

Technological Perspectives: Thomas Merton and the One-Eyed Giant

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In our folly we have tried to convince ourselves that our machinery is sufficient for all our needs and that there is nothing that science cannot do.

Thomas Merton, 'The Angel and the Machine'

Why always coast on the surface and never open the interior of Nature, not by science, which is surface still, but by poetry? Is not the Vast an element of the mind? Yet, what teaching, what book of this day appeals to the Vast?

Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Education'

Josef Goebbels in his formulation of the great law of the technical society: 'You are at liberty to seek your salvation as you understand it, provided you do nothing to change the social order'. All technicians without exception are agreed on this dictum. It is understood, of course, that the social order is everywhere essentially identical: the variation from democracy to Communism to Fascism represents a merely superficial phenomenon.

Jacques Ellul, The Technological Society

Introduction

There is much confusion and muddled thought today with regard to science and technology: where does the one begin and the other end? The line between the two has diminished to the degree that few would give their time to entertaining what in former times was an important question. The blurring of this distinction is attributed at least in part to what essentially can be acknowledged as the veritable triumph of *technique* in the twentieth century. What is the nature of this triumph? And what consequences are we left with? In the mid-1950s, Jacques Ellul spoke urgently and prophetically in his groundbreaking, classical analysis of contemporary technological society:

Pure science seems to be yielding its place to an applied science which now and again reaches a brilliant peak from which new technical research becomes possible... The relation between science and technique becomes even less clear when we consider the newer fields, which have no boundaries. Where does biological technique begin and where does it end? In modern psychology and sociology, what can we call technique, since in the application of these sciences everything is technique?... [W]ithout technique science has no way of existing. If we disown technique, we abandon the domain of science and enter into that of hypothesis and theory. In political economy...it is economic technique which forms the very substance of economic thought.¹

What point was the iconoclastic French social philosopher making? Throughout his critique on technology Ellul, in his seminal work, *The Technological Society*, strongly suggests that in having allowed technique, method and applied science to dominate not only science but nearly every field of human endeavor, we inadvertently begin to practice a kind of reductionism that contributes to the shrinking of the way we serve our fellow humans and to the narrowing of the possibilities of life. We have been slow in recognizing that 'scientific activity has been superseded by technical activity to such a degree that we can no longer conceive of science without its technical outcome'.²

The most fundamental questions in the scientific community today seem to be: *Can it be applied?* and *Is it useful?* And, should the answer be affirmative, and if the costs are not prohibitive, we will somehow find its application and market it for general consumption. Like it or not, it is the functional that holds the upper hand, and what is pragmatic and *works* is what we seem to almost universally acknowledge as that which is true, good and beautiful. In blurring the distinction between science and technology/technique, we have gone from former broadly human concerns to the narrowly pragmatic, the useful, the 'can do' and the 'know-how' and to what is profitably marketable.

In a humanist vein, Ellul warns, 'Today it is no longer the frontiers of science which are at issue, but the frontiers of man; and the technical phenomenon is much more significant with regard to the human situation than with regard to the scientific'.³ Historically, this dubious, Pyrrhic victory, in turn, may in a nutshell be attributed to certain philosophical tendencies in the West that have served as significant impetus in pushing the technological agenda to its unprecedented elevated and even sacred status of a religion.

1. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), p. 9.
2. Ellul, *The Technological Society*.
3. Ellul, *The Technological Society*.

I refer of course to such thought systems that gave rise to utilitarianism and positivism, initially espoused in Europe, and the American school of pragmatism, which together have now dominated our lives for more than a century. Before the growth and dominance of these systems, there was the Cartesianism that we associate generally with René Descartes, followed by the philosophies of the European and American Enlightenment.

This unfolding has been a drama of great proportions. One need not speak of the obvious, since our libraries are lined with books explicating this historical and scientific (or, perhaps, to put it more correctly, this pseudo-scientific or 'scientistic') juggernaut. Moreover, there seems hardly any difference today between 'technology' and 'the world'. A cursory check of attitudes engendered by this movement indicates there are as many critiques favorable to and in praise and virtual adoration of technology as there are those that show caution, disdain, and even outright condemnation.

This essay will not concern itself with the very dramatic and complex interplay that has gone into the making of this fateful period. For our purpose, we might begin by doing ourselves the important service of acknowledging that we, particularly those of us raised and nurtured in the scientific West, are the true descendants and repositories of what we may at best regard as an ambiguous and questionable boon.

Note that I did not say 'intellectual recipient' for, indeed, the entire complex of our personality—both our rational and affective qualities—has come under the far-flung and ubiquitous influence, first, of industry, and, now, technology and hi-tech. This point seems crucial for, in speaking of the human person, Thomas Merton was nearly always concerned with the whole person and, according to him, if the self would undergo transformation at all, this *metanoia* must be, if not perfect, then surely total, and from the inside out. And, moreover, that one's personal transformation comes with the understanding of the complete cultural baggage—both its fortuitous fruits and restrictions—that we carry along everywhere we go.

Merton and Ellul

Merton's writings on technology, though he did not in the end condemn it outright as Ellul manifestly did, do suggest nonetheless that a drastic problem would require an equally drastic solution. Yet the 'solution' he proposes is less methodological than the naked witness of a monk whose way of life, affective and mental work and activities

convinced him that the *useless* can be far more useful than the *useful* itself. Here, perhaps, to simplify matters, we may identify the useful as anything that inordinately relies too much on the technological or the methodological or both. Merton avoided the trap that Ellul warned us of, of substituting one method (or technique) for another, Ellul having defined method or technique as anything arbitrarily and artificially invented to push forward a program, or hints of a technique or a method that becomes an end-in-itself, when we become guided by what seems today to be a universal principle, that is, *technique for technique's sake*.

Merton's weightier reflections on technology appear in the following books: *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and *Dancing in the Water of Life* (the fifth volume of the *Journals*) and, by way of contrast, *The Wisdom of the Desert* and *Raids on the Unspeakable*. There is also the short but very important posthumously published poetic essay, 'The Angel and the Machine', in the spring 1997 issue of *The Merton Seasonal*. In researching Merton and technology, I conclude that his writings all appear to reflect, directly or indirectly, an affirmation of life, of nature and the personal that speaks out unequivocally against a technology that is always in danger of swallowing up the *given*, particularly our *interiority*, that is, what is not man-made or humanly conceived. This should not, after all, surprise us, for the American monk was in possession of a clear and vital contemplative vision. Moreover, in such other personal works as *Thoughts in Solitude*, *Day of a Stranger*, *Woods, Shore and Desert*, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* and in his writings on Zen, we may very well also conclude that his mystical and poetic life and vision represents a very solid witness against the entire technological agenda.

Be that as it may, we shall see (it comes as somewhat of a surprise at first—to this reader at least) that Merton did not finally condemn technology outright. Yet, as I later came to see, this refusal to entirely censure technology indicates the equanimity and wisdom of Merton as a thoughtful and concerned intellectual attempting his best to salvage whatever he could from human culture and experience, of his instinctual aversion to regarding anything in narrowly rational *either/or* categories. It also indicates his unfailing willingness and desire to enter into dialogue with the entire human family—whether we belong to the primitive or the technologically sophisticated—and at whatever level he found the dialogue feasible.

Yet such virtues were the result of deep interior changes in Merton, a kind of quiet explosion and gradual transformation that seemed to have gone hand-in-hand with his ever deepening love for the Creator

of the universe, fellow humans and other creatures. In a *Journal* entry for Holy Thursday, 15 April 1965, the monk, caught up emotionally with the basic themes of Passion Week, writes movingly on the importance of carrying out the will of the Father and how this obedience is bound up with the protection and salvaging of all of God's creation:

Obedient unto death... Perhaps the most crucial aspect of Christian obedience to God today concerns the responsibility of the Christian in technological society toward God's creation and God's will for His creation. Obedience to God's will for nature and for man—respect for nature and love for man—in the awareness for our power to frustrate God's designs for nature and for man—to radically corrupt and destroy natural goods by misuse and blind exploitation, especially by criminal waste. The problem of nuclear war is only one facet of an immense, complex and unified problem.⁴

Though Merton is often harsh in his criticism of technology, typically he is careful not to convict it outright. His main concern ultimately is the preservation and recovery of human freedom, which is only possible if the mind and heart are kept open to what the Creator has to say to His creatures. Freedom he found being threatened by what he perceived as a runaway technological world with tentacles that have, as if willfully, inveighed rudely against the mostly unaware sacred precincts of the human person and always threatening to take up positions not rightly its own.

Unlike Ellul, whose basic critique on technology Merton praised and found a deep echo, the monk could not hold for long the kind of uncompromising and unrelenting attitude that the French philosopher entertained with such brilliance and *éclat*. Could we not say that the reason for his reluctance lay in his being too much involved and in love with the *whole* of human culture—including its technological innovations—to dismiss technology unconditionally?

In late October 1964, Merton's friend W. H. 'Ping' Ferry, then vice president and a fellow of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions at Santa Barbara, California, sent a translated copy of Ellul's *The Technological Society* to the monk. His first reaction was very positive:

Great, full of firecrackers. A fine, provocative work and one that really makes sense... I wonder if all the [Vatican Council] Fathers [involved in

4. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; Journals, V, 1963–1966; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 227–28.

the question of 'The Church and the Modern World'] are aware of all the implications of a technological society? Those who can only resist it may be wrong, but those who want to go along with all its intemperances are hardly right... The technological society! I will go out and split some logs and gather a basket of pine cones.⁵

Three days later, in a 2 November journal entry, he continues to gloat over the book, considering it 'prophetic and...very sound diagnosis', adding:

How few people really face the problem! It is the most portentous and apocalyptical thing of all, that we are caught in an automatic self-determining system in which man's choices have largely ceased to count. (The existentialist's freedom in a void seems to imply a despairing recognition of this plight, but it says and does nothing.)⁶

However, four days later on the 6th, he suddenly switches gear. He tones down his enthusiasm for the book, now regarding Ellul as 'too pessimistic. Not unreasonably so—but one must still have hope'. In the following, we can clearly see where Merton takes issue with Ellul:

Perhaps the self-determining course of technology is not as inexorably headed for the end he imagines. And yet [Ellul's thesis] is logical. But more is involved, thank heaven, than logic. All will be brought into line to 'serve the universal effort' (of continual technological development and expansion). There will be no place for the solitary! No man will be able to disengage himself from society! Should I complain of technology with this hissing, bright green light with its comforts and dangers? Or with the powerful flashlight I got at Sears that sends a bright hard pole of light probing deep into the forest?⁷

The following year, on 21 April, a half year down the road, in writing to Père Hervé Chaigne, editor of *Frères du monde*, Merton is again able to see the positive nature of Ellul's pessimism and 'dark views' whose roots he correctly concludes are derived from a Calvinistic view of the modern world:

[Ellul's] book was not liked in America (naturally) but for that very reason I think there is a definite importance in his rather dark views. They are not to be neglected, for he sees an aspect of technology that others cannot or will not recognize: it does, in spite of its good elements, become the focus of grave spiritual sicknesses, and since they are so evident, it is well to pay attention.⁸

5. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 159-60.

6. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 161.

7. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 163.

8. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis* (ed. William H. Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), p. 109.

One such 'grave spiritual sickness' is 'the folly of the United States in Vietnam', which he finds 'criminal for it...

comes from the blind obsession with mechanical efficiency to the exclusion of everything else: the determination to make the war machine work, whether the results are useful or not. The course of the war in Vietnam from the American point of view is entirely dictated by the demands of the machine.⁹

9. Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, p. 109; italics mine. See also John C.H. Wu's essay, 'Technology and Christian Culture: An Oriental View', in *Technology and Christian Culture* (ed. Robert Paul Mohan; Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1960), pp. 109-10 in which the author gives a clear summary of what he considers the basic difference between Western and Eastern (Oriental) modes of thought and the ultimate meaning of one's profession: 'My own observation is that the Western mind possesses a greater capacity for abstraction. It is capable of pursuing knowledge for the sake of knowledge, of isolating the means from the end, and studying intensely its nature and structure as though it were really independent of the end. In this way it comes to know more about the nature and potentialities of the means than it would have been possible to know if the end were always kept in view. In the Oriental mind, the end seems to dominate. To it, knowledge must minister to Wisdom, so that to pursue knowledge for its own sake would seem to be sheer insanity. The Oriental mind is not at home in drastic distinctions or bifurcations. It thinks and feels analogically and organically. It is more attracted to the final causes than to the efficient causes. Before it undertakes any study, it would ask what it would contribute to the ultimate well being of man. It looks at life as a journey toward a goal, whatever it may be. This Oriental tone of mind finds a typical expression in what Gandhi wrote of himself: "My national service is part of my training for freeing my soul from the bondage of flesh; I have no desire for the perishable Kingdom of earth. I am striving for the Kingdom of Heaven, which is Moksha... My patriotism is for me a stage in my journey to the eternal land of freedom and peace. Thus it will be seen that for me there are no politics devoid of religion. Politics bereft of religion are a death trap, because they kill the soul".'

Speaking as a Christian, Wu concludes, 'Our profession cannot be separated from our religious faith. The question for us Christians is how does our profession contribute to our sanctification, or more plainly, how can we make our profession a special mode of expressing our love for God and our neighbor?' (pp. 109-11).

On the question of ends and means, Robert K. Merton, in his Foreword to *The Technological Society*, echoes Wu and adds his own twist: 'Ours is a progressively technical civilization: by this Ellul means that the ever-expanding and irreversible rule of technique is extended to all domains of life. It is a civilization committed to the quest for continually improved means to carelessly examined ends. Indeed, technique transforms ends into means. What was once prized in its own right now becomes worthwhile only if it helps achieve something else. And, conversely, technique turns means into ends. 'Know-how' takes on an ultimate value' (p. vi).

John Wilkinson in his Translator's Introduction finally gives this stark assessment: 'technique has become indifferent to all the traditional human ends and val-

In examining both we find that Merton, though in profound sympathy with Ellul's general views and surely not optimistic about technology, in fact was simply unable to regard it in a dark and non-redemptive manner as the French philosopher had. In Merton, as in so many other matters that concerned him, it was, to my mind, *proportionality* that ultimately guided his deeper instincts. Typically, being neither of the philosophically Enlightenment cast nor having the Calvinist religious bent, Merton, though he might have found it an alluring temptation, did not take the easier bait of opting for a kind of *deus ex machina* that finally characterized the Ellulian solution.

In fact, Merton had come a long way from the time he had entered Gethsemani in December 1941. A journal entry dated 7 April 1965 gives us a strong hint as to the subtlety of change in Merton's consciousness regarding technology. We are told that while reading some lines to a poem ('The Captives') he had written years back, he 'was brought up short' by the line, 'Blessed is the army that will one day crush you, city/Like a golden spider', in which he felt he had addressed the city rather too harshly. The monk reflected by whimsically chastising his former self:

I still have to rethink a lot of things about 'the world'. The poem belongs to a superficial and arrogant period—my early years in the monastery (up to ordination, when deeper suffering began and a different outlook came with it). In the days when I kept all the rules without exception and fasted mightily and was an energy in the choir, I had this simple *contemptus mundi* [contempt for the world] (no doubt traditional!!). The world was bad, the monastery was good: The world was Babylon, the monastery Jerusalem, etc.

This kind of view ends in pharisaism: I am good, they are bad. And of course any such view of the world is intolerable.¹⁰

From there, Merton goes on to present his 'provisional' views of the world. He begins by saying:

'The world', in the sense of collective myths and aspirations of contemporary society, is not to be unconditionally accepted or rejected, because whether we like it or not we are all part of it and there is a sense in which it has to be accepted.

ues by becoming an end-in-itself. Our erstwhile means have all become an end, an end, furthermore, which has nothing human in it and to which we must accommodate ourselves as best we may... [Technological society subverts and suppresses human] values to produce at least a *monolithic world culture in which all non-technological difference and variety is mere appearance'* (p. x); italics mine.

10. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 225.

He ends by saying that the only right way is 'to love and serve the man of the modern world, but not simply to succumb, with him, to all his illusions about the world'.¹¹

Another possible influence on Merton may have come from certain passages in the collection of writings attributed to the great Taoist Chuang Tzu. The writings, despite its heavy anti-technique, anti-manipulative orientation, and its many passages praising the *useless*, nevertheless hint at the importance of maintaining a prudent attitude towards the practical and the useful. They also encourage a spirit of detachment so that we do not become overly enamored by technique or method at the expense of what is essential. And it would simply have been wholly anathema to Chuang Tzu and the rest of the rather hapless, fun-loving Taoists ever to regard any form of technology or method as anything other than a means to an end or, even, plain folly. By the early 1960s when, in his first letters to my father, John C.H. Wu, Merton first expressed the possibilities of embarking upon the project of writing his own poetic versions of the Chuang Tzu stories, the monk had long been quite familiar with the paradoxical and humorous sayings of the great Taoist.

Yet, despite their differences, what binds Merton and Ellul together is their strong refusal to accept the technological world and agenda at face value as *normative*. Rather, both—Ellul certainly to a far greater extreme, Merton to a lesser—saw the technological agenda as a great contributor to human alienation. Moreover, they are both emphatic in their warning that we not allow ourselves to be wholly made over by it.

In short, the monk, despite the strong anti-technological strain in his thinking and the imminent danger he feels technology imposes on the individual person and society, did not raise it to the high status of a metaphysic, certainly not an evil one. On the other hand, it is clear that the Frenchman had given it such status, as if he was convinced technology *per se* were evil or the devil incarnate. Merton was far from convinced that technology could ever evolve to become an extension of humankind's central nervous system despite the manifestly profound depersonalization and loss of being and vision that its unprecedented proliferation has to a large extent helped to engender in contemporary life:

...an immense and confused sound, rhythms
not those of the engineer...

11. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 225-26.

One lesson Merton scholars learn repeatedly is that the monk rarely betrays a simplistic approach to problems. Merton's thinking on technology was no exception. Despite some rather acrimonious criticisms he launched against it, the monk did not finally suggest that we all march off to become solitaries, hermits and noble savages, nor was he so foolhardy as to initiate a movement to return to nature. He was too balanced a thinker and realist to suggest such extremes and found certain technological marvels too fetching to think otherwise.

As a youth, he was obviously head over heels over cathedrals he had seen in Europe and had been an obsessive movie-goer, remembering with great fondness the moving pictures of Buster Keaton and the Marx Brothers as well as gramophones that could play scratchy jazz and folk records. We can be certain too that he would have enjoyed Jacques Tati's films, especially *Mon Oncle*, a classical spoof on the silliness of living one's life under the total control of mechanical contrivances and 'machine time'. Nor should we forget the state-of-the-art camera that his friend the writer John Howard Griffin was so kind to have loaned him, or his joy at first traveling in a jet on his way to his wonderful meeting with Dr Suzuki in New York City in spring 1964.

In the inspired piece, 'The Angel and the Machine', whose theme we could say is the appropriation of the spiritual by the machine and which William Shannon says, 'appears to be whimsical enough, but actually is in deadly earnest', Merton gives us a revealing and rather revolutionary portrait as to where he stood in relation to technology in the mid-1960s:

If the technological world is in fact without angels, it is because of our own choice, not because of the very nature of technology itself. After all, there was primitive machinery used in the building of cathedrals which, by their extraordinary sculpture and architecture presented to us a visible and symbolic cosmology replete with angels! Could the angels not be as much a part of our modern world of machines? Obviously we would have to see the angels differently. We would seek a new understanding of them. We would interpret their action in our lives perhaps along lines suggested by the archetypes of Jungian depth psychology... [The angels] are no less real today and no less personal, no less concerned with us, and we need them no less.¹²

Though undocumented, one could also make the case that his reading of Ellul's broadly pungent and dark view of technology and the technician played a part in moderating and finally crystallizing

12. Thomas Merton, 'The Angel and the Machine', *The Merton Seasonal* 22.1 (Spring 1997), p. 6.

Merton's own position. Unlike Ellul, he did not see technology as non-redemptive but rather, as suggested in the above excerpt, as that which has been part and parcel of human history and development. Such a daunting fact is quite beyond our control, given the human species' extraordinary imagination and penchant for ever-newer innovations. Hence, to condemn technology wholesale, one would think, would have been as absurd to Merton as for those living in the seventeenth century to decide to wreck and sink all the masterly crafted, three-mast ships off the coast of western Africa because a good number of them were readied to be used to ship slaves to the Americas and elsewhere. Obviously, to do so would be to bark up the wrong tree. Merton would have said, 'We made them, not they themselves'.¹³

But let us listen to Merton's own very real concern and tortured sense of helplessness over a harsh manifestation of twentieth-century technology which unfortunately ran simultaneously with President Johnson's efforts to implement the programs of his 'Great Society'. In his response to an article he had just read in *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, though there is no question where the monk's sympathies lie, the reader cannot help sensing even here his ambiguous feelings vis-à-vis technology:

[The] Vietnam war is more fantastically inhuman and absurd than ever. Huge destructive operations—clearing and razing thousands of acres of jungles, villages etc. The total idiocy of technological war... I see a basic irrationality and inhumanity in our system... We must of course hope. But the contradictions are glaring. A few gestures in a futile 'war on poverty' that changes nothing. A few slogans about a 'great society'. And a frenzied absurd all-out effort at mammoth war with machines—a war on women and children and trees and rice fields—this society is cursed with destructiveness and thinks itself—I suppose it *could* be—creative and progressive. And in a way it is—for its technology is fabulous. But for what? Am I crazy to see something demonic in it?¹⁴

Perhaps in seeing the contradictions reflected in his attitude towards technology, we can hear the 'rhythms...of the engineer' marching to the cadence of war drums; yet, at the same time, such harsh, man-made rhythms are contradicted by 'the festival of rain' that 'cannot be stopped, even in the city'.¹⁵ In short, we might say these

13. Merton, 'The Angel and the Machine', p. 4.

14. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; Journals, VI, 1966–1967; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 187–88.

15. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 9–23 (9, 11).

two extreme rhythms are deeply imbedded in the heart of technology as much as they are imbedded in the human heart, and that technology, like it or not, accurately mirrors the human heart in both its grand and illusory promises, that, when seen in its proper perspective, technology can indeed mirror 'the festival of rain' just as well? This Merton does not say, nor should we speculate that he would have condoned such a view.

What the monk does say is that the city, the technical world 'outside and against the world', is an impersonal collectivity that gives the illusion of omnipotence as well as giving to its true believers a false and perverse sense of eternity. Merton, in his lovely poetic critique of Eugene Ionesco's play, *The Rhinoceros*, quotes the playwright who sees the rhinoceros as 'the man in a rush, a man who has no time, who is a prisoner of necessity, who cannot understand that *a thing might perhaps be without usefulness*'.¹⁶ Or, as Merton himself sees it, 'The rhinoceros [the technocrat] is not an amiable beast, and with him around the fun ceases and things begin to get serious. Everything has to *make sense* and be *totally useful* to the totally obsessive operation'.¹⁷

The technocrat is a victim of his own self-imposed totalitarianism, trapped by the world he creates for himself and others. It engenders a vacuous philosophy of the importance of the escalation of excitement, of frenzy, of outdistancing the previous high. Its radical contemporary symbols extend from advertising and fashion to rock concerts and the breaking of athletic records to the decoding of the DNA, the information explosion and the latest most accurate 'smart missiles'. What the rhinoceros promises is the gradual total *quantification of life*, hence increasingly canceling out all possibilities of solitude and mystery, perhaps making their reality an improbability.

How do the rhinoceroses of the world (the collectivity) trap us into this illusion of omnipotence? Very subtly:

[I]n order to increase its power over you, the collectivity increases your needs. It also tightens its demand for conformity... How does this work? The collectivity informs and shapes your will to happiness ('have fun') by presenting you with irresistible images of yourself as you would like to be: *having fun that is so perfectly credible that it allows no interference of conscious doubt*. In theory such a good time can be so convincing that you are no longer aware of even a remote possibility that it might change into something less satisfying... The end of the cycle is despair.¹⁸

16. Merton, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', p. 20.

17. Merton, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', pp. 20-21; italics mine.

18. Merton, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', p. 16.

It is a cycle in which one's needs multiply in proportion to how much one has bought into the collectivity. Fatigue and despair sets in when we are simply overwhelmed by desires whose possibilities for fulfillment decrease the more we allow ourselves such desires to over-run our lives. Genuine desires are not only permanently deferred; they are altogether forgotten. It is not only the fulfilled end that reflects despair but the entire process for shadows and deception linger in *both* ends and means. As Merton puts it, 'We are prisoners of a process, a dialectic of false promises and real deceptions ending in futility'.¹⁹

Characteristically, Merton remains undaunted and hopeful despite his own sense of doom. The contemplative, living the life of deep solitude, ultimately inhabits a world beyond the 'womb of myth and prejudice', of artificial needs:

Now, since all things have their season, there is a time to be unborn. We must begin, indeed, in the social womb. There is a time for warmth in the collective myth. But there is also a time to be born. He who is spiritually 'born' as a mature identity is liberated from the enclosing womb of myth and prejudice. He learns to think for himself, guided no longer by the dictates of need and by the systems and processes designed to create artificial needs and 'satisfy' them.²⁰

As the world continues to evolve—by this, I suppose we cannot speak of this development divorced from evolving in a technological way—the moral and spiritual questions, rather than diminishing and being transcended by progress, challenge us today more than in all previous ages. Then there is the vitally important and very real human concern of whether we are ready for the enormous challenges further down the road. As an example, the 22 March 1999 issue of *Time Magazine* breezily concludes that genetic engineering in all its glorious manifestations and ramifications will be as popular as Big Macs in the next century. How are we to respond to such a very real challenge?

Pernicious and corrosive as technology has been towards old cultures and traditions in the way it literally sweeps long-held practices away as at a stroke, yet it seems no matter how one cuts it, because technology does not have a life of its own, is incapable of doing anything more than serving as instruments in *delivering the goods*, be it slaves, the bomb, cathedrals, the crematoriums or the clones. Technology by itself can neither direct nor moderate itself, and technical

19. Merton, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', p. 17.

20. Merton, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', p. 17.

moderation is as good as humankind's desire to see the *good* in the practice of moderation.

Partially responsible for our present sense of helplessness vis-à-vis technology is the fact that temperance and moderation seemed to have long ago gone out of fashion, being no longer guiding principles. The why and wherefore of this loss is really a subject for another paper. The critical question facing us is how much longer—if indeed ever—it will take us to be surfeited and glutted before we are ready to make that happy and natural return to moderation and the middle way that might help us regain some state of equilibrium, and once more confidently secure future generations for a life on earth.

Some of Merton's loveliest and most poetic writings on nature and, at the same time, severest broadsides against technology and the machine can be found in the essay 'Rain and the Rhinoceros' in *Raids on the Unspeakable*. In speaking of reason and rationality, Merton echoes the British-American philosopher of organism and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead's own attempt to salvage human reason from the narrow claws of the purely practical and technical agendas that the monk felt reason had begun to serve almost exclusively. Merton would most likely have concurred with Whitehead in seeing such a efficient function of reason as a mere human fabrication, not, as Whitehead would have it, as that which guides Final Causation and which naturally develops from nature, or, in Merton's own words and inimitable image, from 'the rain' with its 'immense and confused sound', from its natural rhythms that are not those of the engineer' in which we would 'celebrate[s] its gratuity and meaninglessness',²¹—and we might add, along with it, its *uselessness* as well.

Merton strongly suggests that we modernists suffer from *hubris* in our belief and nearly all pervasive practice that we can more facilely than ever today impose our will on reality, of substituting a positivistic man-made rationality independent of the Natural Law that governs life, of constructing 'a world outside the world, against the world, a world of mechanical fictions which condemn nature and seek only to use it up'.²² The lifeless world of machines and gadgets constitutionally can neither renew itself nor the human spirit. In strikingly sharp images, the monk confesses, 'I am alien to the noises of the city, of people, to the greed of machinery that does not sleep, the hum of power that eats up the night'.²³

21. Merton, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', p. 9.

22. Merton, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', p. 11.

23. Merton, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', p. 10.

In Merton's writings on the city and technology, one senses that besides imposing its laws and rationality on reality technology also shrinks life and its possibilities to suit its own purposes. As a strange bedfellow of human evolution, technology ever more defines and redefines life's scope and boundaries by determining what is *useful* and what is *useless*. It gives lip service to what is useless, even assigning it a place in its scheme of reality by containing it and making certain that what is useless remains confined and quaint but never interferes with nor poses as a threat to that which is useful or its prearranged 'world outside the world'. Once set in motion, it makes certain that all 'reality'—as it has chosen it to be—will, in Merton's words, 'remain somewhere inside those walls, counting itself and selling itself with fantastically complex determination'.²⁴ It confirms what Ellul believed to be the Nazi propaganda chief, Josef Goebbels' law of technical society: 'You are at liberty to seek your salvation as you understand it, provided you do nothing to change the social order'.²⁵

24. Merton, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', p. 12.

25. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, p. 420. This tells us much about the nature of the mind of the technician too. The following words tie in nicely with Merton's conviction there is a kind of fraudulent 'universalism' that transcends even political systems: 'The technicians' myth is simply *Man*—not you or I, but an abstract entity. The technician intones: "We strive for Man's happiness; we seek to create a Man of excellence. We put the forces of nature at his disposal in full confidence that he will overcome the problems of the present" ... [The technician] understands his methods, which he applies with satisfaction because they yield immediate results. The technician anticipates results, but, be it said, they are not genuine ends but merely results. And then he makes the great leap into the unknown and finds the explanation of everything and the answer to all possible objections: the myth of Man. The technician either does not believe in the myth at all or believes in it superficially. It represents for him a ready-made and comfortable conviction, a ready answer to all criticism... Why indeed should the technician justify himself? He feels in no way guilty; his good intentions are as clear as their excellent results are undeniable... And if ever the slightest doubt were to penetrate his consciousness, his answer would be as clear as it would be staggering: The Man for whom I am working is Humanity, the Species, the Proletariat, the Race, Man the creature, Man the eternal, even You. All technical systems, whether they be expressed in Communist or Liberal ideology, come back in the final analysis to this abstraction' (p. 390).

Finally, on p. 375, we have this controversial statement that reflects Merton's writings on Gog and Magog: 'Whether technique acts to the advantage of a dictator or of a democracy, it makes use of the same weapons, acts on the individual and manipulates his subconscious in identical ways, and in the end leads to the formation of exactly the same type of human being'.

Solitude and Technology

For all his criticisms of technology, Merton never allows us to forget it is humankind that ultimately decides—and, for better or for worse, have always decided—what goods and cargo are to be delivered, with or without technology. The monk obviously saw this clearly, even in his monastery. His broadsides, often deliberately scathing, came from deep within a solitude that, as he saw it, did not belong exclusively to himself and other hermits but to the world and to God and was a grace without which a return to authentic selfhood would be difficult if indeed not impossible. In fact, as in all things with Merton, everything must necessarily begin with a consideration of *solitude*. For, in solitude, he saw a 'special work' concerned with 'a deepening of awareness that the world needs' in order to 'struggle against alienation'.²⁶ And, it would seem there to be no greater human invention lending itself to alienation than technology, a phenomenal means that threatens ever more to become an end.

The significance of the nature of solitude—and here I believe Ellul himself would concur—is that it is not a *method* at all and, therefore, not a 'technology' in the Ellulian sense, but life experienced at a level beyond all technic/technique and blueprints. Yet, it would be short-sighted to conclude that solitude would preclude technique, method, and the pragmatic. What solitude is capable of doing (though solitude in fact *does* nothing) is to cut through the superficialities of life so that we can put things in perspective and critically and rationally question all human-made systems and particular rationalities in an effort 'to get to the deeper awareness of reality that is built into life itself',²⁷ but which method and human-made systems tend to cover up or shuffle aside. We can suppose what Merton meant by this is that for method and technology effectively to serve humankind, they ought to be seen for what they truly are, and not what they can never be, for then we would be raising them above their proper status and function. Briefly, human-made systems and rationalities are not to be seen as 'reality...built into life itself', as sometimes their ever-imposing status would want us to believe they are, as if, having taken on a pseudo soul, they live among us as body snatchers.

Merton typically avoids explicating on reality in a dualistic way, of setting solitude and interiority over and against the world. Rather, he

26. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1968), p. 19.

27. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 333.

says, 'What I fear is living in such a way that life becomes opaque and one-sided, centered in the thing only, in the illusion of self', so that '[e]verything has to be defined in relation to this kind of ignorance (*avidya*)'.²⁸ Hence, it is not technology that is 'ignorant', it is our misuse and abuse of it, and our inability to see it for what it really is.

The Thomists, including Josef Pieper, and even E.M. Schumacher (the author of *Small is Beautiful* and whose inspiration was the four cardinal virtues he found while reading Pieper), might very well conclude that such 'ignorance' is nothing more than lack of *prudence*, a virtue some of us would confess sounds rather quaint to ears attuned to our supposedly enlightened contemporary beats and rhythms.²⁹ This misuse lies, in part, in our having allowed technology the high status it now enjoys. And may it not be inferred that its charms are all the more mystifying and attractive because of our having lost our way, our interiority, our basic intensity for life burdened by our ubiquitous concern for the practical and the useful?

Merton, relying more on intellectual intuition and plain good sense than on a careful analysis of history, does not see this question in terms of bipolar, either/or categories but fashions it in the classical Benedictine way of living simultaneously at the center and at the periphery. Or, perhaps better put, he opts for savoring and living life in its wholeness because of the unnaturalness and plain absurdity in

28. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 333.

29. See Josef Pieper's *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975) and E.M. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975). The Epilogue (pp. 293-97) in Schumacher's book places him squarely in the classical tradition and could easily be quoted in full. I merely quote the most essential: 'Out of the whole Christian tradition, there is perhaps no body of teaching which is more relevant and appropriate to the modern predicament than the marvelously subtle and realistic doctrines of the four Cardinal Virtues—*prudentia*, *justitia*, *fortitudo*, and *temperantia*.

The meaning of *prudentia*, significantly called the "mother" of all virtues...is not conveyed by the word "prudence", as currently used. It signifies the opposite of a small, mean, calculating attitude to life, which refuses to see and value anything that fails to promise an immediate utilitarian advantage.

Everywhere people ask, "What can I actually *do*?" The answer is as simple as it is disconcerting: we can, each of us, work to put our own inner house in order. The guidance we need for this work cannot be found in science or technology, the value of which utterly depends on the ends they serve; but it can still be found in the traditional wisdom of mankind.'

Then, in the final footnote to his unpretentious masterpiece, Schumacher reveals the debt he owes Pieper, the German Thomist 'whom it has been rightly said that he knows how to make what he has to say not only intelligible to the general reader but urgently relevant to the reader's problems and needs' (p. 305).

giving up either the practical and the every day, on the one hand, or the religious and the cultural, on the other. As I have suggested above, Merton, despite his proverbial complaints against technology and the machine, nearly always opts for the kind of moderation found in classical thinkers, East and West.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Whitehead, who wrote broadly of scientific matters, observed William James's and other pragmatists' and thinkers' 'vehement and passionate interest in the relation of general principles to irreducible and stubborn facts'. And, when he adds and nearly waxes poetic, 'This balance of mind has now become part of the tradition which infects cultivated thought... [and] is the salt that keeps life sweet', he was (it may be both surprising and instructive to us), primarily thinking of both St Benedict and Gregory the Great and what he felt made the monastic tradition the great institution it was.³⁰

Whitehead may have had James and others in mind, but his words perhaps apply to Merton even more so than to the great American pragmatist and his like. To Whitehead, authentic science is that particular phenomenon in which *a perfect equilibrium is struck between practical and speculative reason*. This is not new and, until the advent of such systems as Cartesianism, the European Enlightenment, utilitarianism, positivism and pragmatism—all the schools of thought to which modern science must now offer obeisance—it served not only as an ideal but a protection and guide against the dangers of reading reality in any disproportionate way. In Whitehead's own famous language, it meant the mistaking of the branch for the tree, the tree for the forest, or the fatal confusion of ends and means as Aldous Huxley so brilliantly explicated and from whose feet Merton learned so well in his younger days.

Twentieth-century history proved that Whitehead was overly optimistic in his estimation of scientific progress (at least the sort of development that he envisioned and thought possible). Science, having lost its natural bearings, has instead been directed by forces far less philosophically fecund and far more practical and political, military and economic than we would like to admit and feel secure over. Here we are in the thick of a very large theme that is obviously far beyond the scope of this paper. Our concern remains the consequences of what ensues when science and technology, traditional healthy bedfellows, either become confused or fatefully go their sepa-

30. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Taiwan: Rainbow Bridge Book Co., 1969), pp. 3, 14-5.

rate ways. One can see that each drifts off precariously into abstractions, with some of its progenies behaving even monstrously, out of control. It seems that whenever Merton becomes critical of technology, he is plainly speaking of what he regards as abstractions, of disconnectedness between general principles and that which Whitehead loved so well, that is, 'irreducible and stubborn facts', and, of course, the resulting alienation of fatefully buying into this technology. It is this 'one-eyed giant' that Merton saw with such fine clarity and fought hard against to overcome in his own life and thinking.³¹

My reading of Merton convinces me that all his ambiguities and contradictions, his efforts to reconcile the enormous conflicting and contrasting bodies of knowledge, reflect the very universal values so endemic to traditional cultures, East and West. In Merton, you feel the Grecian craving after moderation and proportionality as much as the ancient Chinese desire for 'centrality' or 'the middle way'. Rather than understanding moderation or centrality as a watering down phe-

31. See the brilliant and important essay, 'Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant', in *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1965), pp. 1-20, an impetus for this paper. The reader might find it profitable to read Merton's essay alongside his 'Cargo Cults' in *Love and Learning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1979), pp. 80-94. Merton's inspiration is Laurens Van Der Post's book, *The Dark Eye in Africa* (New York: William Morrow, 1961), in which the latter defines the 'one-eyed giant', the Western man (in Merton's words) as 'master of concepts and abstractions...the king of quantity and the driver of those forces over which quantitative knowledge gave him supremacy without understanding'.

Merton goes on to say: 'The one-eyed giant had science without wisdom, and he broke in upon ancient civilizations which (like the medieval West) had wisdom without science; wisdom which transcends and unites, wisdom which dwells in body and soul together and which, more by means of myth, of rite, of contemplation, than by scientific experiment, opens the door to a life in which the individual is not lost in the cosmos and in society but found in them. Wisdom which made all life sacred and meaningful—even that which later ages came to call secular and profane.'

Wisdom without science is unable to penetrate the full sapiential meaning of the created and material cosmos. Science without wisdom leaves man enslaved to a world of unrelated objects in which there is no way of discovering (or creating) order and deep significance in man's pointless existence... We enter the post-modern (perhaps the post-historic!) era in total disunity and confusion' (p. 1).

Finally, see p. 77 n. 1: 'Having "lost his own soul", the materialistic and cunning exploiter of the colonies destroyed the soul of the native. The "one-eyed giant" has "outer vision" only, no "inner vision". Therefore, though he tries to take precautions to avoid spiritual disaster for himself and the races he has subjugated, these precautions are "without perspective" and in "the wrong dimension of reality".'

nomenon, as we almost reflexively and erroneously seem to conceive of it today, ancient philosophies accepted ambiguities as commonplace for they pictured reality not in some exclusive either/or but *both/and* categories. This is certainly true of the great Chinese sages, including Confucius and Mencius of the *Ju* or Confucian school, and the Taoists, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu; it is one significant underlying reason Merton was so much attracted to their thoughts and, particularly, their simple way of life.

Even though it would be utterly ludicrous to consider Merton from the perspective of a scientist, it is nevertheless not difficult to see this classical, even 'scientific', tendency guiding his thinking. Merton's very spontaneous *way* reflects the continuous effort to align itself with the *natural order of things informed by a divine law*. His writings, no matter how obscure or radical, secular or religious were perhaps comparable to those of Confucius, a rather dramatic updating of classical thought. He was there not solely to pick up the fragmented pieces but more significantly to give the pieces—the Whiteheadian 'irreducible and stubborn facts'—a contextual wholeness and, hopefully, some ultimate meaning. Only a solitary with a contemplative vision could steadily see life and reality in such fashion.

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, when Merton writes the following, it is as though he gives warning to himself:

The ignorance (*avidya*) that hardens the shell, that makes the inner core of selfhood determined to resist the call of truth that would dissolve. The ignorance that hardens in desire and willfulness, or in conformity, or in hate, or in various refusals of other people, various determinations to be right at any cost.³²

We hear in this excerpt the true man of culture determined to uncover ignorance in oneself. He utters words that reflect a piety deeply rooted in the thirst for truth, not in any particular kind of truth one seeks in any particular field of study but in a lucidity that refuses 'clinging to one kind of affirmation and excluding everything else—which would mean sinking back into ignorance and superstition'.³³

The Jamesian infatuation with 'irreducible and stubborn facts' came to roost in Merton not only because the center held. He understood that for facts—be it objects, events, people, even memories—to take on significance, to be seen for what they truly are, they are to be perceived in their proper relationship with other 'facts', and finally as informed by a center, a divine source that itself is *undifferentiated* and

32. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 332.

33. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 333.

therefore not a fact among other facts. Merton's distinguishing way was that he troubled himself in extensive and profound dialogue with his fellow humans, nature and the divine. We might add that continuously in his mature life he found himself in a courageous and protracted quarrel with his God, which ironically brought him ever closer to the Cosmic Heart.³⁴

Technology and the Desert

One final approach to Merton's attitude toward technology would be to view it in contradistinction to the way he saw solitude and the desert experience. Indeed, by juxtaposing the desert with the typical technological agenda, we are able to see both in clear relief.

To the monk, the authentic desert experience is so barren and empty, 'a trackless wilderness', that it is without even a 'scaffolding with which...to help [oneself] build the spiritual structure of [one's] own life with God'.³⁵ This way of life, a veritable quest for salvation, is intended as a path 'to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves'³⁶—in short, as a remedy to bridge the alienation within oneself and to open the way for the development of a new man and new society.³⁷ The great paradoxical truth of course is that which has been privy to mystics of all traditions; in entering the desert, in abandoning the self, one finds the true self.

Those who entered the desert did so not so much to rebel against society as to escape the 'herd mentality', for they 'believed there was a way of getting along without slavish dependence on accepted, conventional values'. Yet, in living such a life, one's intention is not to place oneself above society or to consider oneself superior to others.³⁸ What the Desert Fathers sought was 'a God whom they alone could find, not one who was 'given' in a set, stereotyped form'.³⁹ The desert

34. One very unfortunate misconception today is that anyone abiding and living by the Natural Law is regarded either as a mystic or someone bypassed by the times. This surely indicates the true extent of our alienation and the degree to which 'scientism' has triumphed in our age. In such a positivist milieu, it is no wonder that we have placed all our expectations and affirmations in technology at the near tragic exclusion and expense of everything else.

35. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 6.

36. Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 4.

37. Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 4.

38. Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 5.

39. Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 6.

dwellers embarked upon a 'wayless Way', a detachment from oneself 'that was altogether terrible'; yet, in some inexplicable way, this powerful awfulness is balanced off by a compassion and love emanating from a warm, cosmic Heart that is no less incomprehensible.⁴⁰

The proximate end of this striving after the 'true, secret self was purity of heart, 'a clear, unobstructed vision of the true state of affairs, an intuitive grasp of one's inner reality as...lost in God through Christ. The fruit of this was *quies*: rest'⁴¹ about which Merton goes on to say,

The 'rest'...was simply the sanity and poise of a being that no longer has to look at itself because it is carried away by the perfection of freedom that is in it. And carried where? Wherever Love itself, or the Divine Spirit, sees fit to go. Rest, then, was a kind of nowhere-ness and no-mindedness that had lost all preoccupation with a false and limited self.⁴²

Without being fully conscious of it, Merton was pointing to the Taoist notion of *wu-wei*, literally 'non-action' but in fact 'the fullness of action' that comes increasingly into play when we stop meddling with the natural. To Merton, the Desert Fathers could live in freedom for they neither courted the approval of their contemporaries nor sought to provoke their disapproval, because the opinions of others had ceased, for them, to be matters of importance. They had no set doctrine about freedom, but *they had in fact become free by paying the price of freedom.*⁴³

Merton saw the dangers of his present society as well as the necessity in understanding the significance of recovering the essentials of the Desert not obviously in the physical sense but interiorly. This 'primitive and timeless' wisdom of the Desert Fathers, he reminded, 'enables us to reopen the sources that have been polluted or blocked up altogether by the accumulated mental and spiritual refuse of our technological barbarism'. He adds, 'Our time is in desperate need of this kind of simplicity'⁴⁴ and this need necessitates our going forth into battle against those forces that usurp not only the self but Being itself.

What Merton suggests is a radical turnabout away from the usual illusory temptations of progress that mark the advances of technology and its vapid promises of fulfillment and happiness. Unlike solitude,

40. Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 7; italics mine.

41. Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 8.

42. Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 8.

43. Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, pp. 10-11; italics mine.

44. Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 11.

which will 'bear immense fruit in the souls of men',⁴⁵ the Eden promised by technology finds fulfillment in souls that are no longer attuned to the fine, sublime melodies that usher forth from Being in souls no longer driven by a freedom that comes along when one is in communion with the 'Vast' (as Emerson might say) but something artificial and humanly conceived.

The actual desert experience, while it lasted, was many things to many people. Overtly, it appeared to be a rejection of all social conventions; but, above all, it was a return to simplicity, to a life rooted in love and freedom. Its goal was surely not principally targeted against human contrivances and machines and conveniences. Rather, it opposed all modes of life that would detract us from living the authentic life—to wit, to avoid being dazzled and tricked by humanity's own cleverness and pride. It was foremost an attempt to encounter one's inmost heart so that we may once more recover the knowledge that each person, rather than being born to be manipulated and useful, is a sacred vessel awaiting grace and divine nectar.

However, once the *interior gaze* is lost, inner unity is lost as well. Yet our craving for a unified vision is so deep and strong and endemic to our nature that nothing is able to stop us from seeking after what we have lost, even if it means seeking for it outside of ourselves. For the displaced self, even while in a vacuum, seeks fulfillment; and it stands to reason, the more empty one feels, the more one needs to be dazzled. Is this not our present ailment?

Two and half millennia ago, Lao Tzu seemed to have anticipated many symptoms underlying contemporary problems, prophetically foreseeing the multitude of entanglements that plague us. Moreover, one need not be specially gifted to realize the enormous extent technology has played in this ever-encroaching proliferation:

The five colors blind the eye.
The five tones deafen the ear.
The five flavors cloy the palate.
Racing and hunting madden the mind.
Rare goods tempt men to do wrong.
Therefore, the Sage takes care of the belly, not the eye.
He prefers what is within to what is without.⁴⁶

45. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1948), p. 422.

46. Lao Tzu, *Tao Teh Ching* (trans. John C.H. Wu; Boston: Shambhala Press, 1989), Ch. 12.

Is not 'the belly' the inmost heart, the receptacle of eternal *Tao* that we have abandoned? Is it not what we have lost in our eagerness to remain fashionable, to ever more strain madly to be caught up with the times; in the case of entire societies, to become globally relevant, to await always the next cargo as if the fulfillment of that promise would surely carry us over the top and finally make us truly real?

Merton makes it clear that solitude and the desert experience is not for hermits and cenobites alone. They are not selective lifestyles but the natural, universal treasures of humankind that have been mislaid. They are more exactly human qualities without which our full humanity remains forever beyond our grasp, always deferred until later.

Technology presents us with an all-the-greater problem for its forms of alienation are unspeakably more subtle and deceptive for its undeniably tantalizing appeal. Technology dresses up in ways that tell us, 'all is well', when, in fact, in buying into it lock, stock and barrel, what we see can never be anything more than promises whose fulfillment is always indefinitely postponed into some illusory future. It is chronically unable to deliver on its promises. Technology can never be more than a pseudo-science, a scientism masquerading not only as true science but, more threateningly, as truth itself. Typically, like cinema, technology can be no more than celluloid trying to pass off for reality.

The 'irreducible and stubborn fact' of technology is that, no matter how sophisticated it becomes, it cannot be anything more than itself. Technology is a convenience that, in and of itself, does not even possess the status of 'the *tao* that can be talked about', let alone the Unnamed and Unnamable *Tao*⁴⁷ that, tragically, is often the status we unwittingly assign it. And because we have given it such high status, we now think every new manifestation of technology is to be regarded as a long-awaited epiphany. Moreover, the 'techie wizard' is now the latter-day saint exhibiting the newly found virtues of technical inventiveness, unimaginable speed and power, efficiency and material surfeit. In the meantime, traditional virtues hang precariously, in danger ever more of becoming eclipsed.

Technology's endlessly varied and attractive forms and its infinite subtle shades attack all our senses, at every turn duping us into believing the possibility of complete gratification. It sates without satiating. How different this is from the Taoist intimation that 'Great

47. Tzu, *Tao Teh Ching*, Ch. 1.

Sound is silent./Great Form is shapeless'.⁴⁸ Or that in keeping empty, 'you will be filled'.⁴⁹ Or, as Merton rhetorically asked nearly a decade before America's landing on the moon, 'What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves?'⁵⁰

Let me conclude this discussion with these simple, hopeful words of my father that may help to put the entire complex question of science and technology into a perspective it needs to give it a deeper meaning:

The more science grows, the nearer we shall be to a living Faith. Material civilization is a welcome fuel to the fuel of love. If the fire is weak, it may be smothered by the fuel. But if the fire is strong, the more fuel it has to feed on, the brighter will be its flame.⁵¹

48. Tzu, *Tao Teh Ching*, Ch, 41; see also Ch. 14.

49. Tzu, *Tao Teh Ching*, Ch. 22.

50. Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 11.

51. John C.H. Wu, *The Science of Love: A Study in the Teachings of Thérèse of Lisieux* (Taipei, Taiwan: Kwang Chi Publishers, 1999), p. 18.