mechanisms of the political economy that had evolved through the industrial revolution. As machines took over production, they absorbed an increasing proportion of resources while the people who were displaced become dependent on minimal and unrelated government measures such as social security, welfare payments or unemployment insurance. The resulting misery could give way to political chaos and undermine civil liberties.

Merton wrote against new weapons that cannot win wars but can obliterate civilization. He warned that modern war is planned and fought not only by people, but also by "mechanical computers."[9] He anticipated a trend away from the deployment of armed troops in combat and towards the use of powerful weapons of mass destruction that could terrorize and destroy an enemy.

People were feeling the full impact of the weapons revolution in such areas as diminished funding of public services for schools, parks, roads, homes, decent cities and clean air and water. To develop new weapons, to deploy them around the world, and to use them in regional wars entailed real costs. In the phrasing of the day, you could not pay for guns and for butter.

With deep pessimism, Thomas Merton responded to such threats as thought control, formalized mechanization of the economy, preemptive attacks and "unquestioning belief in machines and processes which characterizes the mass mind."[10] Merton expressed concern about the spiritual disruption that would occur if humans come to base our moral or political decisions on computers. Merton saw a very serious danger in which most of our crucial decisions may turn out to be no decisions at all, but only the end product of conjectures and games fed to us by computers. He decried "a depressingly inane magazine article" on "the mechanical output" of thinking machines: "[J]ust wait until they start philosophizing with computers!"[11]

Merton was prescient about the growing reach of technology. In a circular letter written for Lent 1967, he expressed awareness of the effects of the cybernation revolution. Merton decried the way resources are diverted away from helping the needy. He dismissed President Johnson's "war on poverty" as "a sheer insult to the people living in our Eastern Kentucky Mountains." Merton therefore took aim at the "universal myth that technology infalli-

bly makes everything in every way better for everybody. It does not."[12] But Merton acknowledged that technology can be good and that humanity has an absolute obligation to use means at our disposal to help people otherwise living in utter misery and dying like flies. For example, modern drugs like penicillin and other medical advances save lives. Modern agriculture can enhance our ability to feed starving people. In short, Merton recognized that technology has the capacity to make the world better for millions of persons. Yet Merton saw technology being used instead to enrich big corporations, spray Vietnamese with napalm and threaten people with genocide.

Merton anticipated a movement towards a "more and more collectivist, cybernated mass culture."[13] Merton's nightmarish vision included such areas as the arts and religion. In "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra concerning Giants," Merton addressed the Nicaraguan poet and editor of the newspaper *La Prensa* with his concern about "a Christianity of money, of action, of passive crowds, an electronic Christianity of loudspeakers and parades. Magog [a symbol of the United States] is himself without belief, cynically tolerant of the athletic yet sentimental Christ devised by some of his clients, because this Christ is profitable to Magog."[14]

Twenty years later, the Cistercian M. Basil Pennington mentioned the impact the Lent 1967 letter had on readers. Some felt Merton had been too negative in regard to technology. But Pennington believed that Merton wrote what people needed to hear. Pennington concluded that we still need to hear what Merton wrote at the time.[15] Merton spoke truth to the powers and principalities and envisioned the Spirit of God bringing about a new world in which all might live more humanly.

Defining and Evaluating Technology

In a talk "The Christian in a Technological Age," given to novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Merton joked, "What do I know about technology? I get into the steel building and I'm lost."[16] Merton continued by defining technology as the application of scientific research to the invention of new tools to assist people in practical ways.

Merton disavowed any special competency or originality on the subject. He followed the derivation of the word from the Greek *techne* (an art or craft) and *logia* (the systematic treatment of). From

this definition, people have traditionally regarded technological advances as an appropriate outcome of our using innate, God-given gifts for the common good.

Merton approached technology as inherently neutral. People can use technology for good or evil outcomes. Discernment makes the difference. The malevolent intent and destructive potential of some technologies require self-limitation. Indeed, for Merton some technologies that were developed could have been stopped and should have been refused.

Merton began very early to write about the moral dilemmas and practical consequences of specific developments in the realm of technology. Already in "Tower of Babel," included in *Early Poems: 1940-42* (1971), he had explored the misuse of language to conceal, distort and shape reality and to manipulate people. The poem anticipated a speech by the Professor in part 1, scene 2 of a longer verse drama of the same title published in *The Strange Islands* (1957):

> Now the function of the word is:
> To designate first the machine,
> Then what the machine produces
> Then what the machine destroys.[17]

To evaluate technology, Merton outlined broad-brush guidelines in the passage already quoted at the start of this article. Subsequently, especially in his journals, letters and poetry, Merton articulated several specific ethical criteria: 1) valuing human personality; 2) promoting the common good; 3) protecting the health (including the psychic health) and well-being of citizens; and 4) exercising skepticism towards so-called experts. He was especially worried about the power and wealth concentrated among those who controlled technological innovation.

Merton saw technology as a fact of modern life and a necessity for modern living. But, as a monk, The *Rule* of Saint Benedict had deeply influenced him. Monks were to respect tools and to honor artisans and craftspeople (see chapters 31, 32, and 57): "St. Benedict never said the monk must *never* go out, *never* receive a letter, *never* have a visitor, *never* talk to anyone, *never* hear any news. He meant that the monk should distinguish what is useless or harmful from what is useful and salutary, and *in all things* glorify God." "St. Benedict's principle is that the Rule should be moderate."[18]

Three Baskets of Concern

What specifically bothered Merton about technology? We may gather Merton's concerns in three baskets. First, he believed that human survival was at risk in part because humanity had over-reached itself in such areas as military hardware and environmental pollutants. Second, he cautioned that an uncritical embrace of science and technology distorts our true humanity. He believed that, by regarding scientists and technologists as arbiters of the future, humankind ceases fully to love God, self or neighbor. Finally, Merton thought technology had become for many a *divertissement*, the function of which is to stoke our false self through acquiring money, satisfying our appetite for status or justifying society's, "My country right or wrong" thinking. Merton believed that technology anesthetizes individuals and plunges them in the warm, apathetic stupor of a collectivity. These forces threatened *shalom*, a God-given condition of balance, harmony and integrity.

1. Destructive Developments

Unintended and potentially destructive consequences of modern science and technology constitute the first basket of Merton's concerns regarding technology. Merton understood that he lived in revolutionary times. By the nineteen sixties he recognized a society in profound spiritual crisis manifested throughout the world in desperation, cynicism, violence, conflict, self-contradiction, ambivalence and fear. He decried an obsessive attachment to images, idols, slogans and programs that only dull the general anguish for a moment until it bursts out in more acute and terrifying form.

Merton saw specific manifestations of the times—cybernetics, racism, violation of human rights, war, militarism and the eclipse of nature—as incompatible with the norms of God. He wrote, "Certainly there is great risk for a nation which is still playing cowboys and Indians in its own imagination—but with H-Bombs and Polaris submarines at its disposal!"[19]

Merton believed that the technological revolution had degraded and debauched the human spirit. Humanity has been reduced to the condition of a machine responding automatically to diverse stimuli generated by mass communications and political demagoguery. Peering into the future, he was pessimistic about science and technology uncoupled from faith and the processes of

radical renewal and reorientation such as Vatican II exemplified. Society will not produce divine faith. In part, this was the work of the contemplative monasteries. There was no reason for Merton to be a monk if he was not able at the Abbey of Gethsemani to develop a kind of consciousness different from that experienced outside. For people to recover their capacity to believe and live more humanly, all Christians must seek such radical healing.[20]

Merton also attributed many achievements to science and technology. However, the priorities of the day did not impress him. When, on his forty-sixth birthday, an ape was sent into space, Merton was not deceived. He discerned what was at stake; not human good but the militarization of space.

From Mars or the moon we will perhaps someday blow up the world: . . .
Tra la. Push the buttons, press the levers! As soon as they get a factory on Mars for banana-colored apes there will be no guilt at all.

I am forty-six years old. Let's be quite serious. Civilization has deigned to grace my forty-sixth birthday with this marvelous feat, and I should get ribald about it? Let me learn from this contented ape. He pressed buttons. He pulled levers. They shot him too far. Never mind. They fished him out of the Atlantic and he shook hands with the Navy.[21]

2. Distortion of Our True Humanity

The distinction between the true and false self dominated much of Merton's writings. By false self, Merton described the self that is superficial: alienated, egocentric, exterior, illusory or outward. For Merton, the false self did not exist at any deep level of reality. As for the true self, Merton understood the experience of being united to the image and likeness of God:

St. Bernard of Clairvaux expanded and implemented the thought of St. Benedict when he called the monastery a school of charity. The main object of monastic discipline, according to St. Bernard, was to restore]to humanity, our] nature created in the image and likeness of God, that is to say created for love and for self-surrender.[22]

But technology can easily manipulate the false self. Technology contributes to alienation from our pilgrimage to our truest selfhood. Conjointly, Merton's sense of social location led him to be very critical of the United States during turbulent times, and he struggled personally with transparency and integrity. As early as 1949 he wrote, "For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self."[23]

Merton's antidote to technology emerges. If technology distorts true human freedom, the spiritual path followed by Merton enables him to find God at the center of his truest selfhood. Over and over again, Merton writes that what really matters in life is the pilgrimage to our true humanity: "Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts."[24] Merton defends contemplation as a path to realizing one's true self:

In an age where there is much talk about "being yourself," I reserve to myself the right to forget about being myself, since in any case there is very little chance of my being anybody else. Rather it seems to me that when one is too intent on "being himself" he runs the risk of impersonating a shadow. Yet I cannot pride myself on special freedom, simply because I am living in the woods.... We all live somehow or other, and that's that. It is a compelling necessity for me to be free to embrace the necessity of my own nature.[25]

3. *Divertissements,* Diversions and Distractions

Merton believed that one lives more fully, or more humanly when one discovers oneself to be a child of God and that society and technology seek to distract or divert our attention from the reality that we are God's beloved. This is not to say that Merton refused the technological innovation that enhanced life at Gethsemani. It was in the nature of a monastery to use all gifts wisely. On September 21, 1949 he reported a new machine that aided the monks in their agricultural work: "Things have changed greatly in the six years since I was a novice. But since there is much more work, we can do with a few machines."[26] In a February 16, 1965 journal entry, Merton welcomed new power lines and with them tools that eased the workload of his brothers and allowed him to have elec-

tricity in his hermitage. "I was glad of American technology pitching in to bring me light," but he had no brief for an excess of useless technology.[27]

In a December 12, 1962 letter to Ray Livingston of Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, Merton wrote that he had to some extent abandoned any intransigent position of complete hostility to machines as such.[28] In an April 22, 1967 journal entry Merton noted how helpful it was to use a tape recorder: "It is a very fine machine and I am abashed by it. I take back some of the things I have said about technology."[29]

But Merton feared the impact of technology in the area of human relationships and freedoms. French thinker Jacques Ellul's discussion of mass society especially influenced him. Others have detailed Merton's reflections on Ellul. I want to highlight Merton's concern that having things imparted a false sense of security. Merton criticized frivolous materialism as follows:

> The tragedy of a life centered on "things," on the grasping and manipulation of objects, is that such a life closes the ego upon itself as though it were an end in itself, and throws it into a hopeless struggle with other perverse and hostile selves competing together for the possessions which will give them power and satisfaction. Instead of being "open to the world" such minds are in fact closed to it and their titanic efforts to build the world according to their own desires are doomed in the end by the ambiguity and destructiveness that are in them. They seem to be light, but they battle together in impenetrable moral darkness.[30]

In spite of the Christian elements that survive in the West, Merton believed that he lived in an essentially atheistic society. In a civilization that at best tolerates God and religion, our values – materialism, status, power – distract us from Christian values and prevent us from receiving God's grace. As a cure, Merton taught that only as we come to live in God can we resist the *divertissements* of society at large, even those of the monastery. Technology had the capacity to numb a person to the danger of idolatry. Merton wrote,

> Technology was made for man, not man for technology. In losing touch with being and thus with God, we have fallen into a senseless idolatry of production and consumption for their own sakes. We have renounced the act of being and plunged our-

selves into *process* for its own sake. We no longer know how to live, and because we cannot accept life in its reality life ceases to be a joy and becomes an affliction.[31]

Peering into an abyss, Merton could be quite despairing. He believed that the fixation with technology in the West blinds people to the reality of the spiritual world. Technological civilization such as people now live is without angels or God. Where angels and God used to be, humanity has replaced them with machines. Today, it is hard if not impossible to find God, angels, self or neighbor.

Merton's Prophetic Diagnosis

Welling up with compassion for a world caught up in pursuit of the false self, a world of hallucinogenic drugs, consumerism, propaganda, technology and war, Merton sought to bring people to their senses. To shape an alternative vision, Merton probed the monastic traditions as well as other religions, world-views, communal experiments and twentieth-century literature. Especially significant was his role in introducing myriad readers to the spiritual teachings of South and East Asia, of Islam and of the ancient wisdom of Africa, Australasia and native America. Imaginatively, Merton also mediated his knowledge of traditional knowledge systems and modern technology through art, photography, literary criticism and poetry.

Believing that technology had evolved to such an extent that some form of religious idealism was necessary to sustain humanity, Merton did not look primarily to organized religion for hope. He turned to contemporary artists. In "Day of a Stranger," Merton ironically gives a picture of a "suspension of modern life in contemplation that *gets you somewhere!" TMR* p. 430 (his emphasis).

Merton asked if technology would usher in a new kind of jungle, an electronic labyrinth. Or if it would somehow overcome the myths of science and technology and come to an eschatological culture of peace.[32] Merton anticipated the latter. This culture of peace could be the fruit of the convergence of diverse sources, most notably brought together by Merton in his poetry.

Emblems of a Season of Fury (1963) contains some of Merton's most moving poems including "And the Children of Birmingham," a "freedom song," and "Hagia Sophia," which introduces readers to the feminine Merton. He explores alienation of the individual and the breakdown of communication between the individual and

God, leading ultimately to the breakdown in community and communion. Whatever positive things Merton says elsewhere about technology, Merton is critical here. The lead poem "Why Some Look Up to Planets and Heroes," is eerily topical;

> Brooding and seated at the summit
> Of a well-engineered explosion
> He prepared his thoughts for fireflies and warnings. . .
>
> Until at last the shy American smiles
> Colliding once again with air fire and lenses
> To stand on noisy earth
> And engineer consent
>
> Consent to what? Nobody knows
> What engine next will dig a moon
> What costly uncles stand on Mars
>
> What next device will fill the air with burning dollars
> Or else lay out the low down number of some Day
> What day? May we consent?
> Consent to what? Nobody knows.
> Yet the computers are convinced
> Fed full of numbers by True Believers.[33]

Another poem in the collection, "Chant To Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces," is a commentary on the technological sophistication of the Nazis. "I was born into a Catholic family but as these people were not going to need a priest I did not become a priest I installed a perfectly good machine it gave satisfaction to many." He concludes his meditation with a caveat, "Do not think yourself better because you burn up friends and enemies with long-range missiles without ever seeing what you have done." In this poem, Merton condemns not only the Nazis. As in his early novel published posthumously, Merton indicts the whole of Western civilization.[34]

Emblems of a Season of Fury includes "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants," an essay which uses symbolism to critique the prevailing relationship between the United States and the world and especially Latin America:

... The vertigo of the twentieth century needs no permission of yours or mine to continue.... It has sprung unbidden out of the emptiness of technological [humanity]. It is the genie he has summoned out of the depths of his own confusion, this complacent sorcerer's apprentice who spends billions on weapons of destruction and space rockets when he cannot provide decent meals, shelter and clothing for two thirds of the human race. Is it improper to doubt the intelligence and sincerity of modern [people]? ... The truth is that there is a little of Gog and Magog even in the best of us.[35]

For Merton, Magog and Gog were symbols of the United States and the Soviet Union. Merton pronounced the greatest sin of the "European-Russian-American complex which we call 'the West' as not only [its] greed, cruelty, not only moral dishonesty and infidelity to truth, but above all *its unmitigated arrogance towards the rest of the human race*."[36] With great urgency, Merton was saying, be unlike these giants.

With stunning language and visual imagery *Cables to the Ace* (1968) and *The Geography of Lograire* (1969) celebrated a new myth-dream that represents Merton's understanding of a new world coming into being. In an essay on "Poetry and Contemplation," Merton reflected on his identity as poet, contemplative and co-creator with God:

In an age of science and technology, in which [we] find [ourselves] bewildered and disoriented by the fabulous versatility of the machines [we have] created, we live precipitated outside ourselves at every moment, interiorly empty, spiritually lost. . . . At such a time as this, it seems absurd to talk of contemplation. . . . The contemplative is not just a [person] who sits under a tree with. . . . legs crossed, or one who edifies [herself or] himself with the answer to ultimate and spiritual problems. He [or she] is one who seeks to know the meaning of life not only with [one's] head but with [one's] whole being, by living it in depth and in purity, and thus uniting himself to the very Source of Life.... the whole world and all the incidents of life tend to be sacraments—signs of God, signs of [God's] love working in the world.[37]

Merton appreciated technologies that blessed his life and added joy to the lives of others. He valued appropriate uses of technology, a position he shared with Gandhi. He liked simple technology, which accounts for his fascination with Shaker furnishings. Even as he spent much of the last years of his life in a hermitage, Merton resourcefully used means at his disposal to share widely his vision of a better world.

> The artist and the poet seem to be the ones most aware of the disastrous situation, but they are for that very reason the closest to despair. If man is to recover his sanity and spiritual balance, there must be a renewal of communion between the traditional, contemplative disciplines and those of science, between the poet and the physicist, the priest and the depth-psychologist, the monk and the politician. . . .[i]f the contemplative, the monk, the priest, and the poet merely forsake their vestiges of wisdom and join in the triumphant, empty-headed crowing of advertising men and engineers of opinion, then there is nothing left in store for us but total madness.[38]

Merton was not a pessimist. He probed many sources and concluded that the final outcome of our current fetishisms—pseudo-mysticism, technology, violence—rests neither with the scientist and technician, nor with artist and poet. He proclaimed that our hope rests with God and God's angels:

> Surely, if we are to rebuild the temporal order by the dedication of our own freedom and our science to truth and to love, we need our good angels to help us and to guide us. Who knows? Maybe our technology itself calls for angelic guardians who are ready to come if we let them. We need not fear that they will revive obsessions that died with the Middle Ages. It is not for us to imagine them, to explain them, to write them bodily into the details of our blueprints. It is for us to trust them, knowing that more than ever they are invisible to us, unknown to us, yet very powerful, very propitious and always near.[39]

Merton was prescient. He warned humanity about a disastrous trajectory along which he understood the reigning science-technology paradigm is leading us. He sensed a "responsibility to be

in all reality a peacemaker in the world, an apostle, to bring people to truth, to make my whole life a true and effective witness to God's Truth."[40]

Conclusion and Summary

With reference to Western society, Merton made a physician-like diagnosi: "Our times manifest in us a basic distortion, a deep-rooted moral disharmony against which laws, sermons, philosophies, authority, inspiration, creativity, and apparently even love itself would seem to have no power." Merton identified "the sickness of disordered love, of the self-love that realizes itself simultaneously to be self-hate and instantly becomes a source of universal, indiscriminate destructiveness."[41]

Merton traced the sources of this illness to ideas prevalent in the nineteenth century when people came to believe in indefinite progress, in the supreme goodness of the human person and in the capacity of science and technology to achieve infinite good. He then challenged these principles. As evidence, Merton cited the abject misery of the poor, the persistence of racism and the scourge of war. Merton never ceased to struggle with the allure of technology or to warn others about its effects. Out of solidarity with marginalized peoples, Merton offered a vision of a better world.

Merton still addresses the disquiet of at least four groups of his readers: religious seekers for whom Merton opens a window into Christian contemplative traditions and other spiritual traditions; those for whom materialism and noise have become a *tsunami*; those for whom a society that prepares for war, violates rights, or abuses the environment is worrisome; and those who are part of the current uprising against the globalization of the world's economy and planetization of United States culture. Merton acknowledges that technological change is a reality. As humanity develops newer technologies, Merton invites us to consider carefully the choices before us, to use technology mindfully to meet basic human needs, to refuse to acquiesce to evil, to find community and to honor God.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World* (Journals 4: 1960-63; (ed. Victor A. Kramer, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1966), p. 9, entry for June 6, 1960, Merton's emphasis.

2. "The Triple Revolution," *Liberation* (April 1964), pp. 9-15. The text is available at http://www.pa.msu.edu/people/mulhall/mist/Triple.html.

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9. Thomas Merton, "Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility," *Passion for Peace. The Social Essays* ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995), p. 43.

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13. *CGB*, p. 258.

14. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 382. Hereafter, *CP*.

15. M. Basil Pennington, *Thomas Merton. Brother Monk* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 189-190.

16. June 5, 1966, tape, Thomas Merton Center, Louisville. As sources of his talk, Merton cited the thought of Lewis Mumford and an article by Hyman George Rickover, "A Humanistic Technology," *Nature* 208 (November 20, 1965), reprinted in Noel de Nevers, ed., *Technology and Society* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1972). See also Merton's "Technology," *Collected Essays* 6, pp. 53-59.

17. *CP*, p. 21 and p. 255-56. The title of this article is taken from this poem.

18. *CGB*, p. 6, Merton's emphasis; pp. 82-83.

19. *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 169. Hereafter, *LE*.

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22. Thomas Merton, *Monastic Peace* (Trappist: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1958), p. 19.

23. *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949), p. 26.

24. *RJ*, September 1968 Circular Letter, p. 118.

25. "Day of a Stranger," *A Thomas Merton Reader*, Revised Edition (New York: Image, 1974), pp. 431-432.

26. *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), p. 241.

27. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life. Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* (Journals 5; 1963-65, ed. Robert E. Daggy; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 206.

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30. *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions), p. 82.

31. *CGB*, p. 202, Merton's emphasis.

32. *Ishi Means Man* (Greensboro: Unicorn, 1968), pp. 70-71.

33. *CP*, pp. 305-7.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 346-9. Cf. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969).

35. *Ibid*, pp. 372-3.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 380. Elsewhere Merton commented, "It is taken for granted that the U.S. is universally benevolent, wise, unselfish and magnanimous in her dealings with Latin American countries" and concluded that this was not the case. *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959, pp. 47-48.

37. *LE*, pp. 339-40, 345.

38. "Symbolism, Communication or Communion," *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1968), p. 15.

39. "The Angel and the Machine," *Merton Seasonal* 22., (Spring,1997): 6.

40. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude* (Journals 3: 1952-1960, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) p. 356, entry for December 27, 1957.

41. *CGB*, p. 55.