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In the School of Prophets: The Formation of Thomas Merton’s Prophetic Spirituality

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In the School of Prophets: The Formation of Thomas Merton’s Prophetic Spirituality

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While the spirituality of Thomas Merton has widely been acknowledged as bearing a distinctive prophetic quality, little research has examined the underlying formative influences which shaped the contours of the prophetic element of his spirituality. By identifying the various figures Merton describes as prophetic and analyzing why he does so, the particular values he bestows on the prophetic dimension of Christian life can be discerned. William Blake and Latin American poets like Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Alfonso Cortés, and César Vallejo taught Merton the value of perceiving reality with a certain prophetic vision. From them, Merton learned the merit and power of poetic language and symbol to cut through the muddle of modern consciousness. Novelists such as Boris Pasternak, Albert Camus, and William Faulkner helped Merton recognize the distinctive ability of literature to express the imagination’s prophetic, sapiential insights into the human predicament. Existentialists like Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel helped Merton clarify the prophetic role of fidelity, authenticity, passion, and obedience in Christian life. The Desert Fathers and other monastics, especially Bernard of Clairvaux, offered to Merton a paradigm of monasticism that was simultaneously contemplative and prophetic in nature.
As a whole, these sources helped form a number of identifiable contours to Merton’s prophetic spirituality. First, Merton’s spirituality is characterized by a certain way of viewing reality that can be called *prophetic*. Through the use of the prophetic imagination, expressed especially in poetry and literature, transcendent values are apprehended and proclaimed in a manner that effectively exposes misplaced values and structures of evil. Secondly, Merton’s prophetic spirituality insists upon transcendent values like *simplicity*, *solitude* and *authenticity* to expose a one-dimensional society’s addictive lifestyle and unmask illusions which keep people trapped in them. Thirdly, Merton’s prophetic spirituality is fundamentally *charismatic* in nature. Discerning God’s voice, openness, availability, passion and experience are all necessary elements for protecting the prophetic dimension of the spiritual life from being dissipated by the institutional. Fourthly, humble fidelity to God is foundational and often leads to one becoming a sign of contradiction to the values of the world and the misplaced values of the Church.
This dissertation by Kyle Arcement fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Spirituality approved by Raymond Studzinski, Ph.D., as Director, and by James Wiseman, STD, and Christopher Begg, STD, Ph.D. as Readers.

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For my parents, Warren and Nancy Arcement,

whose limitless patience and support have made this dissertation possible.
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Abbreviations

AJ  The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton (1973)
CFT  The Courage for Truth (1993)
CGB  Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (1966)
CP  The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton (1977)
CWA  Contemplation in a World of Action (1971)
DQ  Disputed Questions (1960)
DWL  Dancing in the Water of Life (1997)
ETS  Entering the Silence (1995)
FV  Faith and Violence (1968)
GNV  Gandhi on Non-Violence (1965)
HGL  The Hidden Ground of Love (1985)
HR  Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work (1991)
LE  The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton (1981)
LTL  Learning to Love (1997)
MZZM  Mystics and Zen Masters (1967)
NVA  The Nonviolent Alternative (1980)
OSM  The Other Side of the Mountain (1998)
RTJ  The Road to Joy (1989)
RTM  Run to the Mountain (1994)
SCH  The School of Charity (1990)
SD  Seeds of Destruction (1964)
SFS  A Search for Solitude (1996)
SJ  The Sign of Jonas (1953)
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<th>SPR</th>
<th><em>The Springs of Contemplation</em> (1992)</th>
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<td>SSM</td>
<td><em>The Seven Storey Mountain</em> (1948)</td>
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<td>TTW</td>
<td><em>Turning Toward the World</em> (1996)</td>
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<td>WTF</td>
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Introduction

A Life in Formation

Perhaps one of the most defining aspects of the personality of Thomas Merton (1915-68), the popular and unconventional Trappist monk of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Kentucky, was his refusal to ever view his life as a finished product. Life, rather, meant growth—and monastic life, in particular, was a call to live life vowed to intense and unending growth. Openness to new ideas, thus, marked his spiritual disposition. Curiosity propelled him toward the discovery of that longed-for insight that would expand his ever widening consciousness. His unrelenting desire for deeper knowledge and understanding would lead him down varied and sometimes “unorthodox” paths (unorthodox, at least, according to the expectations of a Trappist monk of his era). Aware of the hazards that accompany such pursuits, he trod along, nonetheless, toward the goal of an integrated, unified life.¹

Because of his high esteem for new ideas, Merton approached life with childlike eagerness. The humility which is the foundation of the monk’s spiritual quest is evident in the way he allowed himself to be influenced by others, even when aspects of their ideas or lives were disagreeable to him. He had the unique ability to engage, discriminate, sift, discern, and apply other people’s valuable ideas to his life without ever causing these people to feel devalued because of ideas which he ignored or left by the wayside. He was a

¹ Interpreting Merton’s spiritual journey through the lens of “integration” is highlighted by two books edited by M. Basil Pennington: Thomas Merton, My Brother: His Journey to Freedom, Compassion, and Final Integration (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1996) and Toward an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton’s Journey (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988).
consummate ecumenist. Any assessment of Merton’s life or thought must, therefore, consider its dynamic and evolving nature. Fortunately, those interested in evaluating the formation of the various aspects of his life and thought have a life vividly laid bare in his voluminous journal writing and thousands of letters.²

The seven volumes of Merton journals published between 1995 and 1998³ offer a rare glimpse into the motivating influences upon his life and demonstrate the formation of many of his evolving ideas. Nearly thirty years of his life are chronicled almost uninterruptedly—beginning with his first entry on May 2, 1939, and concluding with his final entry two days before his untimely death on December 8, 1968. Much of what he wrote in these journals was edited and published in his lifetime: The Sign of Jonas (1953), The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton (1959), and Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (1966). The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton (1973), Woods, Shore, Desert (1983), A Vow of Conversation (1988), and Thomas Merton in Alaska (1988) were all published posthumously. With the publication of the entire seven volume corpus, the arc of Merton’s life is openly displayed before the reader and his life comes into clearer focus. We also gain access into the many struggles, uncertainties, frustrations, as well as breakthroughs and triumphs of a man in pursuit of God and a meaningful existence. Many commentators consider the journals Merton’s greatest achievement as a writer. Merton’s secretary, Br.

² Although it is uncertain as to the number of letters Merton actually wrote, William Shannon states, “Four thousand would be a conservative figure; probably, the number is much higher” (William H. Shannon, “Letters,” in idem, Christine M. Bochen, and Patrick F. O’Connell, The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002], 255; hereafter TME).
³ It was stipulated by Merton in the Merton Legacy Trust, which was drawn up the year before his death, that the journals as a whole or in part could be published at the discretion of the Merton Legacy Trust but not until after the official biography had been published and not until twenty-five years had elapsed since his death.
Patrick Hart, writes, “There is no denying that Thomas Merton was an inveterate diarist. He clarified his ideas in writing especially by keeping a journal. Perhaps his best writing can be found in the journals, where he was expressing what was deepest in his heart with no thought of censorship.” Lawrence Cunningham suggests that “It was in the published journal, especially, that one finds the most fecund of his spiritual insights. It is those books that will most endure not because they are interesting or timely but because they reflect the experiences of a person who was deeply centered and whose whole life was an exercise in absorbing knowledge in order to become a caring and wise person.”

The other major source which reveals Merton’s progressive maturation is the five volumes of selected letters published between 1985 and 1994: vol. 1, *The Hidden Ground of Love*; vol. 2, *The Road to Joy*; vol. 3, *The School of Charity*; vol. 4, *The Courage for Truth*; vol. 5, *Witness to Freedom*. Published independently from this series is Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: *Selected Letters*, the correspondence between Merton and his longtime publisher and friend. It was Evelyn Waugh, the editor of the British edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* entitled *Elected Silence*, who would advise Merton early in his writing career “to put books aside and write serious letters and to make an art of it.” The latter part of this admonition Merton would take to heart and would subsequently produce a prodigious collection of correspondence ranging from such topics as spirituality and monasticism to poetry and literature to social and religious concerns, as well as a substantial collection

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addressed to his family and friends. William Shannon insightfully comments: “Letters are important sources of knowledge about a person and also about the age in which that person lived…. In reading letters, one meets persons in their full humanness; they reveal secret desires and ambitions. Often they uncover fears, imperfections, faults, and concerns. Merton’s letters (as well as his journals) were the only bit of his writing that did not have to be submitted to the censors; hence, he could be his own uninhibited self.”

It was John Henry Newman who said, “The true life of a person is found in his letters.”

The letters of Thomas Merton are, unfortunately, among the most underappreciated of his writings. It seems that they have been thus far overshadowed by his journals and spiritual books. Yet, the letters reveal a side of Merton that is not found elsewhere. It is here that we come to know and appreciate the man of deep, personal compassion and concern for a staggering variety of individuals. Here he writes with candor and vulnerability, yet with selfless interest and with a genuine desire to connect with others on the most profound level. His letter writing demonstrates a true exercise in creative interchange.

In comparing Merton’s journals and letters, Shannon notes that “there is an important difference between these two similar forms of writing. Merton’s journals tend to be more introspective and self-occupied. In his journals he is necessarily talking to himself.

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9 Creative interchange is a phrase used by the American philosopher of religion Henry Nelson Wieman to describe the process of the integration of diverse perspectives so that people can learn from each other, come to understand each other, be corrected by each other, form a community with each other, and live in peace with each other. See Henry Nelson Wieman, The Source of Human Good (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1946).
(though he certainly saw the real possibility that these journals would be published), whereas in his letters he is talking to, and building a relationship with, another person.”

Merton’s journals and letters can be likened to two eyes through which he viewed the world: the eye which viewed his inner world (journals) and the eye which viewed the world around him (letters). These sources of self-expression would often serve as platforms through which he would make known his own unique vision—for the world, for the Church, for monasticism, for himself. They testify to the ever increasing burden that he would come to bear for making right all that is wrong in each of these spheres of his life. As the popular monk that he was to become, he would be offered a unique opportunity to become an influential voice—a prophetic voice calling for sense and justice in a mostly senseless and unjust century.

**A Prophetic Spirituality**

Attention to understanding the prophetic nature of Merton’s spirituality in Merton studies has tended to focus mainly upon his writings on peace and monastic renewal. These were the most obvious and applicable outlets for the exercise of his prophetic ministry. What has received little consideration is the understanding of the underlying impulses and motivating and formative forces of this prophetic ministry—namely, its *spirituality*.

In a conference given to the novices under his care on the meaning of monastic spirituality given on April 21, 1963, Merton describes his understanding of the term

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Spirituality, for Merton, is a way of life; a way of doing things in regard to the salvation of one’s soul. It involves our way to God with its motives and responses to the Holy Spirit. It also involves one’s ideas—how one thinks about one’s response to God. It is the life of one’s whole being, not just mind or will. Most importantly, spirituality seeks to unify the self. *Monastic spirituality*, in particular, is an intense, focused, and disciplined way of life which is completely devoted to the unification of the self in and with God.

Merton’s use of the terms *prophet, prophecy,* and *prophetic* is much more prevalent and varied. Through a chronological study of Merton’s writings, one notices a marked increase in the use of these terms after his “epiphany” experience on the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville. In reflecting upon this experience, he writes, “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.”

The date was March 18, 1958. Merton was forty-three years old and had ten years left to his life. This decisive moment for Merton is often referred to as his “return to the world” after spending over sixteen years cut off from it within his strict enclosure. His final decade would be subsequently characterized by an intense sense of responsibility and

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12 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1989), 156; hereafter CGB. For a more thorough analysis of the significance of this event, see below.
compassion for the world which, to him, was reeling under the effects of godlessness bent toward self-destruction. In his writings during this period, particularly his journals and letters, we observe Merton assume not the role of savior—one who sees himself as the answer to the world’s problems—but as prophet—one who communicates the truth of what God has revealed, no matter what the cost, in order to help reconcile the world to God.

Yet, it would be a mistake to burden the “Fourth and Walnut” experience with too much weight of significance in regard to Merton’s prophetic interests. A study of Merton’s early writings, particularly before he entered Gethsemani, reveal a young man very interested in the idea of the prophetic. It is at the age of twenty-three that Merton first makes reference to prophecy. The reference is to William Blake. In a letter written to his good friend from Columbia University, Robert Lax, dated August 11, 1938, he writes, “…I have studied William Blake, I have measured him with a ruler, I have sneaked at him with pencils and T squares, I have spied on him from a distance with a small spyglass, I have held him up to mirrors, and will shortly endeavor to prove the prophetic books were all written with lemon juice and must be held in front of a slow fire to be read.”14 What Merton alludes to in this passage is the preparation of his master’s thesis, “Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation,” which he would complete the following year. Merton’s interest in Blake as prophet, as well as the prophetic nature of his poetry, it will be seen, resurfaces in his final decade.15

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15 For an extended treatment of Blake’s influence of Merton’s prophetic spirituality, see Chapter 1.
Merton’s social concerns appear very early, especially in his journals. The first issue that seems to have attracted his attention is that of race. In his journal entry on Good Friday, 1940, after quoting a verse from the Anointing at Bethany from the Gospel of Matthew, he writes, “The apostles and, specifically in one Gospel, Judas, complained that this ointment was wasted in being poured upon Christ instead of being sold and the money given to the poor. Let the people, the so-called Catholics who argue against the ‘imprudence’ of certain actions – like, for example, admitting a Negro child to parochial school for fear all the white parents take away their children – remember the ‘prudence’ of Judas and freeze with horror!”

Concern for the racial situation in America had such an effect on Merton in his early twenties that he nearly moved to Harlem to work with Catherine de Hueck Doherty’s Friendship House instead of entering Gethsemani.

Criticism of the war and America’s role in it would soon follow: “And if we go into the war, it will be first of all to defend our investments, our business, our money. In certain terms it may be useful to defend all these things, an expedient to protect our business so that everybody may have jobs, but if anybody holds up American business as a shining example of justice, or American politics as a shining example of honesty and purity, that is really quite a joke!”

After Merton’s entry into Gethsemani at the end of 1941, we see that the most substantive source for his early prophetic formation as a monk is, by far, the biblical prophets. Three, in particular, frequently appear in his journals of this period, as well as in

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16 RTM, 155.
17 Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), 357-60; hereafter SSM.
18 RTM, 221.
many of his early poems: Jonah, Elijah, and John the Baptist. Jonah first appears in a journal entry dated February 26, 1952. Reflecting upon the meaning of Ash Wednesday, he writes, “Receive, O monk, the holy truth concerning this thing called death. Know that there is in each man a deep will, potentially committed to freedom or captivity, ready to consent to life, born consenting to death, turned inside out, swallowed by its own self, prisoner of itself like Jonas in the whale.”¹⁹ The story of Jonah and the whale bears, for Merton, multiple layers of meaning. Fundamentally, it is the paradoxical, transformative experience everyone must undergo or perish. The whale is death which brings forth life. Jonah is the sign of that life coming out of death—the sign of resurrection. Merton explains its significance in the prologue to his first collection of published journals, significantly titled, *The Sign of Jonas*:

The sign Jesus promised to the generation that did not understand Him was the “sign of Jonas the prophet”—that is, the sign of His own resurrection. The life of every monk, of every priest, of every Christian is signed with the sign of Jonas, because we all live by the power of Christ’s resurrection. But I feel that my own life is especially sealed with this great sign, which baptism and monastic profession and priestly ordination have burned into the roots of my being, because like Jonas himself I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox.²⁰

It is in the prologue to *The Sign of Jonas* that we hear Merton, for the first time, liken the monk to a prophet: “A monk can always legitimately and significantly compare himself to a prophet, because the monks are the heirs of the prophets. The prophet is a man whose whole life is a living witness of the providential action of God in the world. Every prophet

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is a sign and a witness of Christ. Every monk, in whom Christ lives, and in whom all the prophecies are therefore fulfilled, is a witness and a sign of the Kingdom of God.”

The prophet Elijah is an important figure in the early development of Merton’s understanding of the relationship between contemplation and action. His lengthy poem, “Elias—Variations on a Theme” from his 1957 collection The Strange Islands, envisions the prophet as “one who has discovered his oneness with all reality, who resonates with the needs and hopes of others because he has found these very needs and hopes in his own depths, who has been made aware that because the center of the self is not the self but God, to experience one’s true center is to pass beyond the self without leaving the self.”

From the number of his references to John the Baptist, Merton signals his favorite prophet. This is true for both his early monastic years as well as for his final decade. The earliest tribute to the Baptist is the poem from his 1946 collection A Man in the Divided Sea, entitled “St. John Baptist.” He reappears in his 1947 collection Figures for an Apocalypse in both “St. John’s Night” and “Winter Afternoon,” as well as in his 1949 collection The Tears for the Blind Lions in “The Quickening of St. John the Baptist.” These early references to the Baptist envision him as fulfilling a similar role to that of Elijah, namely as the symbolic figure who unites the contemplative and the prophetic within a single vocation.

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21 Ibid.
22 See Patrick O’Connell, “The Strange Islands,” in TME, 455.
24 Ibid., 171-72.
25 Ibid., 185-86.
26 Ibid., 199-202.
From a reading of these early references to the biblical prophets, we come to understand that, for Merton, when a person makes the decision to enter a monastery, that person, in effect, makes the decision to assume a prophetic mantle. The vocation to be a monk, for him, is the vocation to live a prophetic life. This is the case even before the monk speaks or writes. The early Merton understood that the silent communication of a life wholly devoted to God in humility and obedience speaks with a power and authority that leads others to a confrontation with the divine. Yet, Merton was also a writer—a writer who understood that his vocation to write was a vocation to make known the hidden truths of God. Thus, in Merton, this dual vocation of monk and writer would become a uniquely influential source for the exercise of his own prophetic spirituality and contribute significantly to his own personal integration.27

Nearly all of these early prophetic intimations will reappear with renewed interest and force after his “epiphany” in 1958. As is abundantly evident from the above citations, the Louisville experience did not mark the beginning of Merton’s interest in the prophetic. What significance, then, did it play in the formation of Merton’s prophetic spirituality?

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27 A problem arises in defining the vocation of Thomas Merton. Should he be considered primarily a monk who was also a writer or primarily a writer who was also a monk? Or should the vocations be understood more intertwined—-as a monk-writer or a writer-monk? It is important to note that Merton wrestled greatly over the reconciliation of these two vocations throughout his lifetime, especially during the first few years after entering Gethsemani. In his preface to A Thomas Merton Reader, he writes, “If the monastic life is a life of hardship and sacrifice, I would say that for me most of the hardship has come in connection with writing. It is possible to doubt whether I have become a monk (a doubt I have to live with), but it is not possible to doubt that I am a writer, that I was born one and will most probably die as one. Disconcerting, disedifying as it is, this seems to be my lot and my vocation” (Thomas P. McDonnell, ed., Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1974), 17. In spite of this self-deprecating assertion of his own monastic vocation, it is the opinion of the present writer that Merton’s vocation should be understood as a monk-writer, namely as fundamentally a monk and contemplative whose primary mode of expression and creativity was found through writing. In short, it wasn’t simply his ability as a writer that made Merton so influential—it was his ability to communicate the hidden things of God that made him so influential. Justification for this position will hopefully become evident in the course of this dissertation.
An Insight of Reconciliation

On a cold St. John’s Day in the final days of 1957, Merton finds himself feeling overwhelmed by the stack of Christmas cards before him waiting to be opened. This moment spurs his first overt reflection about a new way of conceiving a monk’s relationship to the world, after spending sixteen years in the enclosure of his monastery. He writes, “But a monk should have something to do with the world he lives in and should love the people in that world. How much they give us and how little we give them. My 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.”

He expounds upon this new stance toward the world just two days later: “Until my ‘contemplation’ is liberated from the sterilizing artificial limitations under which it has so far existed (and nearly been stifled out of existence) I cannot be a ‘man of God’ because I cannot live in the Truth, which is the first essential for being a man of God. It is absolutely true that here in this monastery we are enabled to systematically evade our real and ultimate social responsibilities. In any time, social responsibility is the keystone of the Christian life.”

These passages highlight the mood of Merton’s mind leading up to the Louisville experience and are necessary components for a correct interpretation of the event. The unrest within his soul about the way monasticism, in his mind, was evading its social responsibility for a so called “higher” vocation is already percolating when he visits Louisville two-and-a-half months later.

29 Ibid., 151.
There are two versions of Merton’s Louisville “epiphany.” The first was written the
day after the event occurred. The second was written for publication in Conjectures of a
Guilty Bystander eight years after the event occurred. The first version of the experience
begins with the insight to his radical unity with all humankind—of his waking from “the
dream of separateness”—of waking to the illusion of a “‘special’ vocation to be different.”
He is overwhelmed with joy at his fundamental sameness with the rest of the world: “Thank
God! Thank God! I am only another member of the human race, like all the rest of them. I
have the immense joy of being a man!” In reflecting on the women walking on the streets,
he goes on to describe how his vow of chastity has allowed him to recognize that the beauty
of the “woman-ness that is in each of them is at once original and inexhaustibly fruitful
bringing the image of God into the world. In this each one is Wisdom and Sophia and Our
Lady….” This leads him to recount a dream he had had in late February in which he
encountered “Proverb,” a young Jewish girl who personifies the revelation of “virginal
solitude.” It is on the streets of Louisville that he recognizes her once again: “Dear
Proverb, I have kept one promise and I have refrained from speaking of you until seeing you
again. I know that when I saw you again it would be very different, in a different place, in a
different form, in the most unexpected circumstances. I shall never forget our meeting
yesterday. The touch of your hand makes me a different person. To be with you is rest and
truth. Only with you are these things found, dear child sent to me by God!” It is, thus, in

30 Ibid., 182.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 176.
34 Ibid., 182.
“Proverb,” the beauty of the hidden Wisdom of God revealed to him in the women walking along the streets of Louisville, that Merton has a mystical intuition of the radical humanness of his monastic vocation. From hence, he conceives of monasticism as being grounded in the world and whose authentic existence depends upon this groundedness.

The second account appearing in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, interestingly, leaves out any reference to “Proverb.” Instead, the “virginal solitude” of “Proverb” becomes the “secret beauty” of all hearts.\(^{35}\) This extended reworking also includes Merton’s most significant reference to Louis Massignon’s\(^ {36}\) notion of the expression *le point vierge*. Merton explains the phrase: “At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us.”\(^ {37}\) Merton goes on to explain that this *le point vierge* “is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.”\(^ {38}\)

In these two reflections of his “epiphany” in Louisville, Merton articulates an experiential insight of reconciliation; it is a certain validation of the movement of his spirit toward the world which had begun in the previous months. The experience gave him a

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\(^{35}\) CGB, 158.

\(^{36}\) Louis Massignon (1883-1962) was a French scholar of Islam, a priest of the Melkite rite, and correspondent of Merton.

\(^{37}\) CGB, 158.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.
mystical knowledge of the depth of a reality of which, beforehand, he had only seen glimpses. Everything now was one: the monk and the rest of humanity; contemplation and action; God and humankind. From hence, Merton would see differently—he became a different kind of contemplative. His contemplative awareness expanded from a myopic vision of God (as limitedly interpreted within the confines of Catholic Tradition) to a universal vision of God where “the gate of heaven is everywhere.” He also became a different kind of monk—a monk liberated from isolationism and for dialogue and engagement. The experience did not signal the gradual distancing of himself from monasticism or the Church, although he admittedly becomes disillusioned by many of the institutional aspects of each. Merton’s engagement with the world was consistently grounded in his vocation to contemplation and solitude. Therein, he insisted, was found the monk’s unique gift and prophetic word to the world.

**Themes of Merton’s Prophetic Spirituality**

The “epiphany” of March 18, 1958 was also Merton’s experience of reconciliation with his past. We read in subsequent journal entries as well as in subsequent letters (the amount of which exponentially increases after this date) of how many of the interests and passions which occupied his pre-monastic mind were suddenly re-grafted onto the vine of his new identity. He begins revisiting writers who had interested him in his young adulthood; rereading them, reinterpreting them, allowing them to inform his new consciousness as a monk for the world. This is particularly the case with William Blake.

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39 Ibid.
His interest in poetry finds a resurgence. He discovers a new voice in *Original Child Bomb* (1962), *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963), and, especially, in *Cables to the Ace* (1968) and *The Geography of Lograire* (1968). A vast amount of energy in the years following the Louisville experience would be given to analyzing and commenting upon social issues, especially race and war—the two issues with which he was wrestling in his student days at Columbia. Merton was now becoming a whole man, integrating what was good in his past into his present life-situation as a redefined monk.

Merton’s prophetic interests are, perhaps, the most notable and significant aspect of this reintegration. It is as if before the redefining event in Louisville, Merton had only flirted with the prophetic, whereas, now, he accepts it as a divine mandate. Louisville gave Merton the green light to live prophetically without restraint. It will be seen to have provided him with the *content* of his prophetic activity as well; namely, *the reconciliation of all things in Christ through the dismantling of the illusion of separateness*.

Because of his newfound openness to the world outside the strict walls of monasticism, this central theme of Merton’s prophetic spirituality would find further development and shape through his interaction with a number of thinkers with whom he was coming into contact for the first time. His extensive and substantive correspondence and journal entries during his final decade testify to this developmental trend. Writers like Boris Pasternak, Albert Camus, and William Faulkner, philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel, Latin American poets like César Vallejo and Pablo Antonio Cuadra, social activists like Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., social theorists like Herbert Marcuse and Jacques Ellul, and religious thinkers like Abraham Heschel and Louis
Massignon, each in their own way, would help shape Merton’s mature prophetic consciousness.

Arising from Merton’s *creative interchange* with each of these thinkers is a number of themes which form the basis of Merton’s prophetic spirituality, many of which have received little attention in Merton studies. The first theme, developed through his study of Pasternak, Camus, Faulkner, Blake, and the Latin American poets is the special value and power of poetic imagery and literature to convey prophetic insights. According to Merton, these unconventional “Christians” had assumed the prophetic mantle that many of the theologians of his day chose to ignore. Secondly, Ellul and Marcuse help Merton see the problem of prophetic communication to modern, technologized humanity. Thirdly, the existentialists Kierkegaard and Marcel showed Merton that prophecy is grounded in a radical commitment to authenticity of life (i.e. true self) and compels one to point out illusory social and personal structures of consciousness. Fourthly, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. taught Merton that the proper Christian endeavor for the transformation of such illusory *social* structures is through the prophetic stance of active nonviolence, while his reading of his own spiritual tradition taught him that illusory *personal* structures are to be transformed in the life of contemplation. Thus, the relationship between contemplative and prophetic spirituality becomes a major theme of Merton’s final years.

The purpose of this dissertation will be to examine how various influences shaped Merton’s thought about Christian prophecy in his final decade. By focusing upon his letters and journals written between 1958 and 1968, it will direct its analysis upon three of the above themes which form the heart of Merton’s prophetic spirituality: the power of poetic
imagery and literature to convey prophetic insights; authentic living as a vehicle for dismantling illusory personal and social structures of consciousness; and the integral, symbiotic relationship between contemplative and prophetic spirituality.

In the first section, the unique potential of poetic imagery and literature to convey prophetic insights will be explored. William Blake’s influence upon Merton in this regard will be examined, along with Merton’s relationship to a number of Latin American poets. Merton’s “Message to Poets” of 1964 will receive special attention. The influence of novelists Boris Pasternak, Albert Camus, and William Faulkner, will also be analyzed in this section.

In the second section, Merton’s assimilation of existentialists Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel, which demonstrates his understanding of a commitment to authenticity of life as the ground for prophetic living, will be explored. The role Merton assigns to authenticity in the self’s transformation from illusion and despair to truth and freedom will be evaluated, along with its place in his plan for monastic renewal and in the recovery of monasticism’s prophetic dimension.

In the third section, Merton’s ideas about the integral, symbiotic relationship between contemplative prayer and prophetic action will be analyzed. The prophetic dimension of the contemplative life was a major theme of Merton’s two retreats given at Gethsemani to contemplative nuns in the final year of his life. These retreat conferences (published posthumously as The Springs of Contemplation) demonstrate Merton’s most mature and original ideas about prophetic spirituality. A summary of our findings will be offered in a conclusion.
PART ONE

The Writer as Prophet
Chapter 1

Learning How to See: Thomas Merton and the Prophetic Vision of William Blake

Simply put: Thomas Merton is the William Blake of our time.¹

-Michael Higgins

Background

Merton grew up with William Blake. From his earliest childhood days, Merton’s father, Owen, read to his first-born the obscure, yet fascinating and highly imaginative poetry of eighteenth century England’s misunderstood visionary. The earliest interest that Merton’s writings express toward Blake, as mentioned in the “Introduction,” goes back to Merton’s early letter to his friend Robert Lax from his student days at Columbia University. Making reference to his meticulous study of the prophetic books of Blake, Merton informs Lax about his intention to make Blake the subject of his master’s thesis. Merton’s thesis, “Nature and Art in William Blake: As Essay in Interpretation,” was submitted in February, 1939. A concise synopsis of the thesis is offered by Patrick O’Connell:

Merton’s master’s thesis consists of a short preface and two chapters. The first chapter, ‘Background and Development,’ surveys Blake’s intellectual and artistic background and influences, both as writer and painter/engraver, with emphasis on his hostility toward rationalism and empiricism and defense of imagination and inspiration. The second chapter, ‘Blake’s Ideas on the Place of Nature in Art,’ contrasts nature as seen by the senses with nature transfigured by the

imagination, and looks to insights from Thomist and Indian theories of art, as represented by Maritain and Coomaraswamy, not as influences on Blake but as a framework for understanding the nature of authentic artistic creativity.\(^2\)

The topic of *prophecy* or any description of Blake as a prophet is not found in Merton’s thesis. His focus, rather, is wholly upon nature and art. The poetry analyzed, however, is Blake’s prophetic books, a series of obscure and mythic works which seek to express Blake’s ideas about the soul’s effort to liberate itself from rationalism and organized religion. These prophetic ideas can certainly be found throughout the course of Merton’s own spiritual journey, particularly in his penchant for apophatic spirituality and his critique of institutional monasticism.

Besides his master’s thesis, the other major early references to Blake are found in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Reflecting back on his early years as a child, Merton, as a young monk, reminisces about his unique attraction to one of the most seminal sources for his own spiritual formation:

> Meanwhile there was one discovery of mine, one poet who was a poet indeed, and a Romantic poet, but vastly different from those contemporaries, with whom he had so little to do. I think my love for William Blake had something in it of God’s grace. It is a love that has never died, and which has entered very deeply into the development of my life.

> Father had always liked Blake, and had tried to explain to me what was good about him when I was a child of ten. The funny thing about Blake is that although the *Songs of Innocence* look like children’s poems, and almost seem to have been written for children, they are, to most children, incomprehensible. Or at least, they were so to me. Perhaps if I had read them when I was four or five, it would have been different. But when I was ten, I knew too much. I knew that tigers

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did not burn in the forests of the night. That was very silly, I thought. Children are very literal-minded.  

In considering Blake’s paradoxical nature, Merton continues:

How incapable I was of understanding anything like the ideals of a William Blake! How could I possibly realize that his rebellion, for all its strange heterodoxies, was fundamentally the rebellion of the saints. It was the rebellion of the lover of the living God, the rebellion of the one whose desire of God was so intense and irresistible that it condemned, with all its might, all the hypocrisy and petty sensuality and skepticism and materialism which could in trivial minds set up as unpassable barriers between God and the souls of men.  

Directly concerning Blake’s influence upon him, Merton states:

The Providence of God was eventually to use Blake to awaken something of faith and love in my own soul—in spite of all the misleading notions, and all the almost infinite possibilities of error that underlie his weird and violent figures. I do not, therefore, want to seem to canonize him. But I have to acknowledge my own debt to him, and the truth which may appear curious to some, although it is really not so: that through Blake I would one day come, in a round-about way, to the only true Church, and to the One Living God, through His Son, Jesus Christ.  

Further along in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, when Merton is recounting his days at Columbia University preparing to write his master’s thesis, discussion on Blake reappears: “But oh, what a thing it was to live in contact with the genius and the holiness of William Blake that year, that summer, writing the thesis!” Comparing Blake to the other eighteenth century Romantics, he writes, “Even Coleridge, in the rare moments when his imagination struck the pitch of true creativeness, was still only an artist, an imaginer, not a seer; a maker,
but not a prophet.”7 Merton, here, offers an early assessment of his understanding of Blake as a prophet. Although Blake is noted for his emphasis upon imagination in the creative process, this is not what, according to Merton, makes him a prophet. There is a creative gift that exceeds the imagination—that goes beyond the mind’s natural capacities. Blake is a prophet because he is a seer: “He wrote better poetry when he was twelve than Shelley wrote in his whole life. And it was because at twelve he had already seen, I think, Elias, standing under a tree in the fields south of London.”8 In other words, Merton is saying that Blake was a prophet because he had the ability to see what others did not. This prophetic gift allowed Blake to know the solitude of Elias even as a very young man. Elias, here, also connotes Blake’s uncompromising commitment to his own inspired vision of reality and the persecution that inevitably results from sharing it. Merton concludes this section of his autobiography by telling of the tremendous effect his study of Blake had on him: “By the time the summer was over, I was to become conscious of the fact that the only way to live was to live in a world that was charged with the presence and reality of God.”9 For Merton, Blake was a Christian mystic, however heterodox, consumed with the vision of God. In a response to a letter from Mario Falsina, dated March 25, 1967, Merton answers a number of questions posed to him. One question concerns the reasons for his conversion. “…besides the grace of God. First of all the discovery of a metaphysical sense of Being, and an intuition of God as ens a se, pure actuality. Then the mystical ideas of William Blake….”10

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7 Ibid., 190.
8 Ibid. Emphasis added.
9 Ibid., 191.
10 RTJ, 348.
It is precisely this sense of Blake as visionary mystic that awakened within Merton his own desire to be “charged with the presence and reality of God.”

**Blake Recapitulated**

*1959*

After the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, William Blake rarely appears in Merton’s journals, letters, or books. It is not until 1959 that Merton, somewhat accidentally, revisits his favorite Romantic poet. “When I was in Louisville I picked up, on the wing, ‘by chance’ Blake’s poems and realized again how much I love them, how much I am at home with him. Reading the prophetic books with immense enjoyment—feeling thoroughly at home in them now, though I don’t follow all the cast of characters. It is a life-long study in itself…. Blake is never merely indifferent. Always if not inspired, at least very alive. Never dead. I love Blake.”¹¹ About a month later, on September 12, Merton writes Czeslaw Milosz¹²: “I have been reading William Blake again. His reply to Caesar seems like psychosis, but it is valid and consistent and prophetic: and involves no *Ketman* except perhaps a very little of it, on the surface, with some of his ‘friends’ who had money but did not understand him. And this did not get into any of his writing.”¹³ *Ketman*, as Christine

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¹¹ SFS, 315-16.
¹² Czeslaw Milosz, the Nobel Prize winning author, was a regular correspondent of Merton. Milosz’s *The Captive Mind*, about the plight of Polish intellectuals under a repressive regime, garnered Merton’s attention and initiated a correspondence that lasted throughout Merton’s final decade.
Bochen explains, “is a term with an Arabic etymology, which in some Muslim circles means the practice of mental reservation whereby, in an unfriendly regime, one withholds the full statement of one’s religious convictions. Milosz adopts the term to name the ways in which people in Eastern Europe ‘act’ in ways that mask their views and values in order to survive in a society dominated by ‘the Party.’” Caesar, here, is the archetypal symbol of the “unfriendly regime.” Merton is saying that Blake’s prophetic books, while difficult to unravel, are a “valid and consistent and prophetic” statement that fully bear his religious convictions—that hold no punches. Blake, according to Merton, was not one to mask his imaginative vision. He did not care whether others might misunderstand him. He was utterly convinced that the poet must write out of his most authentic self—to convey what he saw with his imagination, however subversive, shocking, or obtuse. This was, for Merton, the foundational element of what made Blake’s poetry prophetic.

1964

After this brief appearance in 1959, comment on Blake lies dormant until 1964 when Merton again accesses him as an interpretive lens through which to understand the spirituality of the Shakers. At the beginning of that summer, Merton found himself on one of his frequent visits to the hospital in Louisville. Writing to Ray Livingston\(^\text{15}\) on May 11, he comments: “I was in the hospital too, and got to read some Blake and some things about Blake in the U. of Louisville library on my way in and out. How few are the people who

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\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Ray Livingston was chair of the Department of English at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota.
see.”\textsuperscript{16} Then, a couple of months later on July 20\textsuperscript{th}, to Mrs. Edward Deming (“Faith”) Andrews, the wife of the Shaker scholar and enthusiast who had asked Merton to write an “Introduction” to his book \textit{Religion in Wood: A Book of Shaker Furniture}, he writes: “In the preface I have been bold enough to bring in quite a lot about William Blake. I hope you will not think this too venturesome, but I thought it would be worthwhile to write a preface that was an essay in its own right, and I hope it will add to the book.”\textsuperscript{17}

Merton opens his “Introduction” with this quote from Blake’s \textit{Jerusalem}:

\begin{quote}
Prepare the furniture, O Lambeth, in thy pitying looms!
The curtains, woven tears and sighs, wrought into lovely forms
For comfort: there the secret furniture of Jerusalem’s chamber is wrought.
Lambeth, the Bride, the Lamb’s Wife loveth thee:
Thou art one with her, and knowest not of self in thy supreme joy.
Go on, builders in hope, tho’ Jerusalem wanders far away
Without the gate of Los, among the dark Satanic wheels.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

Merton uses these lines from Blake’s \textit{Jerusalem} to draw immediate comparisons between Blake and the Shakers. As he notes in the opening paragraph, the more that each is understood, the more such comparisons will be made. Though Blake more than likely knew very little about the Shakers, if anything at all, his creative impulses, according to Merton, bear profound similarities with those of the Shakers.

\textsuperscript{17} HGL, 40.
Merton begins his identification of these similarities by first highlighting the “wild and hermetic theology” of each. Yet, he cautions that neither is as incoherent or eccentric as many have initially supposed.

Imagination is another common feature of each. It has already become obvious that Blake’s understanding of imagination is fundamental to his understanding of reality; it is the essence of life—its very nature. The Shakers, too, gave high regard to the imagination. The imagination, however, did not work alone in the creative process. It was intertwined with and dependent upon religious inspiration. For Merton, “It is no exaggeration to say that the simple and ‘lovely forms’ which emerged from the fire of Shaker religious inspiration had something to do with what Blake called ‘the secret furniture of Jerusalem’s chamber.’” 19 The craft of Blake’s poetry and the Shakers’ woodwork is essentially spiritual. The outward expression of each finds its source in inner inspiration and reflects their inner world. In this way, their art reveals and communicates inner realities of meaning: “Neither the Shakers nor Blake would be disturbed at the thought that a work-a-day bench, cupboard, or table might also and at the same time be furniture in and for heaven: did not Blake protest mightily at the blindness of ‘single vision’ which saw only the outward and material surface of reality, not its inner and spiritual ‘form’ and the still more spiritual ‘force’ from which the form proceeds? These, for Blake, were not different realities. They are one.” 20 In this way, too, their art is prophetic: “And the ‘fourfold vision’ of religious and creative ‘imagination’ (more akin to prophetic vision than to phantasy) was needed if one were to be a ‘whole man,’ capable of seeing reality in its totality, and thus dwelling and expanding

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20 Ibid.
spiritually in ‘the four regions of human majesty.’ In order to expound on his meaning of “fourfold vision,” Merton provides this quote from Blake:

Now I a fourfold vision see  
And a fourfold vision is given me;  
’Tis fourfold in my supreme delight  
And threefold in soft Beulah’s night  
And twofold always. May God up keep  
From single vision and Newton’s sleep!

John Beer, in his William Blake: A Literary Life, provides helpful commentary on the four levels of Blake’s “fourfold vision”:

Single vision was the dead vision of contemporary mathematical rationalism, whereas the vision by which he customarily worked was the twofold, which customarily sought to find inner significance within the normal everyday, but which, as he is explaining, carried its own dangers of fear of the future along with the delights of creativity. Above the fear and vision granted to artists like himself he envisaged two further realms: the ‘threefold’ vision of innocent pleasure given to those enjoying the pleasures of marriage and domesticity (termed ‘Beulah’ from his reading of Isaiah and The Pilgrim’s Progress) and the supreme ‘fourfold’ of supreme vision – at once absolute in its certainty and essentially unseizable for purposes of immediate visual representation.

It is this “fourfold vision” of Blake that Merton describes as being “akin to prophetic vision.” Unfortunately, Merton does not specifically state what he means by “prophetic vision.” He simply describes it as being closely related to Blake’s “fourfold vision.” From this comparison, however, it can be deduced that Merton’s idea of “prophetic vision” comprises religious and creative imagination, like Blake’s “fourfold vision,” but in some way may also differ from it. The difference, however, need not be emphasized. Merton’s concern, here, is to highlight their similarities. What is most significant about this

21 Ibid.
comparison is that Merton sees Blake’s fourth “fold” of his “fourfold vision” as a type of mystical vision. Perhaps, Merton is saying that it is specifically this fourth fold which provides the necessary components for truly “prophetic vision.”

Shaker furniture, for Merton, was an expression of Shaker spirituality. In this way, the craftsmanship of the Shakers is like the poetry and drawings of Blake. Their art sprang from an inner force—out of the mystery of God within. Blake’s “fourfold vision” was the key to Merton’s understanding of the spirituality of Shaker craftsmanship. He describes the work of the Shakers thus:

There were of course rules to be obeyed and principles by which the work was guided: but the work itself was free, spontaneous, itself responding to a new and unique situation. Nothing was done by rote or by slavish imitation. The workman also had a vocation: he had to respond to the call of God pointing out to him the opportunity to make a new chest of drawers like the ones that had been made before, only better. Not necessarily better in an ideal and absolute sense, but better adapted to the particular need for which it was required. Thus the craftsman began each new chair as if it were the first chair ever to be made in the world.24

This direct dependence upon the Spirit of God grounds the work of the Shakers in a form of mysticism that adds mystery and luminosity to their particular form of craftsmanship.

Merton goes on to observe that Shaker vision is “peculiarly and authentically American.”25 While Merton can often be quite critical of America, here, his description of the American spirit of the Shakers is quite positive. The Shakers, according to Merton, unquestionably “felt themselves called to be a force for social renewal in the world which surrounded them. They had the gift to express much that is best in the American spirit. They exemplified the simplicity, the practicality, the earnestness, and the hope that have

25 Ibid., xi.
been associated with the United States. They exemplified these qualities in a mode of humility and dedication which one seeks in vain today in the hubris and exasperation of our country with its enormous power!”  

The Shakers, along with Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, and William Faulkner represent, for Merton, the American spirit in its purest and most prophetic form, before America finally succumbed to the consumerism and materialism of his day.

The prophetic task of recovering the lost spirit of simplicity, innocence, and hope that characterized the Shakers is primarily the work of the spiritual imagination. It is because this religious and creative imagination has become impotent, sterile, and dead that America has fallen into “an era of violence, chaos, destruction, madness, and slaughter.”

As Merton states, “‘Imagination,’ for Blake, is the faculty by which man penetrates ultimate reality and religious mystery.” For both Blake and the Shakers, it was the task of the creative imagination and religious vision to be more than “merely static and contemplative.” Creative imagination and religious vision, rather, were to be “active and dynamic” in expressing themselves in creative work—which is ultimately a work of redemption. Without this creative imagination and redemptive work, Blake offers this prophetic view of humankind’s modern plight: “Art degraded, imagination denied, war governed the nations.”

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26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., xiii.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
The power of Shaker craftsmanship, according to Merton, lies in its chastity, simplicity, and honesty—and in that “it is never conscious of itself, never seeks recognition, and is completely absorbed in the work to be done.”32 Such power, based upon the Shakers’ spirit of simple dependence upon God is, as Merton observes, “perhaps the last great expression of work in a purely human measure, a witness to the ancient, primitive, perfect totality of man before the final victory of machine technology.”33 This observation leads Merton to ask a series of probing and ominous questions: “is such a spirit, such work, possible to men whose lives are in full technological, sociological, and spiritual upheaval? Will such a spirit be possible in the future world that will emerge from the present technological revolution, that world whose outlines can barely be discerned? Is Shaker craftsmanship and its spirit necessarily bound up with a more primitive technology, or can it find a way to direct and inform machine production?”34 Although Merton declines to answer any of these questions, by using Blake as a means of interpreting Shaker spirituality and craftsmanship, he does mean to say that there remains a hope that the future can be saved from total technological, sociological, and spiritual upheaval but only by means of the recovery and exercise of the creative imagination and religious spirit that so characterized the prophetic vision of William Blake.

1968

33 Ibid., xv.
34 Ibid.
While Merton takes up Blake briefly in 1959 and a little more substantially in 1964, it wasn’t until his final year, 1968, that Blake makes a full recapitulation in his thought. On March 9 of that year, Merton records in his journal: “Back to Blake—after thirty years. I remember the profound overturning of the roots that took place in my study of him. And the same—even much more profound, is required.”

This “much more profound” overturning in Merton is articulated mainly in response to his grappling with Thomas J. J. Altizer’s *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake*. His response finds expression primarily in two essays: “The Death of God and the End of History” and “Blake and the New Theology.”

In *Faith and Violence*, Merton situates his essay “The Death of God and the End of History” in Part Four. Each of the four parts of the book deal with various themes of crisis that Merton saw as pressing issues for the Church and for the world. Part Four addresses the theme of belief and unbelief with particular interest in the critique of the “death of God” movement upon institutional religion and orthodox theology.

Merton begins his essay by exploring the claims of the “death of God” advocates. They identify themselves as being fervent Christian iconoclasts who think their ideas are vitally necessary for both Christianity and the world if Christianity is to maintain any relevance in the modern world. As Merton explains, “The kerygma of the ‘death of God’ is

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37 “The Death of God and the End of History” was initially printed in *Theoria and Theory*, October 1967 but was later published in *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).
then, in fact, not a categorical affirmation that ‘God does not exist’ over against a dogma of his existence. Still less is it a declaration that he ‘never existed.’ It is rather a declaration that the question of God’s existence has now become irrelevant. An announcement of ‘good news’: God as a problem no longer requires our attention.”

John A. T. Robinson, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann, and Thomas J. J. Altizer are among the radical theologians (some more “radical” than others) with whom Merton deals in Part Four of *Faith and Violence*. Toward the end of his essay “The Death of God and the End of History,” it is Altizer who garners Merton’s attention.

According to Merton, Altizer, with his treatment of William Blake in *The New Apocalypse*, has shed new light on the God-is-dead movement. What is unique about Altizer’s approach is that his “death of God” kenoticism does not simply imply “passive submission to power politics.” On the contrary, Blake becomes the model for the “prophetic radical Christian.” Blake’s uniqueness lies in the fact that he was a visionary who “chose to confront the awesome reality of history as the total epiphany of the sacred.” It is the tendency of religion, according to Mircea Eliade, “to dissolve history or to evade it.” It is the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament and the ongoing development of later Judaic and Christian prophecy that embraces history without evading it. For Altizer, it is Blake, the radical Christian prophet, who has the faith to come face to face with a “totally

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40 FV, 256.
41 Ibid., 257.
43 FV, 257.
fallen history” and find in it “the redemptive epiphany of Christ.” Such faith is possible because it is at once both “acceptance and reversal.” Merton explains the paradox: “…the reversal is not a rejection of history in favor of something else that is totally outside history. The reversal comes from within history accepted, in its often shattering reality, as the focus of salvation and epiphany. It is not that the world of Auschwitz, Vietnam and the Bomb has to be cursed and repudiated as the devil’s own territory. That very world has to be accepted as the terrain of the triumph of love not in the condemnation of evil but in its forgiveness: and this is certainly not an easy truth when we confront the enormity of the evil!”

Whereas “The Death of God and the End of History” only makes mention of The New Apocalypse, “Blake and the New Theology” is a review essay in toto of Altizer’s book. Merton begins his essay by observing how many writers have dismissed Blake as being too esoteric and lost in his own subjective world of myth and symbol to say anything relevant or useful—“that he was a madman who wrote a few good poems and many bad long ones.” Perceptions were changing, however, and Blake was faring better with more contemporary readers. “They have shown themselves more and more inclined to recognize him as a prophet and apocalyptic visionary who had a very real insight into the world of his time and of ours.” This change of perception, according to Merton, was probably due to the atrocities of two world wars, the atomic bomb, and the chaos which has resulted throughout

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45 FV., 258.
46 Ibid.
47 LE, 3.
48 Ibid.
the world. Merton goes on to explain what he means by describing Blake as a prophet: “In this situation Blake can be read as a ‘prophet’ not of course in the sense of one who exactly predicts future events, but in the more traditional sense of one who ‘utters’ and ‘announces’ news about man’s own deepest trouble—news that emerges from the very ground of that trouble in man himself. And of course the intensity of Blake’s prophetic fervor was increased by the anger with which he viewed the blind complacencies of rationalism, of Enlightenment deism, and of the established Churches.”

Blake is seen in light of the Hebrew Prophets whose function was to highlight the sin of Israel’s disobedience and idolatry in order to influence their reconciliation back to God. Fervor and anger are characteristic of both and denote the passionate, uncompromising nature of the prophetic vocation of each. For Merton, Blake’s prophecies were against “the blind complacencies” that have suffocated the spontaneity of imagination and the creative impulse. Blake’s prophetic task was to use his intuitive capabilities to recover spiritual vitality. A certain amount of righteous indignation was warranted—even necessary. As Michael Higgins observes, “Merton and Blake both possessed the spiritual qualities of the biblical prophet and rebel: the capacity for righteous anger mingled with insight.”

At this point Merton begins his analysis of Altizer’s *The New Apocalypse*. The first few paragraphs of the analysis of the book demonstrate just how conducive Blake is to Radical theology. As Merton states, “Radical theology could hardly find a better and more persuasive prophet.”

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49 Ibid.
51 LE, 5.
Blake. He affirms Altizer’s reading of Blake neither as an orthodox Christian mystic nor a purely heterodox anti-Christian seer. For Altizer, Blake is a unique mind who can only be understood as a revolutionary seer. Such uniqueness can only be understood by realizing that he has “passed through an interior reversal and transformation of the Western Christian tradition.” With Altizer, Merton acknowledges Blake’s virulent views of how he believed the Church perverted Christian truth for its own power and prestige. Instead of becoming “the lover of man who empties himself to become identified with Man,” the Church has become “a scepter whom man sets up against himself, investing him with the trappings of power which are not ‘the things of God’ but really ‘the things that are Caesar’s.’” Again, Merton agrees with Altizer in seeing Blake as a visionary whose vision is “a total integration of mysticism and prophecy, a return to apocalyptic faith which arises from an intuitive protest against Christianity’s estrangement from its own eschatological ground.” He agrees “that Blake saw official Christendom as a narrowing of vision, a foreclosure of experience and of future expansion, a locking up and securing of the doors of perception. He substituted for it a Christianity of openness, of total vision, a faith which dialectically embraces both extremes, not seeking to establish order in life by shutting off a little corner of chaos and subjecting it to laws and to police, but moving freely between dialectical poles in a wild chaos, integrating sacred vision, in and through the experience of fallenness, as the only locus of creativity and redemption.”

52 Altizer, The New Apocalypse, xvi.
53 LE, 5.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 6.
56 Ibid.
Where Merton is critical of Altizer is in his utilization of Hegel’s dialectical method in interpreting Blake. Merton sees this employment of Hegel as superficial and forced. One obvious difference between Blake and Hegel arises when considering their understanding of the nature of coincidentia oppositorum. Merton explains: “what for Hegel would be ‘coincidence’…is for Blake something totally different, the fourfold creative and prophetic vision in which opposites do not merely come together and fuse in synthesis, but are restored to a higher unity, an alchemical wedding of loving and fiery elements made all the more ardent by separation.”

Thus, Merton is not so sure Altizer has “found the right key” for interpreting Blake. However, Merton does see in Blake a dialectical method, although not a Hegelian one. The dialectic he does see he describes as “nevertheless fully concerned with man’s predicament in the world and deals with history not with a simple ‘yes’ or a simple ‘no’ but with a ‘total acceptance, if ultimate reversal, of the full reality of a fallen history.’”

This “fourfold creative and prophetic vision” of Blake serves as the conduit through which humankind is redeemed and thrust into a “higher unity.” This restoration of contraries is not simply the work of the intellect. For Blake, “it was, and had to be, a mystical and prophetic experience involving the whole man.” This soteriological evolution transcends historical process. Here, Merton also becomes quite critical of the new theology’s total negation of the transcension of God in favor of his immanence in history alone. This total kenosis of the so-called static God into the dynamic God, or put

57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 7.
philosophically, the act of Being into the activity of becoming is critiqued by Merton who sees process philosophy and theology as “considerably less alive and dynamic”\(^6^1\) than Scholasticism. Life stuck within the historical plane without the capacity for transcendence is, for Merton, a misreading of Blake. “The revelation of God as life-giving Spirit is surely a revelation of him as not solitary and remote but as completely ‘given,’ ‘poured out’ in the world and man, and so, if you will, kenotic. But Altizer completely ignores all this and hence has to try to reach this same end by the fuzzy romanticism of a Godhead-process, immanent within history.”\(^6^2\)

This critique aside, Merton does find Altizer’s reading of Blake commendable, particularly in his treatment of Blake’s eschatological vision, which Merton believes to be “the most important thing about this book.”\(^6^3\)

He has certainly not toned down the apocalyptic and prophetic character of Blake’s vision, but has sought to do it full justice. In so doing, he has also frankly faced the central importance of that most odious and unpopular of Christian doctrines: the fall. Without the fall not only is Christianity itself emptied of meaning, but Blake too becomes incomprehensible. Eschatology is the vision of a totally new and final reality, a cosmic reversal that brings ultimate meaning and salvation to the fallen world. That reality is, in effect, the total integration of God and Man in Christ—that is to say, in concrete and communal Mankind united not by politics but by mercy.\(^6^4\)

**Prophetic Anti-poetry?**

\(^6^1\) Ibid., 9.
\(^6^2\) Ibid., 10.
\(^6^3\) Ibid.
\(^6^4\) Ibid.
According to Michael Higgins, Blake’s influence upon Merton is expressed most fully in Merton’s so called anti-poetry, which he describes as “a poetry replete with irony and protest, a method of coping with the contemporary disarray of language and meaning, a latter-day Blakean strategy.” This notion of anti-poetry which Merton espoused in the final year of his life was provided to him by the Chilean poet Nicanor Parra. Merton himself describes the anti-poet as one who “suggests” a tertiary meaning which is not ‘creative’ and ‘original’ but a deliberate ironic feedback of cliché, a further referential meaning, alluding, by its tone, banality, etc., to a customary and abused context, that of an impoverished and routine sensibility, and of the ‘mass-mind,’ the stereotyped creation of quantitative preordained response by ‘mass-culture.’

Merton’s two final books of poetry, Cables to the Ace or Familiar Liturgies of Misunderstanding and The Geography of Lograire are his contribution to this genre of anti-poetry. Higgins describes these works as Merton’s “two great Blakean ‘myth-dreams’” which “reflect Merton’s conviction that the tyranny of mind and power in Western culture suppresses the genuine spirituality and life-affirming imagination, the meaning-generating capacity of words and silence, so integral to other cultures: aboriginal; oriental; extinct.” Higgins’ description of Merton’s anti-poetry is reminiscent of what has previously been discussed about Blake’s understanding of the prophetic function in the spiritual life. Anti-

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66 Higgins, Heretic Blood, 57.


68 Higgins, Heretic Blood, 56-57.
poetry’s prophetic role is to parody the nonsense and confusion of modernity’s suppressed imagination and spirit. In so doing, its mimicry exposes the irrational and illogical thought patterns that have characterized much of the twentieth century in the Western world. Words have become empty and meaningless—only noise. Anti-poetry’s metaphorical “gibberish” ultimately seeks to reveal the great need for silence and true communication.

Higgins offers this important insight into helping understand Cables to the Ace: “In Cables form is content; it does not contain or transmit a message, it simply is a message. The title of the poem itself suggests the identification of the means of transmission with the content transmitted, for a cable is both the electrical apparatus by which the message is channeled and the message or cablegram itself. The medium is the message.”

Higgins sees Merton’s Cables as a culminating fulfillment of the Blakean imperative of reconstituting, by means of vision and imagination, humankind’s wholeness and spiritual unity: “In Blake’s poetry the vision is worked out in his prophetic books, with the Apocalypse, Jerusalem, and the final reintegration through Jesus or the Spiritual Imagination. In Cables Merton resolved to ‘assist once again at the marriage of heaven and hell’ (Cable 1); he continues the Blakean dream: ‘These words were once heard, uttered by a lonely, disembodied voice, seemingly in a cloud’ (Cable 9).”

Higgins’ Blakean reading of Cables leads him to interpret the poet’s prophetic job as a recovering of paradise.

Although the poet is nurtured ‘by the fancies/Of female benefactors,’ these benefactors are in fact emanations from the one female, Sophia/Virgin/Urthona, the love of whom is paradise. To see paradise, to know wisdom, one must love and wait

69 Ibid., 182.
70 Ibid., 180-81.
for the *point vierge*, ‘that moment of awe and inexpressible innocence.’ The ‘unspeakable secret,’ this ‘ace of freedoms,’ is the poet’s discovery, the full perfection of which means death. In a powerfully Jungian and prophetic conclusion to Cable 74 Merton speaks of the mandala, the ancient symbol in integration and fulfillment, in connection with the ‘distant country’ of his approaching death:

Better to study the germinating waters of my wood  
And know this fever: or die in a distant country  
Having become a pure cone  
Or turn to my eastern abstinence  
With that old inscrutable love cry  
And describe a perfect circle

Before the poet’s annihilation by Wisdom, an experience which he describes as ‘a perfect circle,’ ‘having become a pure cone,’ he assists in the recovery of paradise through poetry—the language of his vision, the sacrament of his ‘discovery’—freeing Imagination from the shackles of Urizenic perception. Authentic paradisal poetry explores new possibilities through a daring revitalization of idea, word, and sound and, in his anti-poetic epics, Merton attempts to give ‘the world another chance.’”

“Urizenic perception” represents, for Merton, perception that is inhibited by empiricism and doubt because it is blind to imagination, passion, and spiritual realities. Thus, such perception is only superficial, prohibited from truly seeing. Even more, such perception leads to dangerous consequences: “The tyranny of Urizen consists in trying to govern by abstract codes based on mathematical reasoning and materialism, and it brings about a vicious circle of oppressions and wars.” Blake and Merton, for Higgins, are, on the other hand, poets who seek to recover paradise through *prophetic* perception. Such poetry, for Merton, is the only truly “valid poetry.”

All really valid poetry (poetry that is fully alive and asserts its reality by its power to generate imaginative life) is a kind of recovery of paradise. Not that the poet comes up with a report that he, an unusual man, has found his own way back into Eden:

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72 LE, 428.
but the living line and the generative association, the new sound, the music, the structure, are somehow grounded in a renewal of vision and hearing so that he who reads and understands recognizes that here is a new start, a new creation. Here the world gets another chance. Here man, here the reader discovers himself getting another start in life, in hope, in imagination, and why? Hard to say, but probably because the language itself is getting another chance, through the innocence, the teaching, the good faith, the honest senses of the workman poet.\textsuperscript{73}

With \textit{The Geography of Lorgraire}, left unfinished at the time of his death, Merton continues his anti-poetic myth-dream by means of a literary journey to the four corners of the earth. The four quadrants, north, south, east, and west, represent facets of Merton’s own spiritual quest, recounting personal experiences and historical incidents mixed together with past legends and primitive beliefs. Higgins sees Merton’s final poetic work as a fitting culmination for one of the twentieth century’s greatest spiritual explorers. Yet, he also sees \textit{Geography} as a starting point of future exploration: “This final testament to his poetic powers was merely the beginning of an effort to expand the range of his poetic genius by ‘imploding’ his vision through fragmenting his language, torturing meanings, desecrating all Reason’s Laws, and exorcizing the demon within that bid him serve the Master, Thought and all his minions, Words.”\textsuperscript{74} Higgins’ insightful reading of \textit{Geography} continues: “Merton, in quest for the God within, followed his imaginative pulse that chartered new regions of the spirit through a panoply of discordant images and shattered metaphors, dared oblivion and thirsted for a widening of vision, that brought him not death but life. The tyranny of language was to be undone by Word.”\textsuperscript{75} As Merton himself writes:

\textsuperscript{73} LE, 128.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 386-87.
A poet spends his life in repeated projects, over and over again attempting to build or to dream the world in which he lives.\textsuperscript{76}

In this brief excerpt, Merton once again emphasizes the role imagination plays in the life of the poet. The poet is defined as one who “dream(s)”, or the one who lives and creates from his or her own imagination. The task of the poet is to “build” and create a better world. It is to see what only he or she can see and write that vision into existence. \textit{The Geography of Lograire} is about a geography of imagination told cryptically in mythic form employing mostly the tragic experiences of the past in order to hold out the possibility of a future of eschatological hope. It is a geography of spiritual longing for a place of rest after a lifetime of intense soul searching.

How effective, though, has Merton’s anti-poetry been in building up the world in which he longed to live? Not everyone is as enthusiastic as Higgins in their evaluation of Merton’s experimentation in “myth-dreams.” The biggest criticism of such an approach can be found in Dennis McInerny’s \textit{Thomas Merton: The Man and His Work}:

One could say…that in my critique of \textit{Cables to the Ace} and \textit{The Geography of Lograire} I simply miss the point, that if these two works are fragmented and disjointed it is because they were deliberately intended to be such in order to mirror and pass judgment upon the fragmented and disjointed nature of our age. The message, in other words, is as much in the form as in the content. To stand in judgment of a chaotic age, as a poet and prophet, one must speak chaotically. All I can say in response to this is that I am perfectly aware of the point; it is just that I do not agree with it. One does not intimidate or dispel linguistic chaos by yet more linguistic chaos. I stand with E. B. Strunk who claimed that the only way to cope adequately with confusion was unconfusedly. To write about confusion confusedly

\textsuperscript{76} CP, 457.
only compounds the confusion, and that was what Merton was doing by his anti-poetry.  

Higgins himself cautions concerning the insufficiency of anti-poetry: “Antipoetry has its purposes, but it also has its very clear limitation.”  George Woodcock, one of Merton’s earliest biographers and critics, is also skeptical: “…we are forced to question Marcuse’s idea of the infinite resources available to the anti-poet. Once we accept such an idea, we face the problem of how to select from the great mass of bad and good print that offers itself. How, having elected for anti-poetry and thus abdicated poetic discrimination, can we select what may be antipoetically acceptable? Inevitably, we find ourselves bound to set up criteria of badness in anti-poetry. And when that comes we are back in the old game of reserving special subjects and a special language—even if an anti-language—for poetry.”

The above criticisms highlight the ambiguous nature of anti-poetry. While it seeks to imagine and create a better world through its mimicry and intended confusion, it ultimately fails to accomplish its goal because it forfeits one of the primary tasks of the poetic/prophetic imagination, which is to communicate symbolically, yet concretely, a reality of possibility that is not yet but that is somehow attainable. Perhaps one way of

80 Walter Brueggemann, in his *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978), 49-50, offers three tasks of the prophetic imagination: (1) “To offer symbols that are adequate to the horror and massiveness of the experience which evokes numbness and requires denial;” (2) “To bring to public expression those very fears and terrors that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we do not know they are there;” (3) “To speak metaphorically but concretely about the real deathliness that hovers over us and gnaws within us, and to speak neither in rage nor in cheap grace, but with the candor born of anguish and passion.”
understanding the prophetic nature of anti-poetry is by distinguishing between *negative* and *positive* modes of prophecy.\(^{81}\) A *negative* mode of prophecy is purely iconoclastic—it seeks to reveal and destroy what is contrary to the will of God. A *positive* mode of prophecy seeks to express the will of God in the context of a situation that has forsaken that will. Anti-poetry, with its assault on language itself as a way of revealing the confusion and inner contradictions of a given age, would be a purely *negative* mode of prophecy. It reveals and seeks to destroy without offering a positive and meaningful alternative.

**Concluding Remarks**

Merton’s re-visitaton of Blake at the different periods of his life as outlined above reveal some notable particularities about Blake’s impact upon the formation of Merton’s prophetic spirituality. First, Blake’s prophetic spirituality was an *expression of his mysticism*. For Merton, identifying Blake as a prophet meant primarily identifying Blake as a *seer*—a visionary. This is the main theme of Merton’s treatment of Blake in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Secondly, the letter to Czeslaw Milosz in 1959 shows that Merton considered Blake a prophet because Blake boldly asserted his own imaginative vision in the face of ridicule and misunderstanding. Blake had decided that his creative spiritual intuitions held too much significance to be made more palatable for the tastes of the *status quo*. Thirdly, through his treatment of the Shakers in his “Introduction” to *Religion in Wood*, Merton gives concrete application to his appreciation and understanding of Blake’s prophetic vision and imagination. It is Shaker spirituality that, for Merton, embodies the

\(^{81}\) Brueggemann speaks about the two tasks of prophecy: dismantling and energizing. See Breuggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 109.
prophetic spirit of William Blake. They are the ones whose vision has penetrated into ultimate reality and religious mystery and live in the creative vitality of a pure and simple imaginative spirit. The spirit of the Shakers is prophetic because it sought to recover through its imagination the lost innocence, simplicity, and hope that had become threatened through the technological advances of modernity. Fourthly, Merton’s interest in Blake’s ideas about the prophetic imagination were developed through his grappling with Thomas J. J. Altizer’s *The New Apocalypse*. While Merton is not keen on Altizer’s interpretive approach to Blake, he sees great value in Altizer’s book for demonstrating Blake’s relevant value as a true prophet and apocalyptic visionary. Here we see Blake as a prophet because he was one who “‘utters’ and ‘announces’ news about man’s own deepest trouble—which is man himself.” Out of this “trouble,” the prophetic imagination envisions and creates a hopeful future of greater peace and justice. This eschatological hope becomes all the more real in light of the extent of humankind’s fallenness.

Merton’s Blakean poetic experimentation in anti-poetry is considered prophetic by commentators, particularly Michael Higgins, because of its implicit critique of the way “one-dimensional man”82 has forfeited metaphysical realities for a purely pragmatic consciousness. Its muddled mimicry, however, while trying to parody such a consciousness, ultimately loses much of its prophetic power because it falters in being faithful to one of the

82 Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, which Merton read in 1968, describes the consciousness which results from a technological, mass-production society. Merton, writing in his journal on November 7, 1968, says, “Marcuse has shown how mass culture tends to be anticulture—to stifle creative work by the sheer volume of what is ‘produced,’ or reproduced. In which case, poetry, for example, must start with an awareness of its contradiction and use it—as antipoetry—which freely draws on the material of superabundant nonsense at its disposal. One no longer has to parody, it is enough to quote—and feed back quotations into the mass consumption of pseudoculture” OSM, 262. For further treatment on Marcuse and anti-poetry, see David D. Cooper’s “From Prophecy to Parody: Thomas Merton’s *Cables to the Ace,*” *The Merton Annual* v. 1 (New York: AMS Press, 1988), 215-233.
basic tasks of the poetic/prophetic imagination, which is to be concrete enough to move people toward higher consciousness.\textsuperscript{83}

The significance of William Blake’s influence upon Merton is revealed in both its perduing value (from childhood until death) and in the immense personal affection that Merton consistently showed toward what one may describe as a kindred spirit, even when not always being in full agreement with him. Merton saw in Blake an imaginative mind and prophetic spirit who lived in a certain immediacy of spiritual realities. Even as a young student at Columbia University, Merton held Blake to be a Christian mystic, in spite all his heterodox ideas. As he recounts many years later, it was this Blake, the mystic, who would influence him to embrace Roman Catholicism. The irony of this influence was surely not far from Merton’s own mind. He was certainly aware that Blake was an intense critic of organized religion. This demonstrates something very significant about Merton’s ability to learn from others yet think for himself, even as an impressionable college student. Merton never swallowed the ideas or worldview of a particular thinker wholeheartedly. Rather, he studied them with an open mind and integrated what rang true and dismissed what didn’t. This certainly was the case with Blake, who Merton felt was misunderstood by a culture that had forsaken the intuitive for the scientific. In a sense, Merton believed Blake lived in the wrong century (something which can also be said of Merton!). Yet this feeling of being a fish out of water, of going against the grain, gave Blake the psychological impetus to

\textsuperscript{83} It is apparent, from our study, that Merton understood Blake’s prophetic books, as undecipherable as they are, as, nonetheless, truly prophetic. He believed that it is the task of the reader to do the hard work of comprehending and interpreting the poetry. The prophetic nature of the poetry would then become obvious. It is the opinion of the author that this is true in as far as Blake’s prophetic books carry comprehensible meaning. With anti-poetry, however, which may be purposefully meaningless, words, in so far as they are meaningless, lose their positive prophetic significance.
develop his prophetic spirituality. The vitality of Blake’s imaginative spirit refused to be smothered by enlightenment rationalism. Rather, Blake chose to live from his authentic self and become a “prophet against empire.”84 It is this prophetic restlessness and need for authentic self-expression that Merton appreciated most about Blake and with which he most identified.

84 This description of Blake was used by David Erdman, *Blake, Prophet Against Empire: A Poet’s Interpretation of the History of His Own People* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969).
Chapter 2

Finding Prophetic Inspiration in Latin America

_They are strong, sometimes angry, full of clear intuitions, free from the involvement, the desperation and self-frustration of some of the voices here, so many of the voices here._¹

-Thomas Merton

Merton’s fascination with the Spanish language can be traced back to a journal entry of December 14, 1939, where he exuberantly lists “some splendid words in Spanish.”² The inspiration for this list is a book of poetry which he had been reading by the Spanish writer Federico Garcia Lorca. Three days later he offers another such list, afterwards stating, in typical Mertonian hyperbole, “Lorca is easily the best religious poet of this century.”³ Soon thereafter, Merton also begins reading the poetry of St. John of the Cross, which would play a significant role in his early formation as a monk. It was at this time that Merton began to hear the initial call of Latin America.

In April, 1940, Merton took what would be his only trip to a Latin American country. After some deliberation about whether he had enough finances to travel to Mexico or just to Cuba, Merton decides on Cuba. The Cuban trip would offer Merton an experience of Catholicism that was “warm and natural, as well as… supernatural.”⁴ It would also give to Merton a profound religious experience that would etch itself deeply into his consciousness. Writing both in his journal and later in _The Seven Storey Mountain_, Merton

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¹ Merton to Alejandro Vignati, 1 Nov 1964, CFT, 234.
² RTM, 104.
³ Ibid., 106.
⁴ Michael Mott, _The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton_ (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1984), 150.
expresses the impact of an “epiphany” that rivals his experience in downtown Louisville, as well as the later experience at Polonnaruwa shortly before his death. The Church of San Francisco in Havana is the location of the experience:

Before any head was raised again the clear cry of the brother in the brown robe cut through the silence with the word “Yo Creo...” “I believe” which immediately all the children took up after him with such loud and strong and clear voices, and such unanimity and such meaning and such fervor that something went off inside me like a thunderclap and without seeing anything or apprehending anything extraordinary through any of my senses (my eyes were open on only precisely what was there, the church), I knew with the most absolute and unquestionable certainty that before me, between me and the altar, somewhere in the center of the church, up in the air (or any other place because in no place), but directly before my eyes, or directly present to some apprehension or other of mine which was above that of the senses, was at the same time God in all His essence, all His power, God in the flesh and God in Himself and God surrounded by the radiant faces of the thousands million uncountable numbers of saints contemplating His Glory and Praising His Holy Name. And so the unshakeable certainty, the clear and immediate knowledge that heaven was right in front of me, struck me like a thunderbolt and went through me like a flash of lightning and seemed to lift me clean up off the earth.5

Also significant was Merton’s visit to Our Lady of Cobre, which gave him the inspiration to write what he described as “the first real poem I had ever written.”6 Included in his Thirty Poems, “Song for Our Lady of Cobre” reads:

The white girls lift their heads like trees,
The black girls go
Reflected like flamingos in the street,

The white girls sing as shrill as water,
The black girls talk as quiet as clay.

The white girls open their arms like clouds,
The black girls close their eyes like wings:
Angels bow down like bells,
Angels look up like toys,

Because the heavenly stars
Stand in a ring:

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5 RTM, 217-18.
6 SSM, 283.
And all the pieces of the mosaic, earth,  
Get up and fly away like birds.⁷

According to Merton correspondent Stefan Baciu of the University of Hawaii, this poem “became a symbolic expression of rapport in his dialogue with Latin Americans.”⁸ Also included in Thirty Poems is “In Memory of the Spanish Poet Federico Garcia Lorca.” These two early poems, along with the Cuban experience as a whole, proved to be seeds in which Merton’s empathy for and attraction to the spirit of the Latin American poets would blossom.

It was only a bit later, in the early 1950s, that Merton became interested in Portuguese-speaking Latin Americans. Both Alceu Amoroso Lima and Benedictine nun Sister Emmanuel de Souza e Silva would assist in introducing Merton’s writings into Brazil (Lima with introductions and Silva with translations). Merton’s attraction to Portuguese and Brazil was intense: “The Brazilian poets: a whole new world. To begin with, Portuguese is a wonderful language for poetry, a language of admiration, of innocence, of joy, full of human warmth and therefore of humor: the humor that is inseparable from love, that laughs at the uniqueness of each individual being not because it is comical or contemptible but because it is unique. Uniqueness, the innocent self, is always surprising, and surprise is humorous as well as wonderful, on this human level.”⁹

Merton’s fondness for the whole of Latin America, however, is most eloquently expressed in the preface he wrote in 1958 to the Argentine edition of his Complete Works:

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⁷ CP, 29-30.
⁹ CGB, 13.
It seems that I have heard the voice of all the hemisphere in the silence of my monastery, a voice that speaks from the depths of my being with a clarity at once magnificent and terrible: as if I had in my heart the vast and solitary pampas, the brilliant hoarfrost of the Bolivian plateau, the thin air of the terraced valleys of the Incas, the splendor and suavity of Quito, the cold plains of Bogota, and the mysterious jungles of the Amazon. It seems that entire cities with great opulence and terrible indigence side by side live inside me. It seems that the ancient civilizations of Mexico, older even than Egypt, gather in unspeakable silence in my heart. It seems that I hear in the even more profound silence of Peru the forgotten syllables of ancient wisdom which contains in its secrets an image of truth that no man has recognized, an image, symbolic and prophetic, like that of Jesus Christ. It seems that the unending beauty of the New World with its limitless possibilities moves within me like a giant sleeper in whose presence I am unable to remain indifferent. In reality, it seems at times that this presence inside me speaks with the voice of God Himself; and I struggle vainly to grasp and to understand some word, some syllable of the destiny of the New World—the destiny that is still hidden in the mystery of Providence.10

In the above passage, Merton articulates one of the most significant discoveries he made in his engagement with the writers of Latin America: their ancient cultures were filled with “symbolic and prophetic” images and realities which were on the threat of extinction by the westernization of modern societies. It was his dialogue with the Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal, who entered the novitiate at Gethsemani in 1957, that gave Merton insight into the cultural and religious situation of the various Latin American countries. Their relationship continued through correspondence after Cardenal’s departure in 1959 (due to health reasons), lasting until Merton’s death in 1968.

Merton’s correspondence with Cardenal is marked by expressions of frustration and critique over conditions in the Church, along with the role the United States was playing in the demise of many of the cultural values of Latin America. Much of their correspondence

takes on a particular prophetic tone in these regards: “My concept of the Church, my faith in the Church, has been and is being tested and purified: I hope it is being purified…. I do not complain, I do not criticize but I observe with a kind of numb silence the inaction, the passivity, the apparent indifference and incomprehension with which most Catholics, clergy and laity, at least in this country, watch the development and pressure that builds up to a nuclear war. It is as if they had all become lotus-eaters. As if they were under a spell…. I resist this bad dream with all my force, and at least I can struggle and cry out, with others who have the same awareness.” Latin American poets were a frequent topic of discussion. Merton’s letters to Cardenal begin to reveal his admiration for what he considers to be Latin America’s “prophetic quality”: “First of all the poem about Bartolomé de Las Casas is most moving, and so is the article about the mystical tree which seems to me to have a deeply prophetic quality…. Ventana is very alive and appeals to me more than most other ‘little magazines.’ Again it has a prophetic quality in it, and a simplicity that is lacking in the more frustrated or the more pretentious publications.” This particular “prophetic quality” will be further elucidated in Merton’s thought as he delves more deeply into his study of the poets throughout America’s southern hemisphere. One aspect that clearly emerges in his correspondence with Cardenal, though, is the contrast that Merton sees between the two hemispheres: “I say the future belongs to South America: and I believe it. It will belong to

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11 Merton to Cardenal, 24 Dec. 1961, CFT, 129-30. This is one example among many of Merton’s critique of nuclear proliferation and the Church’s negligence in speaking out against such tendencies. Nuclear proliferation is the subject which lies at the heart of Merton’s writings on peace and non-violence and is one of the areas where Merton assumes the prophetic mantle most powerfully. This was the case until 1962, when Merton was no longer allowed by his religious superiors to publish on the theme. He was vindicated, however, with Pope John XXIII’s Pacem in Terris, which appeared the following year (although he was still not allowed to publish on the subject).

12 Merton to Cardenal, 17 Nov. 1962, CFT, 137.
North America too, but only on one condition: that the United States becomes able to learn from South and Latin America and listen to the voice that has so long been ignored (a voice which even ignores itself and which must awaken to its own significance), which is a voice of the Andes and of the Amazon (not a voice of the cities, which alone is heard, and is comparatively raucous and false).”\textsuperscript{13} In Latin America, Merton sees a more authentic form of life, particularly in religious and monastic life: “…it is here (Latin America) that one finds, I think, some of the most authentic and honest spiritual life in the world of our time. In the monasteries there is still simplicity and joy among some of the monks but the structure is so false and artificial that one has a hard time keeping serious about it, and it is often very discouraging….”\textsuperscript{14} From these remarks, we can note that a preliminary component of Merton’s understanding of the “prophetic quality” of Latin America is largely tied to his acknowledgement of the “simplicity” and “authenticity” of the Latin American way of life, especially religious life. Thus, “simplicity” and “authenticity” are constituent aspects of what he considers prophetic in the Latin American people.

By 1965, Merton begins to find reason to hope for the spiritual renewal of the Church, much of it as a result of the work of the Second Vatican Council. Writing to Cardenal on the day of Cardenal’s ordination to the priesthood, Merton comments, “…it is certainly happy that a new spirit of understanding and originality is breathing in the Church, and even some of the most conservative elements are forced to recognize it and adjust to it.

\textsuperscript{13} Merton to Cardenal, 10 Mar. 1964, CFT, 144.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 145. Merton’s desire for an authentic form of monasticism, which is the central theme of his writings on monastic renewal, was largely inspired by the witness of monastic life in South America. Merton made several efforts to continue his monastic life in South America but none proved fruitful.
I am sure that the coming years will be very creative and that prophetic initiatives may be very evident.” The context of this quotation reveals not only Merton’s confidence in the Council but even more poignantly the confidence he had in his friend Cardenal, in whom Merton saw an embodiment of one who would fulfill the role of carrying out the Church’s “prophetic initiatives.” Ernesto Cardenal symbolized, for Merton, the simple, authentic contemplative-poet who was giving voice to the true spirit of Latin America. Cardenal, more than anyone else, helped Merton recognize that voice and understand it. That voice’s prophetic quality would lure Merton to discover for himself the spirit of Latin America mediated mainly through the writings of her vibrant poets; poets likes Pablo Antonio Cuadra, José Coronel Urtecho, and Alfonso Cortés in Nicaragua, Jorge Carrera Andrade in Ecuador, Nicanor Parra in Chile, Octavio Paz in Mexico, Susana Soca in Uruguay, and Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Fernando Pessoa in Brazil. With many of these poets he would carry on a lively correspondence as well as publish translations of their work. He would also be exposed to past Latin American poets with whom he found great affinity: Rubén Darío from Nicaragua, César Vallejo from Peru, and Pablo Neruda from Chile. Two important correspondents who would help Merton gain exposure throughout Spanish-speaking Latin America were Argentinians: Victoria Ocampo and Miguel Grinberg. Out of this extensive cast, three poets in whom Merton found particular prophetic inspiration emerge and warrant analysis: the Nicaraguans Pablo Antonio Cuadra and Alfonso Cortés, and the Peruvian César Vallejo. What surfaces through Merton’s writings on these poets is his elucidation of that peculiarly “prophetic quality” of the Latin American voice.

Listening to Awakening Voices: The Prophetic Ear of Pablo Antonio Cuadra

A cousin of Ernesto Cardenal, Pablo Antonio Cuadra (1912-2002) shared many of the poetic aspirations as his beloved relative. Both took great interest in the Indian cultures of Central and South America and felt that western civilization had all but completely muffled the pure and authentic voices sounding from these ancient cultures. The correspondence which took place between Merton and Cuadra explores this topic and seeks to discover a solution to this problem. The remedy which results from their assessment of the situation reveals their profound faith in the power of poetry to awaken minds and hearts to wisdom. Both Merton and Cuadra heard the wisdom of the ancient civilizations of Latin America and, with their powerful pens, devote themselves to giving it a voice.

It was precisely such “indigenous” wisdom which attracted Merton to Cuadra’s poetry. Merton’s esteem for Cuadra’s poetry shines in Merton’s introductory essay to his Spanish translations which first appeared in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* in 1963: “He has therefore joined the ranks of those who have created what is undoubtedly the finest and most authentically ‘American’ poetry of Latin America.”

Cuadra’s “authenticity,” for Merton, lies in the manner in which he was able to capture the “Indian past” of Central America and make it live “with an unconquerable and flourishing energy through the unmatched prestige of the ancient plastic arts, architecture, folklore, and music, as well as in the texts of ancient

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16 LE, 321.
Indian poems and dramas.”  The pre-Colombian Chorotega pottery served as the inspiration for Cuadra’s award-winning book, *El Jaguar y la luna*. In the original Spanish version, Cuadra offered drawings taken from stylized Nahoa themes. It was such poetry, with its combination of poem and picture, which, for Merton, made *El Jaguar y la luna* “singularly effective.”  Cuadra’s book received the prestigious Rubén Darío prize for Central American verse in 1959. It was Darío’s poetry that inspired Merton to write, “All true poetic genius tends to generate prophetic insight. The poet cannot help but listen to awakening voices that are not yet audible to the rest of men.”  For Merton, this statement would certainly apply to Cuadra, whose prophetic ear heard what the “rest of men” could not or would not and gave expression to it in penetrating imagery.

Cuadra’s *El Jaguar y la luna* opens with “Cup with a Jaguar for the Drinking of Health.” It effectively expresses the indelible stamp which the Ibero-American Indian past has left upon Cuadra’s creative sensibilities. Malgorzata Poks’ insightful study on Merton’s relationship with the Latin American poets demonstrates this relationship more precisely:

The poem’s controlling metaphor is that of a ceramics artist at work, but the original Artist is absent from view, save in the imprint he has left on the clay of creation. The jaguar, worshipped as a god by Cuadra’s ancestors, stamped the created world ‘with his hostile but harmonious mark,’ his art providing the exemplar for the art of man. What the prototypical Artist achieved so gracefully and effortlessly, his human counterpart must attempt to ‘copy’ in the blood of self-annihilation. Once

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17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 322.
19 LE., 305.
we follow the implications of this image, it becomes clear that the artist is none other than the jaguar priest sacrificing himself on the altar of his god by ‘copying’ the divine self-communicating act.21

Merton’s translation of Cuadra’s poem reads:

He has stamped the clay with his hostile
But harmonious mark

And I with clay and blood
Upon this amphora
Copy his claw!

A ball of rage
Clenched over the earth
For the wine of the drunken accident
Hailed by your death.22

What Cuadra offers in this poem is a view of artistic life as participation in the creative action of God. By the “stamp” (image) of the Artist upon the clay of our lives, and in proportion to our act of “copying” (or faithfulness to that “stamp”), we participate in the revelation of divine life (“Hailed by your death”). Such a revelation, though, bears a paradoxical twist symbolized in the use of “wine.” Wine is both a source of joy as well as drunken stupor; of celebration as well as violence; of life as well as death. This vessel is simultaneously the symbol of harmony (through faithful participation in one’s true self) and disharmony (through the disruption of the divinely established order of reality). And as Poks suggests, “the ‘toast’ prophesies a violent (‘drunken’) and victorious ‘accident’ that the dictator will be forced to ‘hail’ by his death.”23 Poks also reads this poem as “the artist’s

21 Ibid., 153.
22 CP, 950.
23 Poks, Thomas Merton and Latin America, 154.
manifesto, a pledge to the ethics of rebellion.”24 With this statement, she suggests that creative, prophetic life is only so to the extent that it remains true to itself and to its participation in the divine, creative impulse. Such faithfulness, while offering some a clear path to follow, will inevitably infuriate others. In the face of such anger, the prophet/artist presents his or her own “rage” in rebellion at whatever cost. In so doing, he or she reestablishes the harmony in the world which had been destroyed by unfaithfulness to the “stamped” image on one’s identity. In this short poem, then, Cuadra, by masterfully utilizing ancient Indian pottery motifs and wedding them with poetic imagery, takes the reader from the journey of the discovery of identity, the struggle of remaining faithful to that identity, and the paradoxical restoration of all things in the sacrificial death of one’s self. What emerges is a vision of the poet as a prophetic hearer who is able to communicate the inaudible creative impulses of an ancient civilization to both encourage and critique the present world, and, thereby, transform it.

Cuadra’s poem, “Written on a Roadside Stone During the First Eruption,” although not translated by Merton, was one he greatly admired, saying, “It is a magnificent poem, and an admirable example of the current political situation with its Indian themes! I really like that prophetic fusion of the past and the present, giving the poem an eternal character, a very religious and solemn aspect!”25 The subject of the poem is Acahualinca—the famous site of the earliest fossilized footprints (presumably marked from the eruption of a nearby volcano) in the western hemisphere as well as the site of contemporary poverty, squalor, and

24 Ibid.
oppression. Cuadra’s deep compassion for the oppressed poor of his native Nicaragua, represented here by “Acahualinca,” is boldly stated in imagery that is simultaneously an excoriating indictment of those political oppressors—the Somoza regime—whose dictatorial policies helped perpetuate the exploitation and abuse of Nicaragua’s most vulnerable. Stephen White offers this translation:

We will cry over the footprints of those who fled from Acahualinca.

Our exodus began here.

They heard the cavernous voice of the monster.
From the high trees they watched the dirty beheaded giant,
the rugged back, only the rugged breast vomiting anger.

We will abandon our country and our kin
because a sterile god has dominated our land.

Our people watched the mindless giant,
they heard the roar of the faceless force.

We will not live under the blind power’s domination!
We will break our grinding stones,
our earthen jugs
the plates we cook on,
to lighten the load of the exiled!

Here, our footprints remained
upon the ash.26

It is Cuadra’s appreciation of his all but forgotten native ancestry, represented here by the “footprints of those who fled from Acahualinca,” and his ability to fuse it together with the other all but forgotten poor and oppressed of his day that Merton considers a “prophetic fusion of past and present.” What results is an enduring prophetic denunciation against

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oppressive regimes of all times, regardless of circumstance or motivation. This “eternal character” of Cuadra’s poem Merton describes as a “very religious and solemn aspect” precisely because of the way it bestows value on the vulnerable and oppressed, criticizes the oppressor, and uses imagery in a way that is universally applicable. This creative technique is employed in much of Merton’s own prophetic writings on peace and non-violence—most notably in his poetic essay “A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants.”

Written in early September 1961 at the height of his output on issues of justice and peace and shortly before he was to be forbidden by the censors of his order to write any longer on the subject, “A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants” draws from the prophet Ezekiel’s figures of Gog and Magog (symbolically representing the United States and Russia) to demonstrate the destructive course on which the two world powers had embarked. The “letter” holds up Latin America—the “Third World”—as the hope for global renewal should Gog and Magog annihilate each other. Merton explains himself to Cuadra in a letter dated 16 September, 1961:

The piece is really an article, …and the giants in question are of course the big power blocs that are beginning to enter the final stages of the death struggle in which they will tear each other to pieces. Though the moment of supreme crisis may come quite suddenly and probably will, I do not think it is immediately near. But I think it is inevitable, unless there is some very remarkable intervention of Providence. Since I trust such intervention may take place, I see no reason for becoming desperate or even excited. However the sober facts seem to point to a nuclear war in the near future. Since there is at least a serious possibility of this, I felt that my position called for some kind of a statement of where I stand, morally, as a Christian writer.28

27 See CP, 372-91.
28 Merton to Cuadra, 16 Sept. 1961, CFT, 189.
The “letter” is addressed to Pablo Antonio Cuadra for two reasons: first, since Cuadra was the editor of the newspaper *El Pez y La Serpiente*, Merton knew that it would likely receive a broad readership; secondly, he knew Cuadra would understand and appreciate its message, since Cuadra was writing in a similar vein on political issues in Nicaragua. Writing to Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy, Merton makes a passing reference to why he sent the “letter” to Cuadra: “This question of standing by while they prepare manipulations that could easily lead to the destruction of the human race is not my idea of honesty. Hence I feel that something must be said and I am starting in Latin America, where it may still be listened to.”

Like Cuadra, Merton was moved to use his influence and poetic abilities to bring to consciousness what seemed clear and logical to him but was obscured by many others because of egoism and lust for power. Yet, his “letter” was written with such force that Merton, upon considering its implications, surprises even himself at its “bitter and unjust” tone. What results from his self-reflection is a revealing glimpse into the uncertainty and precariousness he sees in his own motivations. We also get a further glimpse into his ability to question and critique himself: “This is the point. This weakness and petulancy, rooted in egoism, and which I have in common with other intellectuals in this country. Even after years in the monastery I have not toughened up and got the kind of fibre that is bred only in humility and self-forgetfulness. Or rather, though I had begun to get it, this writing job and my awareness of myself as a personage with definite opinions and with voice, has kept me

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sensitive and afraid on a level on which most monks long ago became indifferent.”30 What Merton laments here is his own inability to speak his conscience with wisdom and humility—without egoistic concern. Yet, he knows that he must speak. He struggles to acquire the ability to speak the truth in love, free from bitterness and hatred: “I am always too vehement. Bitterness can do no good at a time like this. There is too much senseless bitterness, too much hatred justified by a ‘just cause,’ too much hatred in the service of truth, even in the service of God. This is the great lie which the West seems unable to see and now the East is learning to be far more blind and fanatical in their attachment to this lie than we have been.”31 Merton, here, is articulating the desire of the monk, which is the desire for a pure heart from which to live and speak. He recognizes the dangers of prophetic utterance from a heart full of hate—one that demands justice yet is without mercy. He sees such a “prophet” as only an accomplice in the bitterness and hatred that he or she outwardly condemns. His answer to such a predicament? “So we continue to live and try to seek truth. Each must do so with courage and indefatigable patience, constantly discerning it from the obsessive fictions of the establishment everywhere…”32 and, we might add, even within oneself.

Prophetic Madness for a Mad World: The Original Intuition of Alfonso Cortés

31 Ibid., 163.
32 Merton to Cuadra, 1 Aug. 1963, CFT, 191.
It was in May of 1962 that Merton began translating poems of Alfonso Cortés (1893-1969), the Nicaraguan poet who was known as “El Poeta Loco.” Merton’s compassion and admiration for the eccentric and disturbed poet are evident. In his introduction to his translations of Cortés, Merton recalls the incident in which “Cortés went mad one February night…in the house of the one Nicaraguan poet who has enjoyed a world-wide reputation: Rubén Darío.” Merton explains how, “Ernesto Cardenal, as a child, going to the school of the Christian Brothers in León, used to look in the door of Darío’s house and see Cortés inside, chained to a beam.” Cortés would remain in Darío’s house for a number of years before being transferred to a hospital. Writing to Ernesto Cardenal a few days after translating the Cortés poems, Merton comments on this newly discovered Nicaraguan poet: “I think he is a most absorbing and wonderful figure, in some sense prophetic.” To Cortés himself, Merton writes, “You are as a matter of fact a poet to whom God has given a very original intuition, even in a prophetic sense.” The meaning of this “original intuition” and “prophetic sense” is revealed in four main sources: the introduction to Merton’s translations of Cortés’ poetry; the poems themselves; Merton’s correspondence with Cardenal; and Merton’s own poem “To Alfonso Cortes.”

In his introduction to his translations of the Cortés poems, Merton states that “Cortes has written some of the most profound ‘metaphysical’ poetry that exists. He is obsessed

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33 Eleven poems originally appeared in *Emblems of a Season of Fury.*
34 LE, 311.
35 Ibid.
36 Merton to Cardenal, 22 May 1962, CFT, 132.
37 Merton to Cortés, 20 April 1965, CFT, 177.
with the nature of reality, flashing with obscure intuitions of the inexpressible.”38 The poems that Merton admired most, those written in his more “lucid” moments, were not only metaphysical but also “surrealistic, with a deep, oneiric, and existentialist character of its own.”39 Merton goes into greater detail about Cortés’ surrealism in a letter to Cardenal:

The thing that strikes me most about his poems…is his extraordinary ontological sense, his grasp of objective being. He is much more than a surrealist. Indeed he is the only true surrealist, for instead of going like them to the heart of a subjectivity which is at the same time all real and all unreal, he plunges to the heart of a transobjective subjectivity which is the purely real, and he expresses it in images as original and as eloquent as those of Blake. He is one of the most arresting poets of the twentieth century, and in my opinion certainly one of the very greatest. He really has something to say.40

This metaphysical plunge into one’s own “transobjective subjectivity” is a plunge into a dimension of reality that is beyond space and time. It is glimpsing into the point vierge where life bursts forth with incomprehensible energy. What Cortés does with his poetry is reveal how “to live in the full, bewildering, and timeless dimension of a life so shattering in its reality that it seems to be madness.”41 The surrealist poet in search for ultimate reality (sur-reality) must, therefore, brace himself for this treacherous journey:

Room of the guilty one  
Evil place of bad luck  
No presentiment of this  
Was possible,  
Now double your deathly terror,  
Lend thy attraction to my works,  
That my soul, thrust out of land and home,

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38 LE, 311.  
39 Ibid.  
40 Merton to Cardenal, 22 May 1962, CFT, 132-33.  
41 LE, 312.
May not dread the king’s torment.\footnote{42}{\textit{Aegeus in Prison},” in CP, 943. Malgorzata Poks explains that “The meditation on the king of Athens’ sinister seclusion, an emblem of ‘mad Alfonso’s’ own predicament, is meant as a preparation for the unforeseeable difficulties the poet will have to brave in the future in his poetic and spiritual adventure” \textit{Thomas Merton and Latin America}, 92.} For Cortés, this journey is the journey of “Dirty Souls” in search of silence and stillness—of “vast essences which keep / Secrets of dreams in the enormous heart.”\footnote{43}{“Dirty Souls,” in CP, 944.} Cortés’ concern for distance, space, and time and their place in the soul’s journey toward the ultimately real are the main themes of both “Dirty Souls” and “Great Prayer.” Distance is seen both as that which separates and unites—a type of alluring quality which draws together precisely because it is apart:

\begin{quote}
Between, above and under skies,
The distance of which I tell you,
Is the idea giving fragrance
To subtle relationships, slab
Stones,

Silence,
Stillness belonging to the soul of things!\footnote{44}{Ibid.}
\end{quote}

In order to bask in this “idea giving fragrance,” the soul must do two things: pray and dream. These two functions of the soul resolve the obstacle of distance and transcend the barriers of space and time:

\begin{quote}
Time is hunger, space is cold
Pray, pray, for prayer alone can quiet
The anxieties of void.

Dream is a solitary rock
Where the soul’s hawk nests:
\end{quote}
Dream, dream, during
Ordinary life.\textsuperscript{45}

The existential alienation of “the anxieties of void” that “prayer alone” resolves is the soul’s discovery of the truth. Hidden within the “soul of things,” the discovery of truth, for Cortés, is no simple task, considering humankind’s existential state:

Fate is dead. God is in man
What man is in God. Art caves in
Upon itself. Truth is a name
Reason a dilemma: all is a tomb.\textsuperscript{46}

Malgorzata Poks contrasts Cortés’ fateful proclamation in his opening stanza to the “ravings” of the Nietzschean madman saying they have “nothing in common,” yet she considers Cortés’ judgment to be “just as final and just as prophetic.”\textsuperscript{47} Yet, for her, they are both “proclaiming the same event.”\textsuperscript{48} In her analysis of this opening stanza from “The Truth,” she explains how the fatalistic idol of life experienced as a void proves to ultimately be “a convenient fiction with which to gloss over our failure to confront existential freedom.”\textsuperscript{49} This stultifying fear thus prevents humankind from traversing the rough and scary terrains and “tombs” of its false reality in order to find the truly real in the God within. According to Poks, Cortés’ “The Truth” presents “a declaration of liberation from slavery more authentic and profound than Nietzsche did.”\textsuperscript{50} The rest of the poem reads:

\textsuperscript{45} “Great Prayer,” in CP, 944-45.
\textsuperscript{46} “The Truth,” in CP, 948.
\textsuperscript{47} Poks, \textit{Thomas Merton and Latin America}, 105.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
The only law that centers you in virtue
Prophet, wise man, artist, proletarian,
Is mystery: if a womb is with child
If a tree with fruit: if the sun is every day.

No good more actual than the present now
No good future better than
Your good guess today,
Work is more useful than the dawn;
Stronger than destiny is pain.

Ideals? For what, if they are dreams?
Memories? What do they matter to what lies ahead?
Future is half the past: an end
Is what is every minute made real.\(^{51}\)

“The Truth” is addressed to the “prophet, wise man, artist, proletarian” because these are the distinctive individuals who are able to grasp, through their marginalized perspective, the “mystery” in life’s everyday experiences. It is a mystery longing to be known in “the present now.” The truth is encountered not in “ideals” or “memories” but in “what is every minute made real.” Reality is entered into in the simple ordinariness of “work” and in the pregnant possibilities of “pain.” With “The Truth,” Cortés becomes a spiritual director guiding his readers in hand through the dark and dangerous pathways of unreality into the life-giving world of the present moment bursting forth from within and all around.

Merton’s affection and compassion for Cortés is made explicit in his own poem from *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, “To Alfonso Cortes.” In it Merton addresses the mad poet as a “mad saint” whose personal eccentricities have caused onlookers to see only “droll”-like characteristics, leaving them in confused dismay:

You stand before the dark

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\(^{51}\) “The Truth,” in CP, 948.
Wet night of leaves  
In glasses and a witty hat  
With a tropical guitar,  
And the white crumpled  
Clothes of sugar countries.  
So droll, to be the mad  
Saint of a hot republic.  

Noting the ironic perspective of these opening lines, Poks asks this insightful question: “Is it the point of view of the onlooker, who sees a personage in a ‘witty hat’ and appreciates the curious irony of fate that gives metaphysical insight to a deranged mind while denying it to the sane; or is it the opinion of Cortés, who, like a court jester, subverts the sham of official ‘seriousness’ with his wit and prophetic madness, and in his madness inexplicably, perhaps even unnoticeably, manages to outwit the wiser men and women?” Indeed, it is both. And Cortés offers no defense regarding the comical characterization made about him but only an assured and optimistic smile.

You smile in a mist of years  
Where your country has placed you  
To think about the paper  
You hold in your hand:  
For critical services  
At some unrecorded time  
The Nation awards you  
This empty room.

Merton, here, describes what he perceives as Nicaragua’s unjust reaction to one of her most original visionaries. For his prophetic madness, Cortés is rewarded “This empty room”—a permanent hospital ward. Yet, to such a gesture, Cortés offers no retaliatory response. His

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52 All quotations from “To Alfonso Cortes” come from CP, 355-56.  
docility in the face of ill-treatment and ridicule is Merton’s way of relating him to the docile Jesus of Nazareth, who was likewise ridiculed and deemed a madman, and thereby vindicating him. The poem concludes:

Have you noted in cryptograms
Upon the tiny white leaf
Some fortunate index,
Some sign of the age?

Or do you announce
A central tumult
Out of reach of their patrols?

No, you stand still
And you begin to smile
As you read rainbows
On the empty paper.

It is, ultimately, not a prophetic declaration of “Some fortunate index, / Some sign of the age,” or the announcement of “A central tumult” that characterizes Cortés’ prophetic madness. Rather, it is the more authentic and truly saner prophetic response revealed in a simple smile and in the reading of “rainbows on the empty paper.” Poks makes the connection between Cortés’ smile here and Merton’s illuminating experience before the smiling Buddhas at Polonnaruwa where Merton experienced the world in which “all problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear.” The prophetic message that Cortés’ smile communicates, being much more potent than condemning and retaliating denunciation, is a message of prophetic hope—a hope arising from a penetrating intuition into spiritual realities. This reading “rainbows on the empty

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54 John 10:20.
55 OSM, 323. Quoted in Poks, Thomas Merton and Latin America, 87.
paper” is the prerogative of one not moved by the passing fancies of a mad world. Cortés, thus, emerges as the wise man whose saintly and uncompromising drollness reveals where true madness is really found.

César Vallejo: “Prophet of Our Time and Our Hemisphere”  

Merton was first introduced to the Peruvian poet César Vallejo (1892-1938) by Pablo Antonio Cuadra sometime in 1958. Four years later, in 1962, Merton writes the novelist Henry Miller telling of his work of translating some of Vallejo’s poems: “As for translations, I am translating bits of César Vallejo, who is to me a most significant and meaningful voice, and moves me most deeply, probably because of his Indian resonances. He is the greatest of all the great South American poets we have had in this century, I think.”  

Four of these translations would appear the following year in Emblems of a Season of Fury: “Anger;” “Black Stone on Top of a White Stone;” “Estais Muertos;” and “Peace, the Wasp.” Merton’s affection and admiration for Vallejo would only continue in the upcoming years. To Margaret Randall, in a letter of January 1963, Merton describes Vallejo as “the poet of our century who seems to have the most to say.”  

Later that year, Merton commenced a lasting correspondence with Clayton Eshleman who was also working on translations of Vallejo’s poetry. Merton’s initial letter to Eshleman is his first thorough

57 Merton to Miller, Aug. 7 1962, CFT, 276.
consideration of Vallejo’s significance. Although Vallejo, in Merton’s opinion, is “the poet of our century who seems to have the most to say,” he is not easily accessible. Merton, thus, takes joy in learning of Eshleman’s interest in Vallejo and quips, “I think all the poets in America could translate Vallejo and not begin to get him.”\(^{59}\) The reason for Merton’s high esteem for the Peruvian poet lies in his belief that Vallejo “is the most universal, Catholic in that sense (the only real sense), poet of this time, the most Catholic and universal of all modern poets, the only poet since (Who? Dante?) who is anything like Dante.”\(^{60}\) Expounding on Vallejo’s universal, Catholic identity, Merton explains, “So what I mean is that Vallejo is totally human, as opposed to our zombie poets and our little girl poets and our incontinents. I have never really thought out all that must begin to be said about Vallejo, but he is tremendous and extraordinary, a huge phenomenon.….”\(^{61}\) In contrast to the poets of North America for whom Merton had little affinity and of whom he here speaks quite pejoratively, the Peruvian poet is described as the consummate humanist precisely because he is alive—an awakened voice with something meaningful to say—and not like a “dead body moved by evil spirits”\(^{62}\) speaking excessive and thoughtless pleasantries.

In the same letter to Eshleman, Merton draws a comparison between Vallejo and the popular Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. He writes that Vallejo is “so much more magnificent…precisely because he is in every way poorer. No matter what they do with Vallejo, they can never get him into anybody’s establishment (Neruda walked in very easy

\(^{59}\) Merton to Eshleman, June 1963, CFT, 254.
\(^{60}\) Ibid.
\(^{61}\) Ibid., 254-55.
\(^{62}\) Merton to Sr. M. Emmanuel, HGL, 200. This is a definition of “zombie” which Merton gives to Sr. M. Emmanuel after which he goes on to explain his use of the term in his writings: “The expression ‘zombie’ in my books refers to the alienated, stupid, bourgeois or other mass-man.”
without giving the slightest trouble.”

Herein lays Vallejo’s significance in Merton’s mind and the importance of his and Eshleman’s translations. Vallejo’s uniqueness is found, similarly to Cortés’, in his commitment to his own vision of reality amidst the many illusions of mass-society. Thus, not only is this work of translation a worthy project in and of itself, it is also a project “of very great and urgent importance for the human race.”

Vallejo’s unique ability to remain centered in the truly real leads Merton to describe him as “a great eschatological poet, with a profound sense of the end (and yet of the new beginnings that he does not talk about). All the others are running around setting off firecrackers and saying it is a national holiday or emergency or something. Or just lolling around in a tub of silly words.”

Here, Merton reveals his own proclivities for an eschatological vision of reality. Not everyone would see in Vallejo’s poetry a vision of life fulfilled. The Peruvian’s penchant for originality and total commitment to meaningful communication is, for Merton, the great soteriological endeavor which will triumph over the meaninglessness and impotent communication of mass-society. Vallejo substantiates for Merton that the poetic word can save.

Merton’s love for Vallejo continues to be expressed in a letter to the Cuban poet Cintio Vitier, further developing Vallejo’s prophetic and eschatological significance: “…I think that an understanding and love of Vallejo, this Inca and Prophet, is the key to the deep realization of the problems and predicaments of the two Americas today.”

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63 Merton to Eshleman, CFT, 255.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Merton to Vitier, May 26 1964, CFT, 239.
to Vitier highlights again both his esteem for the poetry of Latin America as well as his
criticism of the poetry of the United States. The hope for true poetic creativity, in Merton’s
estimation, belongs to the poets of the southern hemisphere, “all gathered around Vallejo as
around its deepest center and as a kind of source of life…who tend to be more personal and
more prophetic than that of the U.S. while at the same time speaking for ‘the people’ more
than the individualist and sometimes hermetic subjectivism of the U.S. poets….” Shortly
after sending this letter to Vitier in May of 1964, Merton expresses similar sentiments to
Hans Urs von Balthasar: “Vallejo is certainly, in a very obscure way, a prophet of our time
and our hemisphere. A witness of our misery and confusion. He is the Incas’ version of
Baudelaire, and so simple.”

What Baudelaire did for nineteenth century Paris in exposing
individual and societal moral complexities along with the vices which accompany a
decadent culture, Vallejo did for his own people. Implicit within this Baudelaire comparison
may also be found a reference to the prophetic use of symbols. Baudelaire is known for his
use of sound and symbol to create atmosphere and add layered meaning to images used in
his poetry. Merton sees a similar feature in the sounds and symbols of Peruvian poetry. As
already noted in his preface to the Argentine edition of his Complete Works, he writes, “It
seems that I hear in the even more profound silence of Peru the forgotten syllables of ancient
wisdom which has never died and which contains in its secrets an image of truth that no man
has recognized, an image, symbolic and prophetic, like that of Jesus Christ.” It was poets
like Vallejo who began giving voice to these “forgotten syllables of ancient wisdom.”

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67 Ibid.
68 Merton to von Balthasar, Aug. 7 1964, SCH, 227.
symbolic and prophetic sounds caught Merton’s attention and are reflected in the poems he translated. Vallejo’s use of the theme of death in “Black Stone on Top of a White Stone” and “Estais Muertos” can serve as an example to illustrate Merton’s insights into the symbolic and prophetic nature of Vallejo’s poetry.

The opening stanza of “Black Stone on Top of a White Stone” expresses the poem’s starkness and sobriety. Yet there is also a sense of peaceful resignation:

I shall die in Paris, in a rainstorm,
On a day I already remember.
I shall die in Paris—it does not bother me—
Doubtless on a Thursday, like today, in autumn.\textsuperscript{70}

This is Vallejo’s own embrace of his personal mortality. He is confronted with the reality of his own existence and is somehow able to be at complete peace with it. In these lines, Malgorzata Poks notes that “The poet’s voice is calm and prophetic; the vision of suffering and unbearable loneliness accepted with, one might almost say, sancta indifferentia.”\textsuperscript{71}

Vallejo’s resignation in the face of death continues in the final two stanzas:

It shall be a Thursday, because today, Thursday
As I put down these lines, I have set my shoulders
To the evil. Never like today have I turned
And headed my whole journey to the ways where I am alone.

César Vallejo is dead. They struck him,
All of them, though he did nothing to them.
They hit him hard with a stick and hard also
With the end of a rope. Witnesses are: the Thursdays,
The shoulder bones, the loneliness, the rain and the roads…\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{70} All quotations from Vallejo’s “Black Stone on Top of White Stone” come from CP, 1000.
\textsuperscript{71} Poks, \textit{Thomas Merton and Latin America}, 209.
\textsuperscript{72} The second and third stanzas are rendered by the author in a prose run-on style.
Merton’s reference to Vallejo being “in every way poorer” than Neruda is substantiated in these lines. Vallejo, standing proxy for all humankind, has no option but death. This existential awareness is an opportunity for identification with Christ’s own humble obedience and submission to the Father’s will. As with Christ, such submission need not be an occasion of despair. Rather, the Peruvian’s resignation and faith are evident in his subtle use of time. Vallejo steps outside of time having “already remembered” the fateful moment of his death. Poks observes that “This prophetic memory of the future is but a distillation of a lifetime of Passion Thursdays already endured, a summary experience refined to a point of white heat by the particular Thursday when the poem is being written.”

She also sees Vallejo’s use of time as a way of transcending the linear and historical plane, and, in so doing, making himself “out to be a quintessential monk.” It is the life of the monk whose mystical identification in Christ, in a peculiar way, embodies Paul’s verse from Colossians: “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” It is precisely the monk’s living death which is a sign of eschatological hope: “When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory.”

“Estais Muertos” continues the theme of humankind’s existential stance before death. Vallejo again deals with his subject matter-of-factly:

You people are dead.
What a strange manner of being dead. Anyone might say that you were not.
But, in truth, you are dead.

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73 Ibid., 210.
74 Ibid.
75 Colossians 3:3, New American Bible.
76 Colossians 3:4, New American Bible.
You float like nothing behind that membrane which, suspended from zenith to nadir, comes and goes from dusk to dusk, trembling in front of the sonorous box of a wound which to you is painless. Well, I assure you that life is in the mirror and that you are the original: death.\footnote{All quotations from "Estais Muertos" come from CP, 1000-01.}

Here, Vallejo assumes the voice of the Prophet boldly declaring what no one wants to hear: the news of our own mortality. The Prophet warns against false hope which would assuage the reality of the human condition, that of nothingness, and insists emphatically upon the need to come face to face with “the original.” It is only at such a point that authentic living begins:

While the wave goes and while the wave comes, with what impunity one can be dead! Only when the waters swell and break on the shores in front of them, and when the waves pile one on top of the other, then you transfigure yourselves and, imagining you are about to die, you discover the sixth string which does not belong to you.

The discovery of “the sixth string” is the discovery of humankind’s only hope—divine grace. It is the discovery of the Other which is so deep within that it can only be grasped through the pulverizing pressures of our annihilation. For Poks, it is a type of “sixth sense” which is able to perceive these inner depths as well as an echo of the “sixth day of creation” which awakens humankind to its original Image.\footnote{Poks, \textit{Thomas Merton and Latin America}, 213.} Yet, the extent of death’s hold on life is brought out in the following stanza:

You are dead, never having at any time before this been alive. Anyone might think that since you do not exist now, you might have existed at some other time. But in truth you are the cadavers of a life that never was. Pathetic fate, never to have been anything at any time, but only dead! To
be a dry leaf without ever at any time having been a green one. Orphaned beyond all other orphans!

Human life left to itself knows no experience of authentic living. There is, therefore, no past experience upon which to draw to guide one out of the tomb of life as we know it. Past notions of peace and joy and happiness are only fabrications of life—illusions which keep humankind fastened to the grave. The Prophet voices one more emphatic mortal cry:

Yet for all that the dead are not, and cannot be, cadavers of a life they have not lived. They have forever died of life.
You are dead.

The final word is spoken and the casket lid is sealed. What about “the sixth string?” Does hope in the end die in despair? Not necessarily. According to Poks, “This hope…while not denied, must remain suspended, like the figurative membrane, between the dusk of arché and that of télos, while ‘aliveness’ itself remains in the grave, reduced to the state of ontological silence.”79 This is the state of humankind before God: lifelessness. The only possible way out of the tomb is through divine intervention. Vallejo, the Prophet, echoing the great Pauline themes of faith, grace, and human corruption, proclaims the despised message of true liberation.

Concluding Remarks

79 Ibid., 214.
Thomas Merton’s love and affection for Latin America and her poets is a recurring theme in the writings of his final decade. This is particularly evident in his prolific correspondence with many of the creative writers from the southern hemisphere. These letters reveal the struggles he had with identifying himself with the poetic community of the United States, saying time and time again how much more he felt in sympathy with the spirit and creative impulses of Central and South America.

It was his relationship with Ernesto Cardenal that exposed him to these creative impulses that he would come to say bore a particular “prophetic quality.” This “prophetic quality,” which he first saw in Cardenal himself, revealed itself in simple and authentic living. It was revealed in a life more impressed by the deep and forgotten sounds of wisdom of America’s ancient civilizations than with the “raucous and false” noises of westernization and technological advance. This is also why he considered Cardenal’s uncle, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, a prophetic writer. Cuadra saw value in those threatened sounds of wisdom and gave voice to them in his poetry. *El Jaguar y la luna* and “Written on a Roadside Stone During the First Eruption” are both examples of Cuadra’s ability to wed past and present in a prophetic fusion which critiques current injustices while offering a remedy for humankind’s waywardness found precisely in the lessons of America’s ancestors which he espoused. Merton follows suit in his “Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants” and offers a blistering critique of the arrogance and greediness of the unbridled nationalism of his day. This poetic essay is a fine example of Merton’s prophetic writings on peace and non-violence.
Merton’s correspondence with “El Poeta Loco,” Alfonso Cortés, reveals Merton’s own prophetic eye for being able to see value in what others ridicule. Merton saw in Cortés’ madness a peculiar prophetic revelation that shines when one touches the really real. Knowing this “original intuition” or “transobjective subjectivity” is knowing “The Truth” and requires great stamina and self-assurance in the face of ridicule, since this “Truth” appears as madness to those living in the falsities of a fabricated existence. This spiritual journey is traversed in the vessel of faith and imagination whose compass is the really real revealing itself in the present moment. What results is a simple, yet, prophetic smile which communicates the vast depths of inner peace and hope that come in knowing “The Truth.”

The really real is also the central theme of the poetry of César Vallejo. This “Inca and Prophet” earned Merton’s highest affection and admiration. Vallejo helped solve the problems of the Americas, in Merton’s estimation, because he, more than any other poet, was able to write in such a way that exposed the deep vapidity and confusion of the modern U. S. American. By his sophisticated use of symbolic and prophetic imagery, Vallejo was able to pierce straight through the crusted obfuscations of America’s delusional tendencies. His poetry, further, points toward an eschatological existence that is only accessible by coming face to face with the reality of one’s mortality. The Prophet Vallejo, much like the Prophet Paul before him, courageously proclaimed the only message which truly liberates: “Estais Muertos.”

From our examination of what Merton describes as the prophetic elements in Latin American poetry, as well as through an analysis of some of the poems of Pablo Antonio
Cuadra, Alfonso Cortés, and César Vallejo, all of whom Merton repeatedly references as prophetic, three major themes about Merton’s understanding of prophecy arise. First, poetry has a unique capacity to carry a “prophetic quality” because it has the ability through its symbolic language and imagery to reveal the hidden wisdom of the past to both critique and offer perspective on contemporary situations. A type of listening—a prophetic ear—is, therefore, required to grasp this hidden wisdom, and creative and prophetic verse is required to express it in a way that does justice to the many layers of meaning involved in the particular insight. Secondly, the prophetic ear of the Latin American poets was developed through their intentional, simple, and authentic living. Thus, the prophetic spirit is characterized by a singularity of focus upon the most real which provides the capacity to see through superficial and dehumanizing tendencies and allows for the freedom to write from a place of radical truth. Thirdly, the “prophetic quality” of poetry is soteriological and eschatological in nature in that it bears within itself the capacity to heal, save, and reveal a saner and more just existence for humankind. James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a book of significant influence upon Merton, says it this way: “Contra\*hit orator, variant\* in carmine vates.” 80 These three prophetic qualities of poetry can be read as explications of Merton’s definition of a poem, which he says is “any piece of writing or spoken utterance which, in symbolic and rhythmic language, seeks to communicate a deep and direct experience of life in some aspect of other. A poem however cannot be confined to mere teaching, nor is it necessarily ‘inspirational’ or even serious. It must however in

some way or other strive to be more memorable and more challenging than mere prose.”

Further explications concerning the prophetic nature of poetry are expressed in Merton’s “Message to Poets.” It is to this “Message” that we now turn.

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81 Merton to Jan Boggs, Feb. 9 1966, RTJ, 338.
Chapter 3

Thomas Merton’s Prophetic Spirituality in “Message to Poets”

The poets have much to say and do: they have the same mission as the prophets in the technical world. They have to be the consciousness of the revolutionary man because they have the keys of the subconscious and of the great secrets of real life.¹

-Thomas Merton

Background

The occasion for Merton’s “Message to Poets” was a gathering of the new, emerging Latin-American poets, along with a few young North Americans, in Mexico City in February of 1964. The gathering came about out of a shared vision and love for poetry and the need for solidarity and mutual encouragement among these young, highly visionary voices seeking inspiration in poetic expression. It crystalized spontaneously through the initiative of mostly poor poets from throughout the hemisphere. One attendee, for instance, “sold her piano to make the trip from Peru.”² Miguel Grinberg, one of Merton’s Latin American correspondents, invited Merton to attend, presumably for the purpose of addressing the group and offering them affirmation and encouragement in their creative endeavors. Because Merton was not allowed to attend, he wrote a “Message to Poets.” This

¹ Merton to Ludovico Silva, 27 April 1967, CFT, 230.
² LE, 371. A “Message to Poets” was originally published in excerpts in Americas, 16, April 1964, but was subsequently published in full in Raids on the Unspeakable (New York: New Directions, 1966).
gave Merton the opportunity to express his heartfelt solidarity with the poetic impulses he saw budding in these young Latin American writers. At the heart of his “Message” is the necessity for the poet to acquire a prophetic spirit, which Merton felt was required if the poet was to speak anything meaningful to the modern world.

Summary

Merton opens his “Message” by asserting that the poet discovers the meaning of life through the very act of living. Poetry becomes a metaphor for life, since the poet knows “that the reason for a poem is not discovered until the poem itself exists.” Merton sees this meeting of poets as a “spontaneous explosion of hopes.” It is a “venture in prophetic poverty” supported by poets with “their own vision of reality and of the future.” It is a fire of hope—a new fire whose reason for being will only be discovered after walking straightway into “contradictions and possibilities.” The poet must live in tune with the “Spirit of Life.” His or her life must be characterized by spiritual immediacy through which the poet becomes the expression of the revelation of this Spirit of Life. Yet, this is not a project for the individual poet alone. The revelation of the Spirit of Life will be known in the gathered community of those who have come together in love and hope—a revelation which is impossible to comprehend in alienation from the vitality of the poetic community:

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3 LE, 371.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
“The Spirit of Life that has brought us together, whether in space or only in agreement, will make our encounter an epiphany of certainties we could not know in isolation.”

Merton proceeds to contrast the motivations of the poets with those who gather together for tactical reasons or matters of policy which are affairs of “prejudice, cunning, and design.” The poet is the “innocent” one in sync with the pure rhythms of life. On the other hand, the one with a “collective” mind is the cunning and manipulative one who is out of step with the pure rhythms of life due to selfish motivations. The solidarity of poets happens spontaneously as individual poets surrender to life “in the Spirit.” The “collective” mind sows seeds of doubt by its derision of the reality of hope. Metaphysical doubt infects “collective life” by pitting one person against another and by imposing on each false and illusory measurements. This leads to the dehumanizing mentality that sees the human person as an object for sale in a slave market. Despair sets in because the collective mind knows it has been unfaithful to life and to being. Out of their own spiritual alienation, people living with a collective mind contrive to break, to humiliate, and to destroy the spirit of others. Such individuals fall into an existence which is permeated by feelings of guilt, betrayal, and the radical limitation of life—namely, death. Poets stand in solidarity “to denounce the shame and the imposture of all such calculations.” The solidarity of poets must stand in contrast to the poisons of “collective life” and “must reject the seductions of

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 372.
Poets must not allow themselves to be categorized as opposites of the collective mentality as if they were a “real” alternative.

Merton then makes a brief excursus on the similarities between the vocation of the poet and that of the monk. The poet, like the monk, must remain outside the collectivists’ categories and “remain innocent and invisible to publicists and bureaucrats.”

Continuing his contrasting analogy between collective and poetic mentalities, Merton describes the collective mentality as one which weaves words about life in order to make them conform to what the collectivists themselves have declared. Such propagandists believe in “the magic of words.” The poetic mentality rejects such magic and expresses itself solely in the unpredictability and freedom of life. “All magic is a ruthless venture in manipulation, a vicious circle, a self-fulfilling prophecy.” This leads Merton to articulate one of his clearest definitions of prophecy in all of his writings: “To prophesy is not to predict, but to seize upon reality in its moment of highest expectations and tension toward the new. This tension is discovered not in hypnotic elation but in the light of everyday existence.” Poetry, in this context, “is innocent of prediction because it is itself the fulfillment of all the momentous predictions hidden in everyday life.”

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid, 373.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
Merton continues his description of poetry as “the flowering of ordinary possibilities. It is the fruit of ordinary and natural choice. This is its innocence and dignity.”\textsuperscript{16} The poetic spirit is one completely surrendered to the ordinariness of life. It accepts reality as it is and gives voice to this reality amidst the multitude of expressions of distorted reality. By being obedient to life, the poet calls forth new fruits of hope which the world has not yet seen—fruits which will “calm the resentments and the rage of man.”\textsuperscript{17} Words are given to poets for the sole purpose of pointing “beyond all objects into the silence where nothing can be said.”\textsuperscript{18} The words of the poet have the potential to be the words of God spoken out of silence leading back into silence. The poet is a minister of silence curing “all victims of absurdity who lie dying of a contrived joy.”\textsuperscript{19} Poets are “dervishes mad with secret therapeutic love which cannot be bought or sold,….”\textsuperscript{20} They are “stronger than the bomb.”\textsuperscript{21} Therefore, the poet must embrace “the insecurity and abjection that a dervish existence entails.”\textsuperscript{22}

Merton concludes his “Message” by returning to the “collective mind” and “poetic mind” antithesis. For him, the “collective mind” is represented by Plato’s Republic, where there is no place for poets. The “poetic mind” is, on the other hand, represented by the Heraclitean ever-moving river where truth is manifest to all who are able to receive it in that instant. The “technological Platos” think they run the world they live in and imagine they

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 374.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
can tempt the world “with banalities and abstractions.” The “poetic mind” eludes these “technological Platos” simply by stepping into the Heraclitean river. Yet, entry into the river requires one to approach it with one’s own two feet. One must feel the moving waters with one’s naked skin. “He must know that immediacy is for naked minds only, and for the innocent.” Thus, Merton can end his “Message”: “Come, dervishes: here is the water of life. Dance in it.”

Analysis

Merton’s opening sentence, “We who are poets know that the reason for a poem is not discovered until the poem itself exists,” serves two primary purposes. First, it establishes his solidarity with the poetic community of Latin America, and, secondly, it introduces his understanding of the phenomenological dynamism of poetic creativity. Poetry happens as result of one’s living. It is an unfolding of life itself in poetic expression. In this sense, poetry writes itself. Living spontaneously is, thus, a prerequisite for writing meaningful poetry. It is such spontaneity which is the cause for this “spontaneous explosion of hopes” which has assembled this poetic community together. Merton’s description of the gathering as “a venture in prophetic poverty” refers to the spiritual impulse at work, drawing a group of like-minded artists with meager monetary resources together to explore the

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23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid. Robert Daggy uses this final line of Merton’s “Message to Poets” as its basis for his title of the fifth volume of Merton’s journals of which he was editor: Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage.
possibilities of their common vocation. Such an impulse is prophetic because it reveals “a living expression of the belief that there are now in our world new people, new poets who are not in tutelage to established political systems or cultural structures—whether communist or capitalist—but who dare to hope in their own vision of reality and of the future.” The prophetic spirit of the poet is seen to be one guided by counter-cultural principles and motivations. Their source of life is found in something other than the status quo. These poets have heard an original message and are fired with the need to make it known. The fire of this spiritual impulse, Merton sees, is their common bond. He refers to it as the “Spirit of Life.” This “Spirit of Life” has gathered these poets together because He has something to speak to them—something they cannot hear in their own individual isolation. Merton’s idea of prophetic activity here is, thus, communal in orientation. The voice of the “Spirit” is discerned in the midst of the gathered community open to the spontaneity of this creative “Spirit.”

The body of Merton’s “Message” is an exposition on the contrasting voices he introduces in the first paragraph; namely, the voice of the “Spirit of Life” with the voice of what he will call “collective life.” By pitting one against the other, the prophetic voice of the “Spirit of Life” comes into clearer focus.

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26 Ibid., 371.
27 Merton’s use of the term “collective” is extensive. It first appears in his journal entry of May 6, 1949. This quote from D. S. Savage highlights the intimate relationship Merton saw between poetry and prophecy fifteen years before his “Message to Poets”: “It seems inherently probable that in his isolation from the mass society... the American poet, forced back into his interior life, will be led to discover the reality of the individual and the relevance of the metaphysical-religious perspectives which open up when the individual existence, and not the collective being of society, is taken as the central point of reference for the adventure of human experience. And he may as poet, prophet and seer open a way for the eventual transformation of
In contrast to the solidarity of the poets brought together by living in the spontaneity of the “Spirit of Life,” “collective life” gathers together through planned, tactical convictions or matters of policy, “since these are affairs of prejudice, cunning, and design.”28 The life of the poet, on the other hand, is characterized by “innocence.” Such “innocence” is a result of living in fidelity to “life rather than to artificial systems.”29 Merton likens living innocently to the sunlight, seasons, and rain: “It is something that cannot be organized, it can only happen. It can only be ‘received.’ It is a gift to which we must remain open.”30 The poet must always stand guard against the seeds of doubt “collective life” seeks to sow, since it is through such doubt that “innocence” is lost. How does the poet stand guard against such seeds of doubt? Through faith, since, “all innocence is a matter of belief.”31 By keeping steadfastly open to life “in the spirit,” the poet assures him or herself of staying in tune with the Spirit’s voice despite the cacophony of distracting noises sounding from “collective” society.

Collective life also contributes to the formation of “illusory measurements” built by a world with “arbitrary values without life and meaning, full of sterile agitation.”32 It

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28 LE, 371.
29 Ibid., 372.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
becomes the task of the poet in the face of such “illusory measurements” and “metaphysical doubt” to “denounce,” “remain united against,” “refuse,” and “reject” all that is contrary to the pure voice of the Spirit. The poet must never treat the “collective” mind as a validly contrary alternative—it is pure illusion and must be exposed as such, since it has no metaphysical basis in reality. This is the context in which Merton compares the poet to the monk. Remaining outside the categories of the “collective” mind is the poet’s common vocation and prophetic task. Such opposition will not be understood. Collective consciousness only understands itself—only what “they themselves have decreed.”

This is not because they are simply ignorant and lazy slaves to their own limited perspective. This is because “they are crafty ones who weave words about life and then make life conform to what they themselves have declared.” Such “word-magic” can be seen as a type of false prophecy, an impure form of language coming from an impure spirit, deliberately unintelligible, which appeals to the vulnerable will. The poet’s responsibility in the face of such false prophecy is not “derision” but true prophecy. It is in contrast to this idea of “word-magic” or false prophecy that Merton shares his thoughts on the meaning of true prophecy.

It is clear that Merton is aware of the various meanings attached to the word prophecy, as well as its various functions. On more than one occasion in his writings he dismisses the facile understanding of prophecy as prediction. Rather, the function of

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33 Ibid., 373.
34 Ibid.
35 See his novitiate conferences tapes “Life and Prophecy” (TM9) and “The Prophets” (A4520 and A4521). “The Prophets” was given in July of 1962. The date of “Life and Prophecy” is unknown. Both were published by Credence.
prophecy in his “Message to Poets” is more in line with the biblical tradition of the Hebrew prophets, a tradition in which he had himself been immersed for many years before 1964. Like the Hebrew prophets, Merton’s prophet is one who “seize(s) upon reality in its moment of highest expectation and tension toward the new.”

“Reality,” here, for Merton, is alive, dynamic, and filled with spiritual vitality. It seeks to reveal itself in an ever evolving thrust toward the future. It is the bearer of eschatological hope. It is in the voice of the prophet that “reality” finds its release from built-up tension. The prophet, here, becomes the pregnant mother giving birth to a “new” reality. The prophet’s task, therefore, is to “seize” upon this moment of birth. To “seize” implies the active participation of the prophet in the birthing process. The prophet is not seen simply as the passive conduit through which the Spirit speaks. Rather, he or she sings in harmony with the melody of God’s new song resounding from within his or her own inner, creative resources. Merton goes on to point out that this tension is a matter of discovery, not “in hypnotic elation but in the light of everyday existence.”

We see that Merton, here, also dismisses the notion of prophecy as the ecstatic utterance of those caught up in a spiritual frenzy. Merton’s “prophet,” rather, has both feet firmly planted on the ground of “reality.” This process of “discovery,” which is the responsibility of the prophet, is the contemplative dimension of the prophetic process. The poet must develop a contemplative awareness through which he or she sees the unfolding of reality as it reveals itself in the pregnant moments of everyday life. Those

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36 LE, 373.
37 Ibid.
38 See “Life and Prophecy.” Here Merton contrasts the classical prophets with the nabi; nabi referring to those prophets who prophesy through ecstatic frenzies. He makes reference to Jeremiah’s critical lament over such prophets in Jeremiah 23.
caught up in “hypnotic elation” are too prone to be thwarted by the illusory impulses of our fallen nature to be able to see reality in its pure form—to hear its unalloyed message. The “innocence” of the poet protects him or her from imposing his or her own version of reality upon the Reality of the unfolding “Spirit of Life.” The poem is understood as the culmination of the “Spirit’s” prophetic thrust—it is the prophecy. It is not prediction because “it is itself the fulfillment of all the momentous predictions hidden in everyday life.”

It is, rather, “the flowering of ordinary possibilities.” Prophecy, for Merton, is thus the natural climax of those in tune with reality. With poetry, “it is the fruit of ordinary and natural choice.” It is these fruits born through the obedience of poets to the Spirit of Life which will “calm the resentments and the rage of man.”

Merton’s emphasis on the spirituality of the poet as one living in the ordinary immediacy of everyday life is further expanded as he writes about the non-persuasive nature of poetry. Writing poetry is an apophatic endeavor. It points “beyond all objects into the silence where nothing can be said.” Poetry arises out of silence and moves back into silence. Its function, if it can be said to have one, is to move the reader into silence; not the silence of a lifeless void but the fecund silence of the Spirit of Life. This poetry leading into silence is prophetic because it is a cure to “all victims of absurdity who lie dying of a

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39 LE, 373.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid. Although Merton uses the terms prophecy and poetry, at times, interchangeably, he never explicitly equates them. He seems to believe that poetry is a very compatible form of prophetic expression but would certainly not hold that all poetry is prophetic in nature.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 374.
contrived joy." It exposes falsity, illusion, and superficiality. Here, Merton’s affinity for Sufism comes through with this analogy: “Let us then recognize ourselves for who we are: dervishes mad with secret therapeutic love which cannot be bought or sold, and which the politician fears more than violent revolution, for violence changes nothing. But love changes everything.” The poet is the voice of healing love that heals the contrivances and distortions of the “politician” through authentic and humble expressions of truth. Paradoxically, such “innocent” expressions “are stronger than the bomb.” Although a poet’s life is often characterized, like the dervish’s, by “insecurity and abjection,” the “nobility” and prophetic power of its marginalized existence is found in the embrace of his or her own integrity.

What is interesting about his development of the apophatic, non-persuasive nature of poetry is that it follows immediately after his discussion on the prophetic nature of poetry, what would normally be considered persuasive. Is Merton’s notion of poetry, then, self-contradictory? The answer to the question depends upon whether Merton actually considers the prophetic nature of poetry as intentionally persuasive or not. In other words, does the poet, for Merton, write poetry seeking to effect change in people or is this rather a natural effect of his or her fidelity to living open to the Spirit of Life as a poet? Although the answer to this question is not explicitly stated within his “Message to Poets,” Merton does seem to favor the latter option. What is certain, however, is Merton’s assertion that the vocation of both the poet and the prophet is rooted in a deeper vocation to contemplative

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44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
living. Poetry and prophecy are, thus, as stated before, “the flowering of ordinary possibilities” and “the fruit of ordinary and natural choice.” The comment which immediately follows, “This is its innocence and dignity,” reveals something unique about Merton’s approach to both poetry and prophecy. Perhaps one could argue, especially considering the technological consciousness of modern humanity, that it is precisely in their non-coercive humility and “innocence” that the words of the prophetic poet become persuasive.

The concluding metaphorical antithesis between Plato and Heraclitus reveals Merton’s deep affinity for the philosopher of vitality and change, as well as his skepticism of technological innovators who pride themselves with the thought that their ideas “run the world” but which really lead only to “banalities and abstractions.” The solution to the ideas of these “technological Platos” is living in the immediacy of Heraclitus’ vital, ever-moving river of life. Heraclitus, thus, becomes the symbolic figure whose approach to life most completely characterizes the poet’s (as well as the prophet’s) proper consciousness and subjective orientation. In Heraclitus are found immediacy, innocence, openness, humility, vitality, creativity, possibility, hope, spirit. Heraclitus, for Merton, “was one of those rare spirits whose prophetic insight enabled them to see far beyond the limited horizons of their society.”

While most people ridiculed him, he was one who “preferred loneliness to the

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47 Ibid, 373. The non-persuasive nature of Merton’s idea of prophecy also corresponds with his approach to ecumenical dialogue at this time in his life.

48 Ibid.

warm security of their collective illusions.”

The contemplative/poetic/prophetic vocation of Heraclitus is summed up, here, in this passage from Merton’s 1960 essay, “Herakleitos (sic) the Obscure”:

The aristocratic contempt of Herakleitos for the conventional verbalizing of his fellow citizens was something other than a pose, or a mad reflex of wounded sensibility. It was a prophetic manifestation of intransigent honesty. He refused to hold his peace and spoke out with angry concern for truth. He who had seen “the One” was no longer permitted to doubt, to hedge, to compromise, and to flatter. To treat his intuition as one among many opinions would have been inexcusable. False humility was an infidelity to his deepest self and a betrayal of the fundamental insights of his life. It would have been above all a betrayal of those whom he could not effectively contact except by the shock of paradox. Herakleitos took the same stand as Isaiahs, who was commanded by God to “blind the eyes of this people” by speaking to them in words that were too simple, too direct, too uncompromising to be acceptable. It is not given to men of compromise to understand parables, for as Herakleitos remarked: “When the things that are right in front of them are pointed out to them, they do not pay attention, though they think they do.”

This is the tragedy which most concerns Herakleitos—and which should concern us even more than it did him: the fact that the majority of men think they see, and do not. They believe they listen, but they do not hear. They are “absent when present” because in the act of seeing and hearing they substitute the clichés of familiar prejudice for the new and unexpected truth that is being offered to them. They complacently imagine they are receiving a new light, but in the very moment of apprehension they renew their obsession with the old darkness, which is so familiar that it, and it alone, appears to them to be light.

In invoking Heraclitus as the exemplary symbol of the contemplative, prophetic poet, Merton, as evidenced by this passage, touches upon a number of common themes which appear in many of his passages discussing the prophetic nature of poetry. Seven points can be made from the above two paragraphs from “Herakleitos the Obscure.” First, the prophetic poet has contempt for “conventional verbalizing.” The “prophetic manifestation

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50 Ibid., 266.
of intransigent honesty,” which is the poet’s justifiable response in the face of such “conventional verbalizing,” demonstrates Merton’s insistence of the poet’s deep value for linguistic honesty and meaningfulness. The prophetic poet always speaks the truth; indeed, he or she even speaks with “angry concern for truth.” Secondly, the prophetic poet has a contemplative awareness of “the One.” He or she “sees,” “intuits,” and has “insight.” Such words are frequently used by Merton to describe the contemplative gaze required of the prophetic poet. It is the way the prophet and poet hears what God is revealing to them. Thirdly, the prophetic poet has an uncompromising commitment to the revelation of God. The intuition received from God is not simply “one among many opinions.” There is no room for “false humility,” since a denial of God’s message would entail a denial of one’s “deepest self and a betrayal of the fundamental insights of his life.” Fourthly, the prophetic poet uses paradox to shock the hearer into the awareness of a new reality. This parabolic technique plays on the expectations of the hearer utilizing symbol, story and imagination to expand the hearer’s consciousness beyond the constrictions of limited perspective. This brings us to the fifth point: Merton often uses examples from the Hebrew prophets to support his ideas about the nature of prophetic poetry. His reference to Isaiah serves to illustrate his previous points and leads into the ones that follow; namely, that the “majority of men,” the “collective life” of his “Message,” are given to illusion: “they think they see, and do not.” More than that, their illusion becomes delusion as they seek to justify themselves in the face of “the new and unexpected truth that is being offered to them.” And this, finally, leads to the seventh point which is the conscious (and at times unconscious)
motivations that the “majority of men” use to justify remaining in their own delusions. They are enslaved to the “familiar” and prefer their enslavement above change and liberation.

In summary, the prerequisite of Heraclitean-influenced prophetic poetry, then, is for the poet to develop a contemplative awareness of God. Its function is to speak the truth unflinchingly, to liberate from illusion, to expand the hearer’s consciousness, to make life more authentic and meaningful.
Chapter 4

Prophetic Fiction: Thomas Merton’s Reading of Boris Pasternak, Albert Camus, and William Faulkner

Thomas Merton’s literary interests can be traced back to his childhood days as a student in France and afterwards at Oakham in Rutland, England. Already at the lycée, Merton tried his hand at writing novels. Later, at Oakham in 1931 at the age of sixteen, he became the editor of the school magazine, The Oakhamian. In his student days at Columbia University, he affiliated himself with the literary group on campus and served as the art editor of The Jester of Columbia, where he published numerous cartoons, poems, and editorials. During this time, Merton also published numerous book reviews in The New York Times Book Review and The New York Herald Tribune Book Review. His two earliest reviews appeared in May of 1938; one on The World’s Body by John Crowe Ransom and the other on Laughter in the Dark by Vladimir Nabokov.

Merton’s early novels, The Labyrinth, The Man in the Sycamore Tree, and The Straits of Dover (whose title eventually became The Night Before the Battle), all of which were written in the summers of 1939 and 1940, were all burned before he left New York for Gethsemani. One novel was spared: Journal of My Escape from the Nazis (it was eventually published a year after his death under the title of My Argument with the Gestapo). Merton would never again attempt to write fiction. This does not mean, however, that his interests in the art form completely disappeared with his profession of vows as a Trappist
monk. Like many of his early interests, it would lie dormant for a number of years during
his early monastic formation, but, in time, would find new and reinvigorated expression.

It is no coincidence that the reemergence of Merton’s literary interests coincide with
his experience on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in downtown Louisville. Exactly two
months after the experience he records in his journal his discovery of Boris Pasternak:
“Above all, this year has marked my discovery of Pasternak…. This is a great writer with a
wonderful imagination and all he says is delightful—one of the great writers of our time and
no one pays much attention…. He is so good I don’t see very well how the Reds can avoid
killing him. Coming down the chapel steps and praying for his soul, a great one, a man who
is spiritual in everything he thinks and says!”1 Pasternak and the “Pasternak Affair” (the
controversy surrounding his being awarded the 1958 Nobel Prize for literature) would
occupy much of Merton’s attention between the middle of 1958 and Pasternak’s death in
May of 1960. Merton’s shared correspondence with Pasternak over the course of these two
years, along with the essays he wrote about Pasternak, reveal his deep affection for one he
would call “a prophet of a new age.”2

Just a few years after Pasternak’s death, Merton would shift his literary interests to
two other novelists whose writing he considered highly prophetic: Albert Camus and
William Faulkner.3 It was in these two writers, in particular, that Merton saw the monastic
function of prophetic witness being exercised most powerfully. As Patrick Hart recognizes,

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1 SFS, 203.
2 Merton to Cuadra, Dec. 4 1958, CFT, 182.
3 While Camus and Faulkner wrote primarily fiction, Pasternak was also a prolific writer of poetry.
“This vision led Merton in the mid-sixties to shift his attention from formally religious writings to literary models.” It was after a visit from Jacques Maritain in the fall of 1966 that Merton wrote to his publisher, James Laughlin, expressing a new approach he and Maritain felt was best for dealing with the theological and philosophical problems of the day: “Jacques Maritain and I both agreed that we thought perhaps the most living way to approach theological and philosophical problems now (that theology and philosophy are in such chaos) would be in the form of creative writing and literary criticism. I am pleased with the idea and it seems to make sense....” Merton would go on to write numerous essays in literary criticism, treating poets and novelists alike. Besides the aforementioned essays on William Blake, Merton would also treat such writers as James Joyce (“News of the Joyce Industry” and “A Footnote from Ulysses: Peace and Revolution), Edwin Muir (“The True Legendary Sound: The Poetry and Criticism of Edwin Muir”), Simone Weil (“The Answer of Minerva: Pacifism and Resistance in Simone Weil”), Roland Barthes (“Roland Barthes—Writing as Temperature”), J. F. Powers (“J. F. Powers—Morte D’Urban: Two Celebrations”), William Styron (“William Styron—Who Is Nat Turner?”), Flannery O’Connor (“Flannery O’Connor—A Prose Elegy”), Rolf Hochhuth (“The Trial of Pope Pius XII: Rolf Hochhuth’s The Deputy”), and William Melvin Kelley (“William Melvin Kelley—The Legend of Tucker Caliban”), all of which would eventually be

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4 LE, xv.
published in 1981 in his collection *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton.* Most prominently featured in this thick volume, however, are essays on the three novelists Boris Pasternak, Albert Camus, and William Faulkner. In these essays, Merton explores the prominent themes of their work, highlighting with special emphasis their prophetic content. In fact, among all the people Merton describes as prophetic, these three novelists receive the highest approbation. We shall treat each in turn.

**Boris Pasternak: “Prophet of a New Age”**

*Individual human life became the life story of God and its contents filled the vast expanses of the universe.*

-Boris Pasternak

In Boris Pasternak (1890-1960), Thomas Merton found a kindred spirit. Both were poets; both were novelists; both were lovers of nature; both wrote with prophetic conviction exposing the dehumanizing injustices of their day; both were caught in situations which forced each to make deep personal sacrifices for a greater good. These similarities would lead Merton to write in his initial letter to Pasternak, “It is as if we met on a deeper level of life on which individuals are not separate beings.” In his journal, Merton expresses this affinity from another angle: “I am in closer contact with Pasternak than I am with people in

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6 Also featured in LE are a number of essays on related literary questions. These titles include “Poetry, Symbolism and Typology,” “Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal,” “Theology of Creativity,” “Answers on Art and Freedom,” and “Why Alienation Is for Everybody.”


8 Merton to Pasternak, Aug. 22 1958, CFT, 87-88.
Louisville or Bardstown or even in my own monastery—and have more in common with him.”9 Like the Latin American poets Merton was discovering at this time, Pasternak bestowed immense inspiration upon Merton—both in his courageous living and in his prophetic writing. When Merton wrote to Pablo Antonio Cuadra at the end of 1958, saying, “We can and should be prophets of its [‘united, free America’] advent—just as Pasternak in Russia is a prophet of a new age,”10 Merton was giving voice to his spirit’s longing to help bring true unity and freedom to a fragmented and nationally segregated America. Pasternak’s Russia faced a somewhat different predicament. Marxism threatened to control and constrain a nation, and Pasternak was the prophet who stood up to expose its dehumanizing effects. This bold witness of Pasternak won Merton’s esteem and sparked a brief but lively correspondence lasting from 1958 until 1960.11

In Merton’s first letter to Pasternak, Merton expresses his deep affinity and love for Russian spirituality and her artists. He also expresses his desire to learn Russian “in order to try to get into Russian literature in the original”12—a desire which proved futile. Merton concludes his letter by expressing his admiration for Pasternak’s courageous and important work as a writer:

My dear Pasternak, it is a joy to write to you and to thank you for your fine poetry and your great prose. A voice like yours is of great importance for all mankind in our day…. The Russian leaders do not perhaps realize to the full how important and how great you are for Russia and for the world. Whatever may lie

9 SFS, 225.
10 Merton to Cuadra, Dec. 4 1958, CFT, 182.
11 A collection of the correspondence between Merton and Pasternak (three letters each) was published in *Six Letters: Boris Pasternak and Thomas Merton*, Forward by Naomi Burton Stone and Introduction by Lydia Pasternak Slater (Lexington: The King Library Press, 1973).
12 Merton to Pasternak, Aug. 22 1958, CFT, 88.
ahead for the world, I believe that men like yourself and I hope myself also may have the chance to enter upon a dialogue that will really lead to peace and to a fruitful age for man and his world. Such peace and fruitfulness are spiritual realities to which you already have access, though others do not.\footnote{Ibid.}

Merton’s prophetic eye for the authentically spiritual is evident in his admiration for Pasternak. Although Pasternak was not a conventional Christian, Merton saw in Pasternak “a chosen and Christian soul.”\footnote{Merton to Maritain, June 30 1960, CFT, 32.} To Helen Wolff, Pasternak’s publisher at Pantheon Books, Merton would write, “I believe he is very fundamentally Christian in the broad and prophetic sense that is vital today.”\footnote{Merton to Wolff, June 22 1959, CFT, 98.} In a separate letter, also to Wolff, he would write, “Pasternak could approach this mystery [resurrection and a new creation] with the confidence of the poet who is at home with symbols. His love gave the symbols great power and his vocation in the end was prophetic in a sense that has been granted to few religious men in our time.”\footnote{Merton to Wolff, June 9 1960, CFT, 101.} After viewing pictures of Pasternak’s funeral sometime in the summer of 1960, Merton would again express to Wolff his deep appreciation for Pasternak’s prophetic witness: “Really the pictures of the funeral floored me. They were tremendous, and a very moving witness to the love of the Russian people for the poet and prophet that has been given them—the only one in an age so dry of prophetic inspiration, and so full of the accents of false prophecy…. He is a great and eloquent witness of the resurrection and of immortality.”\footnote{Merton to Wolff, July 23 1960, CFT, 102.}
Shortly after sending off his initial letter to Pasternak, Merton received a copy of Doctor Zhivago. In order to understand why Merton saw Pasternak as “a prophet of a new age” and “a great and eloquent witness of the resurrection and of immortality,” one must understand the import of Pasternak’s novel for Merton. Merton offers his analysis of Doctor Zhivago and the significance of its achievement in two essays published in 1959: “Boris Pasternak and the People with Watch Chains” published in the July issue of Jubilee and “The Pasternak Affair in Perspective” published in the November issue of Thought. Both of these essays along with a brief introduction, “In Memoriam,” were published in his 1960 collection of essays, Disputed Questions, under the title “The Pasternak Affair.”

The inclusion of “The Pasternak Affair” in Disputed Questions, indeed, as its leading essay, supports Merton’s intentions as set forth in his Preface: “…I think there is one theme, one question above all, which runs through the whole book. It is a philosophical question: the relation of the person to the social organization.” Applied to Pasternak, the form of this central theme takes shape as Merton discusses the struggle “of one outstanding and gifted person isolated in the presence of a huge antagonistic totalitarian machine which turns against him the full force of its disapproval and stops short only of his physical destruction.” Merton casts Pasternak’s struggle against the “huge antagonistic totalitarian machine” in terms of false and true humanism. The false humanism of the Russian “totalitarian machine” was based upon, in Merton’s view, “a culture where man has first

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18 In Pasternak’s first two short letters to Merton, he expresses his disdain for his early writings saying, “that except the ‘Dr. Zh’ which you should read, all the rest of my verses and writings are devoid of any sense of importance” Six Letters, 8. Herein is found another similarity between Pasternak and Merton, who, especially in his later journals and letters, also expresses much disdain for his early writings.  
20 Ibid., viii-ix.
been completely alienated from himself by economic individualism, and then precipitated into the morass of mass-technological society which is there to receive us in an avalanche of faceless ‘numbers.’”

In contradistinction, true humanism is the discovery of our true identity as being made in the image of God. It is entered through the door of our own solitude where we learn how to live with ourselves. Yet, the life of true humanism carries with it implicit responsibility: “This discovery makes it impossible for us to evade the obligation of loving everyone else who bears in himself the same image.”

Merton saw in Pasternak the prophet of this true form of humanism and, in “The Pasternak Affair,” expounds on his thesis.

In Part I, “In Memoriam,” Merton, writing shortly after Pasternak’s peaceful death at a writer’s colony near Moscow in May of 1960, introduces the main events of Pasternak’s life, including the political intrigue which surrounded his being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958. The award garnered world-wide attention, including the attention of many young Russian writers who saw in Pasternak “a prophetic figure, a man whose ascendency was primarily spiritual.”

His impact upon the world, for Merton, was not so much grounded in what he wrote as in his witness as a genuinely spiritual man. As Merton asserts, “He became a kind of ‘sign’ of that honesty, integrity, sincerity which we tend to associate with the free and creative personality…. In one word, Pasternak emerged as a

\[\text{Ibid., xi.}\]

\[\text{Ibid.}\]

\[\text{Merton makes it a point to emphasize that Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize not for his novel \textit{Doctor Zhivago} alone but also for his work in poetry, other prose works, and translations. Many Russians, understandably, did not see it that way. The category in which the award was given was “Literature,” and Pasternak had written one novel, \textit{Doctor Zhivago}, which had first been published (in Italian translation) in 1957.}\]

\[\text{DQ, 4.}\]
genuine human being stranded in a mad world.” Yet, it should be noted that Pasternak riled the Russian authorities and proved dangerous to their Marxist ideologies not simply because of his particular form of spiritual integrity but precisely because he chose to express himself and his panoramic vision of life in his novel. This relationship between personal conviction and verbal communication highlights a distinction Merton had a tendency to overlook in his descriptions of Pasternak’s prophetic spirituality. Being so concerned with prophecy as a way of life grounded in authenticity and personal conviction, he can at times diminish the particular value of prophecy as communication. Pasternak was prophetic not simply because he possessed an authentic spirituality and genuine, personal convictions but because he, while knowing the possible consequences, chose to communicate his personal convictions anyway. This is not to say that Merton neglects to see the prophetic value of communication. Indeed, our treatment on the subject thus far has proven otherwise. In the case of Pasternak, however, Merton seems to be so enamored with the courageous and heroic way of life exemplified by his Russian friend that the prophetic power of Doctor Zhivago seems almost secondary. Nevertheless, Merton did consider Doctor Zhivago a great work of prophetic fiction, as the remainder of “The Pasternak Affair” demonstrates.

In Part II, “The People with Watch Chains,” Merton discusses what makes Pasternak’s novel a truly great book: “it is in some way about everybody and everybody is involved in it.” Its central (and not too obscure) theme is the triumph of Life (Zhivago means life) in all its pain, ambivalence, and mystery over “the illusory, frozen-faced imago

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25 Ibid., 5.
26 Ibid., 8.
of Life upon which Communism constructs its spiritless fantasies of the future.”27 It is the story about a protagonist, not incidentally a poet, whose frustrated and confused life in the face of violence and oppression calls forth the creative and life-transforming impulses of the human spirit. It is about the ability of Life to defy confinement and control. It is about the spiritual fecundity and creativity of the soul which, through its heroic suffering and endurance, dismantles all that seeks to destroy it. Ultimately, it is about “the mystery of history as passion and resurrection.”28

Such life, for Merton, is revolutionary. Not in the sense of a rebel and non-conformist, who simply “wants to substitute his own authority for the authority of somebody else.”29 Rather, it is revolutionary in the same way that the life of Gandhi was revolutionary. Merton notes that the protest of Pasternak and Gandhi are ultimately the same: “the protest of life itself, of humanity itself, of love, speaking not with theories and programs but simply affirming itself and asking to be judged on its own merits.”30 He explains that this protest of love is essentially Christian in the sense that it is an “intense awareness of all cosmic and human reality as ‘life in Christ’ and the consequent plunge into love as the only dynamic and creative force which really honors this ‘Life’ by creating itself anew in Life’s—Christ’s—image.”31 It is this vision of cosmic Christianity that leads Merton to identify Pasternak as “a prophet of the original, cosmic revelation: one who sees symbols and figures of the inward, spiritual world, working themselves out in the mystery of the universe

27 Ibid., 7-8.
28 Ibid., 8.
29 Ibid., 11.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 12.
around him and above all in the history of men. Not so much in the formal, and illusory, history of states and empires that is written down in books, but in the living, transcendental and mysterious history of individual human beings and in the indescribable interweaving of their destinies.”

This cosmic spirituality finds expression in Pasternak’s protagonist in three primary vocations: as artist, symbolist, and prophet. As Merton comments, “It is as artist, symbolist and prophet that Zhivago stands most radically in opposition to Soviet society.” The relationship of each of these three vocations to the other, for Merton, is, as is becoming obvious, an interdependent one. Interpreted in Aristotelian fashion, in *Doctor Zhivago*, prophecy is seen as a type of “final cause” of a particular type of spiritual impulse. Through the use of words (“material cause”) in their symbolic form (“formal cause”), the artist (“efficient cause”) constructs prophetic communication. This prophetic communication, in order to be most powerful and transformative, must flow from a life fully committed to its primal, spiritual impulse. This is exactly what makes *Zhivago* and, by implication, Pasternak so prophetic. It is against the “pseudo-scientific array of propaganda clichés” that the “Doctor Life” stands diagnosing the sickness of Soviet society. His belief in intuition, a great sin according to the Marxists, allows him to grasp the full meaning and implication of the situation as a whole. With *Zhivago*, it is in the poetic vocation, which is at once dynamic and contemplative, that the intuitive faculty is most alive and active. As Merton notes, “dynamic” and “contemplative” are “two terms which can only be

32 Ibid., 17-18.
33 Ibid., 18.
34 Ibid., 20.
synthesized in the heat of a prophetic ardor.”35 The unfolding process of Zhivago’s prophetic communication is described thus: “When in the moment of inspiration the poet’s creative intelligence is married with the inborn wisdom of human language (the Word of God and Human Nature—Divinity and Sophia) then in the very flow of new and individual intuitions, the poet utters the voice of that wonderful and mysterious world of God-manhood—it is the transfigured, spiritualized and divinized cosmos that speaks through him, and through him utters its praise of the Creator.”36 Ultimately, Merton understands prophecy as praise. It is that eschatological acclamation that moves all things in a definite direction. And to which direction does it move? Its movement is toward freedom, not a political or social freedom but a freedom found in a “new dimension of the future which we cannot yet estimate because it is not yet with us.”37 Biblically understood, this prophetic utterance of praise is an utterance of faith which “calls into existence the things that do not exist.”38

In the final section of “The Pasternak Affair,” Merton focuses upon the spiritual implications surrounding the publication of Doctor Zhivago. In commenting upon the spirituality of Pasternak as seen both in Doctor Zhivago and in his own quiet witness, Merton insightfully summarizes its significance:

Pasternak stands first of all for the great spiritual values that are under attack in our materialistic world. He stands for the freedom and nobility of the individual person, for man the image of God, for man in whom God dwells. For Pasternak, the person is and must always remain prior to the collectivity. He stands for courageous, independent loyalty to his own conscience, and for the refusal to

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35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 20-21. Treatment of the relationship between wisdom and prophecy will be further developed in our discussion of William Faulkner.
37 Ibid., 24.
38 Rom. 4:17, NRSV.
compromise with slogans and rationalizations imposed by compulsion. Pasternak is fighting for man’s true freedom, his true creativity, against the false and empty humanism of the Marxists—for whom man does not yet truly exist. Over against the technological jargon and the empty scientism of modern man, Pasternak set creative symbolism, the power of imagination and of intuition, the glory of liturgy and the fire of contemplation. But he does so in new words, in a new way. He speaks for all that is sanest and most permanently vital in religious and cultural tradition, but with the voice of a man or our own time.\(^{39}\)

What is most striking about Pasternak’s witness, for Merton, is the fact that even after surviving the worst of Stalin’s purges, Pasternak, through his literary protest, still castigates Stalinism, and not while living as an exile but while living in the heart of Russia. Therein rests Pasternak’s symbolic greatness and prophetic power.

That Life is Love is the great theme of *Doctor Zhivago*. This is precisely the salve which heals humankind’s many illnesses. Pasternak had the insight that love is the ultimate expression of spirituality and freedom. He imbues his leading protagonist with this motivation and it can be seen in the characterization of nearly every relationship throughout the novel. *Doctor Zhivago*, in a sense, can be read as an exploration of the various aspects of love. As Merton notes, “Every degree of true and false love makes its appearance in the book….\(^{40}\) Merton sees this particular aspect of Pasternak’s spirituality as being highly influenced by Vladimir Soloviev’s *Meaning of Love*\(^{41}\) where the vocation of the human person is “to regenerate the world by the spiritualization of human love raised to the sophianic level of perfect conscious participation in the mystery of the divine wisdom of

\(^{39}\) DQ, 31.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., 49.
which the earthly sacrament is love.” Pasternak’s spirituality of love is what confirms him as a Christian witness to the gospel. For Merton, this most important component of spiritual life validated Pasternak’s own belief in “Christ as the center of history.” This spirituality of love also validated Pasternak’s unfailing commitment to the supreme value of Christian humanistic thought, the value of personalism.

Merton is not alone in his evaluation of the fundamental Christian vision of Boris Pasternak. Neither is he alone in his assessment of Pasternak’s prophetic spirituality. One critic, Nichola Chiaromonte, remarks that, “The final point of Pasternak’s vision is the message of Christ, and what Christ means to him is absolute faith in man’s innerness and freedom.” George Panichas holds a similar opinion: “Pasternak’s message to modern man is without doubt the result of his own search for truth, his devotion to the freedom of the artist, his unwavering belief in the greatness of man. His message and meaning must be understood in the light of their Christian humility and simplicity…. Pasternak’s concept of love is complete precisely because it must be seen in the unity that is found in Christ.”

This Christian humanism of Pasternak is underscored early in Doctor Zhivago when he has Nikolai Nikolaievich, a former priest, say: “Gregariousness is always the refuge of mediocrities, whether they swear by Soloviev or Kant or Marx. Only individuals seek the truth, and they shun those whose sole concern is not the few indeed. I think one should be loyal to immortality, which is another word for life, a stronger word for it. One must be true

42 DQ, 49.
43 Cited in Ibid., 62. Merton, though placing this phrase in quotations, does not provide the reference in his text.
to immortality—true to Christ!” The triumph of the artist, symbolist, and prophet—all
descriptions of both Pasternak and Zhivago—over the forces of evil is Pasternak’s total
affirmation of the supreme value of the goodness of life. Imbedded within this affirmation
of life, however, is an unmistakable protest. Panichas notes how “[Zhivago’s] life
symbolizes the immemorial protest against the dehumanization of man; his death
immortalizes the struggle of man to free himself from those things and systems that would
destroy the human soul. In this protest and in this affirmation Boris Pasternak built a
monument to the divinity of all men.” Merton would certainly be in enthusiastic
agreement with Panichas’ perceptive assertion.

In concluding “The Pasternak Affair,” Merton offers his own prophetic observation
about the significance of Doctor Zhivago:

If we stop to think about what it says, we will realize that if Pasternak is
ever fully studied, he is just as likely to be regarded as a dangerous writer in the
West as he is in the East. He is saying that political and social structures as we
understand them are things of the past, and that the crisis through which we are
now passing is nothing but the full and inescapable manifestation of their falsity.
For twenty centuries we have called ourselves Christians, without even beginning to
understand one tenth of the Gospel. We have been taking Caesar for God and God
for Caesar. Now that ‘charity is growing cold’ and we stand facing the smoky dawn
of an apocalyptic era, Pasternak reminds us that there is only one source of truth, but
that it is not sufficient to know the source is there—we must go and drink from it, as
he has done.

Do we have the courage to do so? For obviously, if we consider what
Pasternak is saying, doing and undergoing, to read the Gospel with eyes wide open
may be a perilous thing!"8

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47 Panichas, The Reverent Discipline, 291.
48 DQ, 67.
Found among Merton’s unpublished manuscripts following his death was an essay entitled “Pasternak’s Letters to Georgian Friends.” Written in early 1968\textsuperscript{49} at the request of Helen Wolff, “Pasternak’s Letters to Georgian Friends” offers a further insight into Merton’s understanding of Pasternak’s prophetic spirituality. Written with the same affection which characterized “The Pasternak Affair,” the body of the essay focuses upon Pasternak’s devoted relationship to a number of Georgian poets and comments upon his work of translating Georgian texts. Most significantly, however, the essay focuses upon the nature of Pasternak’s commitment to his art, which Merton describes as a type of “ascesis of generosity.”\textsuperscript{50} This total commitment to the artistic endeavor, Merton notes, reflects an expression of Pasternak’s poet friend, Tabidze. The expression, \textit{gadavarda}, which means “to throw oneself headlong,” or as Merton puts it, “to dive right into the life-stream without after-thought and without care,”\textsuperscript{51} is, as Merton sees it, fully incorporated into Pasternak’s life-view. Not simply a leap into rivers of romantic ecstasy, \textit{gadavarda} is a much more sober reality. It is the absolute surrender of the fully devoted artist to the demands of his or her craft. Through his or her ascetic discipline, the artist’s particular work comes to life. Although an enriching experience, “it is the terrible enrichment of poverty and nakedness, solitude and abandon.”\textsuperscript{52} Or as Pasternak expresses, “Everywhere in the world one has to pay for the right to live on one’s own naked spiritual reserves.”\textsuperscript{53} Merton’s reflection on \textit{gadavarda} underscores his insistence on interpreting prophecy in terms of a spirituality and

\textsuperscript{49} “Pasternak’s Letters to Georgian Friends” was not published until 1978 in the first issue of \textit{The New Lazarus Review}.
\textsuperscript{50} LE, 88.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 91.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Cited in Ibid., 91.
not in terms of a passing charismatic gift. The power and substantive value of prophecy is found in the total investment of one’s life in hearing and communicating the Word of God. This requires great asceticism and growth in wisdom through insight and intuition, all of which necessitate the superior worth of the human person over any collective organization.

Merton’s astute and compassionate reading of Boris Pasternak, the man and his writings, exemplifies that particular prophetic insight which he valued so greatly in his beloved Russian friend. Merton was able to understand and appreciate the depth of Pasternak’s prophetic witness because he, too, possessed so many of the same prophetic sensibilities. Like Pasternak, Merton had that particular gift of seeing through the ephemeral and superficial and, with a discerning eye, identify what is sick in the human condition. Each entered fully into his own history and broke through the cultural and social conditions that threatened to deny the very soul of life. Indeed, as William Shannon asserts, “breaking through cultural restraints and seeing what could be is the role of the prophet.”

Albert Camus and the Prophetic Revolt

These men, who were born at the beginning of the First World War, who were twenty when Hitler came to power and the first revolutionary trials were beginning, who were then confronted as a completion of their education with the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the world of concentration camps, a Europe of torture and prisons – these men must today rear their sons and create their works in a world threatened by nuclear destruction. Nobody, I think, can ask them to be optimists. And I asserted their right to dishonor and have rushed into the nihilism of the era. But the fact remains that most of us, in my country and in Europe, have refused this nihilism and have engaged upon a quest for legitimacy. They have had to forge for

themselves an art of living in times of catastrophe in order to be born a second time and to fight openly against the instinct of death at work in our history.\textsuperscript{55}

In 1957, the year before Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the prestigious award was given to Albert Camus (1913-1960). He was forty-four. It was about this time that this prolific writer (besides novels, Camus also wrote numerous plays and essays) caught Merton’s attention, mainly through the recommendation of Czeslaw Milosz. As was often the case upon Merton’s discovery of a new prophetic voice, a certain fixation developed. Merton quickly became enamored with this Algerian visionary and artist who was speedily constructing an ethic that was at once original and timely. Also as was often the case, in the heat of enthrallment, Merton began preparing a book. The book on Camus never panned out but what was born were seven penetrating literary essays that probed the work of one who Merton considered both a “human” and “humble prophet.”\textsuperscript{56}

In his moving acceptance speech for his Nobel Prize, Camus interprets his own life first and foremost as an artist. The work of the artist is seen as a ministry of reconciliation: “The artist forges himself to the others, midway between the beauty he cannot do without


\textsuperscript{56} CGB, 182. The seven essays on Camus, most of which were published in the last three years of Merton’s life in various literary journals, were published collectively in LE. They are: “The Plague of Camus: A Commentary and Introduction” (written in June 1967 and first published by The Seabury Press in 1968); “Camus: Journals of the Plague Years” (completed in April 1967 and first published in \textit{The Sewanee Review}, autumn 1967); “Terror and the Absurd: Violence and Nonviolence in Albert Camus” (written in August 1966 and first published in the February 1969 issue of \textit{Motive} in an abbreviated form); “Prophetic Ambiguities: Milton and Camus” (written in October 1966 and first published in edited form in the \textit{Saturday Review}, April 15, 1967; “Camus and the Church” (first appearing in \textit{The Catholic Worker}, December 1966); “Three Saviors in Camus: Lucidity and the Absurd” (written in September 1966 and first published in \textit{Thought}, spring 1968); “The Stranger: Poverty of an Antihero” (written in March of 1968 and first published in the fall 1968 issue of \textit{Unicorn}).
and the community he cannot tear himself away from." Camus’ program for the “art of living,” which is the underlying theme in all of his writings, ought to be understood as an overflow of this compassionate impulse. It was his desire to bridge the gap between his own authentic experiences as an artist and the “absurdity” he found in the world around him. His instruments of reconciliation were his penetrating and revealing myths. With them he drew his readers along the labyrinthine pathways of his main ideas: absurdity, revolt, love. Although not a poet, his parabolic prose bears the marks of a poetic thinker. It carried with it a certain moral weight which was unmistakable and was characterized, especially in Merton’s estimation, by a definite prophetic thrust.

Merton begins his essay “Prophetic Ambiguities: Milton and Camus” with this observation: “Poets and poetic thinkers—men who construct myths in which they embody their own struggle to cope with the fundamental questions of life—are generally ‘prophetic’ in the sense that they anticipate in their solitude the struggles and the general consciousness of later generations.” Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus* is such a mythic work. In it and in *The Stranger* published the same year, 1942, Camus introduces his signature, if sometimes misunderstood, theory of the absurd. By the absurd, Camus generally means “the absence of correspondence or congruity between the mind’s need for coherence and the incoherence of the world which the mind experiences.” Merton himself explains the absurd as “the gap between the actual shape of life and intelligent truth. Absurdity is compounded by the ambiguous and false explanations, interpretations, conventions, justifications, legalizations,

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57 “Albert Camus – Banquet Speech”. *Nobelpize.org.*
58 LE, 252.
evasions which infect our struggling civilization with the ‘plague’ and which often bring us most dangerously close to perfect nihilism when they offer a security based on a seemingly rational use of absolute power.”

Merton is quick, however, to debunk (on more than one occasion) a popular misinterpretation of Camus’ doctrine of the absurd; that Camus taught it in order to promote it. On the contrary, Camus was not an advocate of the absurd. Rather, the absurd was an expression of Camus’ insight into the current social situation, particularly in Europe. In actuality, Camus was a humanist who forged his own way through the fog of life and provided his own remedies to the nihilism surrounding him, remedies, he believed, of which neither left nor right were capable. This left Camus “in the very uncomfortable position of rejecting all the facile and doctrinaire generalizations of the mass movements and finding his own way in solitude.”

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, we learn the proper response to the absurd: “to live in the present and not in the future.” As Camus scholar Robert de Luppé explains, “The present is the continual struggle to sustain this vital consciousness. There is no question of comfort or of despair: the question is one of confrontation.”

*L’Étranger*, most often translated as *The Stranger*, is also at times, notably, translated as *The Outsider*. Its protagonist, Meursault, who represents “the alienated man” who insists upon living authentically in his alienated state without self-justification—and is condemned for this very reason—can certainly be read as a

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60 LE, 268.
61 Ibid., 257.
63 Ibid.
64 Robert de Luppé utilizes such a translation in his book *Albert Camus*.
65 LE, 292.
characterization of Camus’ own philosophical reading of the culture in which he lived. As Camus himself explains, the Stranger “is a man poor and naked” who “refuses every mask” who “refuses to lie…by saying more than he feels” but who is “in love with the sun that casts no shadows” and is animated “by a profound passion…for the absolute and for truth.” Such an existential commitment to “the absolute and for truth” needs not be justified because it cannot be justified. It cannot be “fitted into the context of something else that is less basic, less authentic, less real, but more easily reduced to rational formulas.”

For Merton, “The authenticity and love toward which Camus tended were, then, beyond formulas of justification and explanation. They were also in some sense beyond the apprehension of an interior spiritual insight, beyond any trémoussement prophétique” (“prophetic flutter”). This passage suggests much about the understanding Merton had of the relationship between solitude, authenticity, prophetic insight, and prophetic communication and confirms our discussions on Pasternak, Blake, and the Latin American poets. Prophetic activity is here depicted as being fully dependent upon, although not a justification of, authentic solitude. Solitude is seen as a valid and worthy approach to life in and of itself. What often arises out of authentic solitude, however, are the spiritual insights and “prophetic flutters” that give rise to prophetic communication. This is the logical outcome of a life committed to the authentically real and grounded in spiritual vitality. This prophetic phenomenon reveals itself in the life of Meursault, who even though “living in apparent happiness in spite of unconscious alienation,” and becoming conscious of his actual

66 From the American student edition of The Stranger, cited in Ibid., 298.
67 Ibid., 298.
68 Ibid.
condition, “becomes able to articulate his protest and resistance against what has caused it.”\textsuperscript{69} He is not motivated by moral good against moral evil or by a particular reward but “simply as a witness to human truth.”\textsuperscript{70}

With \textit{The Plague}, Camus develops his philosophical vision far beyond the scope of the absurd and explores the avenues of ethical response to the shortcomings of nihilism. As a “modern myth about the destiny of man,”\textsuperscript{71} \textit{The Plague} is a manifestation of tyranny, evil, and death—the face of the absurd which must be resisted at all costs. Passive resignation or acquiescence means defeat.

The heroes of \textit{The Plague}, Rieux and Tarrou, represent certain types of “saints without God”\textsuperscript{72} whose tireless and courageous work at saving the plagued town of Oran form the proper response to the “absurd” situation. On the other hand, Père Paneloux’s (the local Jesuit) moralizing is demonstrated as logically unsustainable and practically ineffective. Paneloux eventually apologizes for his uncharitable and judgmental sermonizing and follows Rieux and Tarrou in laying down their lives as members of a sanitary squad. The concocted serum against the plague eventually works but not before claiming the lives of both Paneloux and Tarrou. The message of Camus is clear: it is the one who relentlessly and self-sacrificially fights against whatever destroys life who is the true witness to human love and truth—not the one who simply condemns it from a pulpit.

The noble fight against the evil of the plague—the evil being, in subjective terms, a deficiency in the human spirit which curtails the inner freedom of the human person and

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 300.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 196.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 181.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 186.
nullifies the ability to fashion a course of action for the future—forms the basis of Camus’ prophetic revolt. Merton sees two major components to Camus’ strategic plan in combatting this “absurd” evil in ourselves and in the world. The first and foundational step involves the ability to clearly perceive one’s existential situation. This is the moment of *lucidity*. As Merton explains, “The existential and poetic logic of Camus starts from an intuitive preference for lucidity as a fundamental human value, through which man discovers his own meaning and *chooses* to mean what he in fact is.” 73 This lucid moment moves the human person away from the alienated state of indifference and grounds him or her in the reality of their existential and social circumstance—which is the absurd. Yet, Camus’ “lucidity” is not merely recognition of the fact. It is a radical commitment to remain centered in one’s own personal integrity in the face of the societal falsities and evils which threaten to redefine it. Embedded within the lucid moment of spiritual insight and commitment, though, is the power of human solidarity and compassion which begins to manifest itself in *trémoussement prophétique*, communicating some expression of revolt. For Camus, the very value of life is found precisely in this rebellion against evil. Merton points out that it is not the logical axiom: “I think, therefore I am”; but the moral commitment: “We rebel against the absurd, therefore we are”; which forms the beginning moments of authentic existence for Camus. 74

*The Plague’s* Rieux and Tarrou are Camus’ true Rebels. In them is the portrayal of true prophetic revolt. As the story of their lives illustrate, the destruction of the absurd can only be accomplished through a revolt based upon love working together in solidarity with others who also see the tragic absurdity of the plague. This loving revolt, the only kind that

73 Ibid., 224.
74 Ibid., 225.
truly saves, Merton notes, “demands dialogue, openness, speech.” This highlights the second component in dealing with the absurd: the Camusian revolt is necessarily communicative. In communication revolt finds its prophetic power because it “protests against the conspiracy of silence which, everywhere, both under totalism and under capitalism, seals men’s lips so that they do not protest against organized murder but approve it.” The great danger, in Merton’s reading of Camus’ ideas of lucidity and revolt, is absurdity’s silent acquiescence: “the homage of unquestioning acceptance which the majority of men offer to the idol.” Herein lies the obligation to vocalize resistance.

The resistance of Camus’ prophetic revolt is not, for Merton, about the direct denunciation of any particular social or economic injustice. Rather, it is about unmasking the fallacy that power actually promotes life when it depends upon killing thousands of human beings and relies on policies which ultimately necessitate these deaths. Lucid language is the required remedy to penetrate through the foggy and miasmic rhetoric of the philosophical justifiers of the absurd. Merton sees Camus as the “human” and “humble” prophet because Camus held that the human task was “a humble and limited one: to find those few words by which to appease the infinite anguish of free souls.” Merton, however, notes that Camus’ statement should be read in its broader context: “He was concerned with the power of language—of truth then—to protect man against ferocity, murder, nihilism,

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75 Ibid., 243.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., 246.
78 Cited in Ibid., 276.
chaos. Language used clearly and honestly in the service of a lucid consciousness would protect man against his tendencies to nihilism and self-destruction."^{79}

This theme of prophetic communication is a central theme of Camus’ final completed novel, *The Fall*. Merton understands the theme of *The Fall* to be summed up “as the total failure of garrulous analytical reasoning as a means of authentic communication.”^{80}

Clamence, Camus’ protagonist, is, for Merton, the mythical false-prophet figure—“a sort of feeble twentieth-century John the Baptist preparing the way for nobody, bringing no news except the analysis of his own sins and those of his world, and announcing, with finality, nothing but general and irreversible guilt.”^{81} One of the goals that Camus sets for himself with *The Fall* is to demolish the barrier which guilt has erected between the one who communicates and the one who is being communicated to. What Camus seeks is a form of communication that is pure and free from individualistic self-awareness. Only then is language safeguarded in the proper sincerity where authentic love can be expressed. Yet, the temptation always remains to pervert language into hateful and violent rhetoric. Such an option nullifies language’s prophetic power. Thus, Camus, as a wise instructor, offers this prophetic advice:

> Over the expanse of five continents throughout the coming years an endless struggle is going to be pursued between violence and friendly persuasion, a struggle in which, granted, the former has a thousand times the chances of success than that of the latter. But I have always held that, if he who bases his hopes on human nature is a fool, he who gives up in the face of circumstances is a coward. And henceforth the only honorable course will be to take everything on a formidable gamble: that words are more powerful than munitions."^{82}

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79 Ibid., 276.
80 Ibid., 277.
81 Ibid., 277.
Camus’ relationship to the Church was of particular interest to Merton. He also felt that Camus had important things to say about his own life as a monk. In this regard, David Belcastro notes that “Merton heard in Camus a prophetic voice challenging him to examine critically the Christian faith he professed and the monastic life he lived.” Merton explores these themes in his essay “Camus and the Church.”

Both the chaplain in The Stranger who seeks Meursault’s conversion and Père Paneloux in The Plague represent Camus’ problem with the Church. He had the opportunity to express this problem to a group of Dominicans when he presented a paper at the Dominican Monastery of Latour-Maubourg in 1948. Camus’ basic criticisms are aimed at the Church’s apparent pharisaism. By this he meant two things: “on one hand the man who thinks that it is enough to recognize an obligation by a purely formal and punctilious fulfillment is a Pharisee. On the other the man who detects the failure and points to it, without fulfilling an equivalent obligation himself, is also a Pharisee.” The chaplain of The Stranger and Paneloux of The Plague, as well as Clamence in The Fall, are all embodiments of pharisaism and, instead of healing the world of its nihilism, according to Camus, end up only contributing to it. In order to substantiate his criticism to the Dominicans, Camus raises the question that had been recently raised in Rolf Hochhuth’s 1963 drama The Deputy: why hadn’t Christians, particularly Vatican officials, spoken out more forcefully against the violent aggressions of the Nazis?

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84 LE, 264.
Why shall I not say this here? For a long time I waited during those terrible years, for a strong voice to be lifted up in Rome. I an unbeliever? Exactly. For I knew that spirit would be lost if it did not raise the cry of condemnation in the presence of force. It appears that this voice was raised. But I swear to you that millions of men, myself included, never heard it; and that there was in the hearts of believers and unbelievers a solitude which did not cease to grow as the days went by and the executioners multiplied. It was later explained to me that the condemnation had indeed been uttered, but in the language of encyclicals, which is not clear. The condemnation had been pronounced but it had not been understood. Who cannot see in this where the real condemnation lies? Who does not see that this example contains within it one of the elements of the answer, perhaps the whole answer to the question you have asked me? What the world expects of Christians is that Christians speak out and utter their condemnation in such a way that never a doubt, never a single doubt can arise in the heart of even the simplest man. That Christians get out of their abstractions and stand face to face with the bloody mess that is our history today. The gathering we need today is the gathering together of men who are resolved to speak out clearly and pay with their own person. When a Spanish bishop blesses political executions he is no longer a bishop or a Christian or even a man.... We expect and I expect that all those will gather together who do not want to be dogs and who are determined to pay the price that has to be paid if man is to be something more than a dog.  

It is passages such as this that leads to Belcastro’s sobering evaluation: “Merton sets Camus before the Church as a prophetic voice challenging Christians to examine their participation in modern nihilism, that is, their support of the state in acts of violence against humankind.” Yet, Belcastro admits that Merton sees Camus’ reproach in a broader light. Camus wasn’t simply concerned with condemning the Church. He was also “a prophet who opens new ways of being in the world that promise new life for the Church.”

By citing this lengthy passage in his essay, Merton is also underlining the credibility of Camus’ assessment. Two important points should not go unnoticed here. First, the proper way to be in the world as a prophetic Church is to communicate with the world in a language that is at once understandable and uncompromising. There are moments when

85 Cited in Ibid., 266-67.
87 Ibid., 231.
nuance and abstract terminology should give way to direct and forceful admonition—hence, Merton’s emphasis upon Camus’ notion of *lucidity*. Yet, although not admitted by Camus, communication in nuance and philosophical abstraction is at times necessary for the Church. Theological and philosophical sophistication and complexity require such communication. Logically, this means that there are many ways in which the Church communicates to the world which are not prophetic. This highlights an important question, which Merton implicitly asks by citing the passage above: does the Church currently have an adequate platform for effective prophetic communication? Addressing this question would take us beyond the scope of this study, but it does take us to the second important point of Camus’ admonition to the Dominicans. It pertains to the age-old struggle between institutional bureaucracy and charismatic expression. Put in the form of a question: how effectively can the Church *as an institution* prophetically communicate? There seems to be very little biblical precedent for institutional prophetic communication. In the Bible, prophecy nearly always occurs by *prophets*—by individual human beings moved by God’s Spirit. In fact, their prophetic messages were often aimed directly against the compromising effects of institutional dependence.  

Merton admits that Camus’ challenge to the Church is nothing new. Our sincerest of intentions are always filled with ambiguity and confusion. Much that is said, promised, or rejected in one statement has a way of being negated in the next. What is true personally is

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88 See Isaiah’s prophecy against blindness and perversity (Is 29:9-16); Amos’ prophecy against Israel’s corrupt worship (Amos 5:21-27); Jeremiah’s Temple sermon prophecy (Jer 7:1-8:3); John the Baptist’s prophetic denunciation of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mt 3:7-9); Jesus’ prophetic admonition to the Pharisees and scribes on their dependence upon the tradition of the elders (Mt 15:1-20). Of special note is Jeremiah’s oracle against the group of Judean prophets prophesying a false hope (Jer 23:9-40).
even truer of an ecclesiastical institution. The weight of being inoffensive, saving face, and trying to please everyone can easily tempt the Church to communicate in uncertainties and obscurities and can all too often lead to silence when the world cries out for a prophetic word. Yet, Merton recognizes that, with few exceptions, the Church has at times spoken “without ambiguity though still in official language.” He cites the statement from Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 81: “The arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity and one which injures the poor to an intolerable degree…. Divine Providence urgently demands of us that we free ourselves from the age-old slavery of war. But if we refuse to make this effort….” He also considers Pope John XXIII’s *Pacem in Terris* to be a clear, prophetic encyclical. The problem persists because, as Merton laments, “Christians themselves do not pay attention, or simply shrug the whole thing off….” Prophetic effectiveness is depicted here by Merton as being dependent upon the prophet’s own relevance and value. Found implicitly within an effective prophet is personal integrity and credibility. What happens when the source of the prophetic voice becomes complicit in the sin that it condemns? Has it forfeited its right to prophesy? These questions allude to the concerns voiced by Camus and echoed by Merton and bespeak the ambivalence of ecclesiastical prophetic communication.

Herein is found, for both Camus and Merton, the need for creative writers and artists. The role of the prophet to modern society is fulfilled most of all in these vocations. They are the ones endowed with the gifts of clear and creative communication skills. The select few who are simultaneously endowed with God’s Spirit have the greatest opportunity to be

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89 LE, 268.
90 Ibid.
God’s prophetic instruments in the world—to sound God’s truth in a way that demands attention. This is precisely how Merton understands Camus’ message to the Church: “this purification and restitution of language so that the truth may become once again unambiguous and fully accessible to all men, especially when they need to know what to do.” For Merton, the whole message of Camus rests on the idea of “telling the truth.”

The prophetic revolt of Albert Camus rests on faith in the power of words to lead “in a creative and life-affirming direction.” In his novels, plays, and essays, Camus explored this central theme and, as Merton notes, everywhere they reach the same conclusion: “we live in a world of lies, which is therefore a world of violence and murder. We need to rebuild a world of peace. We cannot do this unless we can recover the language and think of peace.”

William Faulkner: “The American Prophet of the Twentieth Century”

What has been said about Albert Camus must be put in proper perspective—that is, Merton’s perspective. John Eudes Bamberger recounts an incident which occurred in the late 1960s when, after giving his series of talks to the young monks of Gethsemani on Camus “with his usual verve,” Merton had this to say: “Camus is a man of the past and

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91 Ibid., 273.
92 Ibid., 274.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
outdated. Forget what I said about him!” He then proceeded to commence a series of talks with equal verve on Rainer Maria Rilke and William Faulkner.

William Faulkner (1897-1962) had up to this point little impact upon Merton’s thought or spirituality. As a precocious sixteen year-old he attempted a reading of Faulkner’s then new book *Sanctuary*, but to no avail. It left him completely befuddled. A similar occurrence happened in the late 1950s with *A Fable*. It wasn’t until December of 1966 that Merton mentions any interest in who he would eventually call “the American prophet of the twentieth century (or at least the first half of it),” a prophet “too great to be heeded by the nation.”

Merton’s thought on Faulkner is expressed in two main sources: first, in a series of conference talks which were recorded by his novices (two of which have been transcribed and appear in an appendix in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*); secondly, in two articles also published in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*. Why Merton considered Faulkner “the American prophet of the twentieth century” emerges only in a close consideration of these primary sources.

On December 2nd, 1966, Merton wrote in his journal the following entry: “Early morning – reading Faulkner’s *The Bear*. Glad the time has come for me to read this. Shattering, cleansing, a mind-changing and transforming myth that makes you stop to think

97 Ibid. This is a paraphrase of how Bamberger remembers Merton’s comment.
98 LTL, 171.
99 Ibid.
100 “‘Baptism in the Forest’: Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner” was originally written as an introduction to *Mansions of the Spirit*, edited by George A. Panichas (New York: Hawthorn, 1967) and “Faulkner and His Critics” was a review article published in *The Critic*, April-May 1967. Of lesser importance are Merton’s comments on Faulkner in his *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970).
101 “The Bear” is here italicized in conformity to the usage in LTL, but it is not a novel in itself but a story within the novel *Go Down, Moses*. 
about re-evaluating everything. All great writing like this makes you break through the futility and routine of ordinary life and see the greatness of existence, its seriousness, and the awfulness of wasting it. And how easy it is to waste and trivialize it. Seriousness of my own solitary vocation. Eschatological witness of Ike McCaslin. Like Camus, Faulkner wrote mythic stories that explored the existential plight of characters reeling in the drudgery of a fallen world. Unlike Camus, Faulkner imbues his novels with moments of hopeful optimism through characters which represent overtly spiritual and biblical themes. Faulkner’s spiritual and biblical vision did not go unnoticed by Merton.

“The Bear,” as is evident in the journal entry quoted above, had a tremendous effect upon Merton when he first read it. The following day, he continues his reflections: “Biblical Faulkner. I could write a book on The Bear as a basis for contemplative life. The true kind. Theoria. Freedom. One truth.” Again on December 6th: “The Bear can be read as a perfect tract on the monastic vocation, i.e. especially poverty.” These initial ideas would eventually be developed and form the basis for his important essay “‘Baptism in the Forest’: Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner” where he describes Faulkner’s literary approach as not “religious” or “metaphysical” but sapiential. Merton explains himself:

Faulkner is typical of the creative genius who can associate his reader in the same experience of creation which brought forth his book. Such a book is filled with efficacious sign-situations, symbols, and myths which release in the reader the imaginative power to experience what the author really means to convey. And what he means to convey is not a system of truths which explain life but a certain depth of awareness in which life itself is lived more intensely and with a more meaningful

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102 LTL, 165. This is the first mention of Faulkner in all of Merton’s journals.
103 Ibid., 166.
104 Ibid.
direction. The “symbolic” in this sense is not a matter of contrived signification in which things point arbitrarily to something else. Symbols are signs which release the power of imaginative communion.

The value of this *sapiential* approach lies in how it enables the reader to apprehend his or her deepest significance and ultimate destiny. It liberates life “inhibited by dead social routine, by the ordinary involvement of the mind in trivial objects, by the conflicts of needs and of material interests on a limited level”\(^{106}\) and allows for a life of “poetic and contemplative awareness”\(^{107}\) where one encounters the truth hidden within “the drama of human existence.”\(^{108}\) *Sapiential* thinking is able “to bridge the cognitive gap between our minds and the realm of the transcendent and the unknown, so that without ‘understanding’ what lies beyond the limit of human vision, we nevertheless enter into an intuitive affinity with it, or seem to experience some such affinity.”\(^{109}\) In his essay, Merton uses his commentary on “The Bear” to illustrate this *sapiential* method.

“The Bear,” as *sapiential* myth, is fully steeped within the religious, mythic tradition. Merton begins his discussion by first making himself clear about what he means by myth. He offers this helpful definition: “A myth is a tale with an archetypal pattern capable of suggesting and of implying that man’s life in the cosmos has a hidden meaning which can be sought and found by one who somehow religiously identifies his own life with that of the hero in the story.”\(^{110}\)

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\(^{105}\) LE, 98.
\(^{106}\) Ibid., 100.
\(^{107}\) Ibid.
\(^{108}\) Ibid.
\(^{109}\) Ibid., 100-01.
\(^{110}\) Ibid., 102.
The mythic arc of “The Bear”—indeed, the whole of Go Down, Moses of which it is a part—is, for Merton, an account of Ike McCaslin’s spiritual initiation. Like the novice who enters a monastery to learn the ways of being a monk from a spiritual father, Ike is a “disciple” being formed “in a traditional and archaic wisdom by a charismatic spiritual Father who...hands on not only a set of skills or a body of knowledge, but a mastery of life, a certain way of being aware, of being in touch not just with natural objects, with living things, but with the cosmic spirit, with the wilderness itself regarded almost as a supernatural being, a ‘person.’”111

Ike’s eventual sight of the Bear, named Old Ben, represents the moment of his spiritual illumination. This is why Ike, the hunter in constant search for his prey, is never able to see Old Ben until the moment is right. Not until he is ready to surrender himself entirely to the wilderness without defensive munitions does he become properly disposed to come face to face with the one he seeks. This resolve to approach the wilderness solely upon his naked reserves is the crucial turning point which allows for Ike’s initiation to take place. Ike’s “nakedness” is the symbol of his new consciousness which is unencumbered by his preconceived notions of how he is supposed to relate to the world. It is a type of raw and immediate vision freely opened to the present moment. With this new consciousness, “[h]e will learn to be not only a wonderful hunter but a contemplative and prophet, a wise man who has beheld the real ground of mystery and value which is concealed in the Edenic wilderness and which others can only guess at.”112

111 Ibid., 103-04.
112 Ibid., 104.
The tragedy of the story of “The Bear” is depicted in the way in which, as an old man, even after his spiritual initiation, Ike’s prophetic vision is helpless in preventing a young relative from getting involved in practices of miscegenation and injustice. Merton aptly summarizes Ike’s predicament: “He has seen the inner meaning of the wilderness as an epiphany of the cosmic mystery. He has encountered the Bear and had his ‘illumination.’ In the light of this he has seen into the religious and historic mystery of the South which lies under judgment and under a curse. Yet there is nothing he can do about it apart from his monastic gesture, which remains ambiguous and abortive.”

This reference to the civil-rights problem, “the religious and historic mystery of the South,” signals one of the major prophetic themes that run throughout Faulkner’s novels. Merton was keenly sensitive to it, along with the unpopularity that Faulkner encountered because of it. Faulkner’s unpopularity was, according to Merton, a “penalty for taking a unique personal position and not electing to run with some pack.” As Merton’s biographer, Michael Mott, notes, “Faulkner had the added credential of being equally unpopular with both sides on the issue.” Of course, the South’s particular sin was slavery. But, Faulkner’s Ike feels that at least southerners exemplified some forms of compassion toward their slaves. John Hunt, in his book William Faulkner: Art in Theological Tension, offers helpful insights into Ike’s “theological” perspective. As Hunt explains, for Ike, the South was especially dear to God, even with its stain of the sin of slavery on its hands. The sin of the North, however, was worse: “Rugged individualism of the new industrialism

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113 Ibid.
114 LTL, 185.
expressing itself economically in *laissez-faire* capitalism produced a spiritual arrogance which could not go unpunished. God’s purpose was lost in the celebration of the boundlessness of the human spirit, while with ruthless rapacity and greed the North manufactured for a profit the products of the southern society it condemned.”

Merton reflects upon Faulkner’s mythic battle between North and South in his journal entry for February 15th, 1967. While admitting to Faulkner’s penchant for “tirade” and “schizoid grandiloquence” in the privacy vs. government debate, he insists that Faulkner’s idiosyncrasy and individuality ought to be respected, not reproved and despised, which was often the case. For Merton, Faulkner’s brand of Southern mythology is far more persuasive and compelling: “The danger of his mythology is precisely that it is convincing, and in many ways better, more coherent, certainly more alive and interesting than Northern liberal mythology. It presents a seemingly plausible case for the contrivance of what is completely finished – and can’t get anywhere.”

Thus, it is in Faulkner’s ambivalent and peculiar position toward the South that Merton discerns his prophetic vocation. While embracing the South, Faulkner also stands apart from it. He stands apart from it in order to speak his prophetic mythology to it and lead it into a more humane future.

The Faulknerian myth, “The Bear,” and Southern mythology are meant to be read as narratives which mimic one another. Faulkner’s program of spiritual formation as set forth in “The Bear” is, for Thomas Del Prete, a story of “learning how to live beyond

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117 LTL, 199.
boundaries.”

It is a story where the initiated move beyond linear time and enter into an eschatological dimension of reality. It is the place of “nowhere” that is the privileged place of prophetic insight and wisdom. Faulkner’s commentary on the South demonstrates that it is only in this place of “nowhere” that the mythic story can be told honestly and accurately. These insights lead Del Prete to correct observations about Merton himself, which can be gleaned from his treatment of “The Bear”: “Clearly Merton is challenging boundaries…refusing to be bound by certain cultural assumptions and expectations which make a person into an image and reality into a product, and which pigeonhole him in some spiritual stifling place.” And later: “There is a hidden geography beyond the boundaries of space and culture, a spiritual geography shaped by compassion, which, with profound implications for Merton’s engagement with the social issues of his time, identifies him with the ‘struggles and suffering of the world.’”

Merton’s reading of Faulkner’s sapiential approach continues with his treatment of Faulkner’s 1939 novel, The Wild Palms. Read as a sort of biblical “meditation,” The Wild Palms is a “symbolic presentation of deep, classic truths about man and human values.” Faulkner’s approach is unique. He combines two apparently unrelated stories alternating in the telling of each. This “counterpoint” approach has the effect of taking the reader more

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119 Ibid., 6.
120 Ibid., 7.
121 LE, 515.
122 Ibid.
123 Ibid., 517. Merton points out that “counterpoint” was the word Faulkner himself used to describe what he was trying to do in The Wild Palms.
deeply into the meanings Faulkner was trying to convey—more deeply than could have been grasped by reading the stories independently of one another.

The two stories, “Old Man” and “Wild Palms,” are, as Merton notes, “pitched on entirely different levels”¹²⁴ but have one underlying theme in common: “each is the story of a man and a woman thrown into situations where they are completely alone and isolated from the rest of the world, engulfed in a flood, a ‘tidal wave’ that threatens to destroy them.”¹²⁵ On one level, the novel is about the social and psychological situation of modern man, but on another level, it is about the wisdom of “preternatural” man told in mythic form. The significance of this juxtaposition, for Merton, is that, as the two stories move along, the characters in the mythological tale end up being depicted as being more human than the characters in the modern tale. As Merton explains, “In them Faulkner seems to be presenting a sort of quintessential humanity: they are man-and-woman and the other two, the moderns, are simply a couple of poor, beat-up, ruined people.”¹²⁶

“Old Man” is about a “tall convict” who finds himself swept out of his penitentiary (which Merton likens to a monastery) because of the flooding of the Mississippi River in 1927. The goal of this “tall convict” is to return to the penitentiary and escape from the chaos which confronts him at every turn out in the world. After rescuing a woman whom he encounters while being swept along the river in his rowboat, they together are hurled down the Mississippi ending up in the Cajun country of the Louisiana delta. One life-threatening incident after another occurs yet nothing prevails over the “tall convict” and the woman he

¹²⁴ Ibid., 516.
¹²⁵ Ibid., 517.
¹²⁶ Ibid.
saved (who had by now even had a child amidst the surrounding chaos!). When, after
months battling the primal chaos of the Mississippi he returns finally to the security and
solitude of his “monastic” penitentiary, he proudly hands over the woman he saved along
with her newborn baby.

The modern tale told in “Wild Palms” seems wholly different. A man meets a
married woman with whom he falls in love. They each believe that the greatest value in life
is the love that they share. They do not see any value in marriage but only see it as obstacle
to their life together. All that matters is “love.” Their “love” leads to the conception of a
child and a botched abortion which leaves the woman, Charlotte, bleeding in the hands of a
doctor that the male character, Harry, happens to come upon. Charlotte is taken to the
nearby hospital where she undergoes an operation to fix the botched abortion but to no avail.
She dies on the operating table. Harry is hauled off to the penitentiary. Their enmeshment
in each other results in the destruction of each.

Merton’s interpretation of the novel hinges on the significance of the mythic power
of the river, which, for him, is a “symbolic expression of the tragedy of life….“\textsuperscript{127} It is this
river motif as “deluge” which ties the stories together and imbues them with multiple layers
of meaning. He comments:

Where the novel gets interesting is in the correspondence between the material on a
cosmic scale in “Old Man” and the modern man and woman in “The Wild Palms”\textsuperscript{128} who are also engulfed in a flood, a deluge, a tragedy of their own making, but they
don’t realize it. They are typical, modern people who don’t believe in anything, are
convinced that death is the end of it, we live our lives since that’s all there is. This is
the basic faith of modern man! This is what people today think! I want to get

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 519.

\textsuperscript{128} Merton consistently refers to the story of “Wild Palms” as “The Wild Palms,” but this is contrary to the
original 1939 publication or how other commentators refer to it.
something out of life before it’s too late! This faith is what Faulkner’s two-level novel finally torpedoes as he describes its shallowness and stupidity: *That’s not the way to live!* People who try it let loose in their lives a titanic flood, a tremendous force, without even knowing what they are doing, without even knowing they are also in a “flood.”

Of the many corresponding themes between the cosmic descriptions in “Old Man” and tragic descriptions in “Wild Palms,” the most significant is the theme of life and death. “Old Man” depicts life that comes forth out of chaos. In “Wild Palms” one finds the denial of life and imprisonment that the allegiance to modern values brings. Read as a whole, *The Wild Palms*, as Merton notes, is impregnated with biblical symbolism. He sees the symbol of the flood as an “eschatological symbol”130: “Faulkner is saying that our life is like being in the flood. *We are in the deluge.*”131 Thus, Faulkner’s message is clear: just as Charlotte and Harry are under divine judgment and suffer the consequences of their misplaced value system, we too who neglect the primitive wisdom of solitude and the formative powers found by living close to nature for the modern pseudo-values of passion and self-fulfillment place ourselves under the same divine judgment. This interpretation of *The Wild Palms* leads Merton to this bold statement: “[Faulkner’s] novels and stories are far more prophetic in the Biblical sense than the writings of any theologian writing today (at least, any that I know!). …I am convinced that we have before us a better idea about man and nature and values and God than can be found in the whole Spiritual Directory, and everything else on the Mystical Theology Shelf as well.”132

129 LE, 519.
130 Ibid., 520.
131 Ibid.
132 Ibid., 520-21.
It ought to be noted that Merton did not have any intention of baptizing Faulkner and forcing a Christian interpretation upon his thought. The reference to Faulkner’s prophetic writing “in the Biblical sense” is meant to be understood not as if Faulkner himself was intentionally proclaiming the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob or that of Jesus Christ. Faulkner’s writing was prophetic “in the Biblical sense,” for Merton, because he boldly and vividly put forth myths which were pervaded with biblical symbolism and wisdom. Faulkner was a religious humanist, not a Jew or Christian. It was his desire to explore the mythical, symbolic, religious, and sapiential meanings of reality. Although a critic of many modern values, as has been noted, Faulkner was ironically a thoroughly modern writer. His approach to literature was much like Joyce, Proust, Camus, and the other modernists of his era: truth is known only in vague shadows; life is permeated with doubt and frustration; hope and understanding come only when one approaches life with authenticity and radical honesty. For him, like Camus, the ideal way to communicate in such a philosophical atmosphere was through mythic storytelling informed by sapiential content.

Thus, Merton’s provocative assertions that Faulkner was “the American prophet of the twentieth century” and that his writings were “far more prophetic in the Biblical sense than the writings of any theologian writing today” find their legitimacy only when understood in light of the value he places upon Faulkner’s sapiential-mythic approach to storytelling. The prophet, then, emerges as the wise-man or woman endowed with penetrating insight into the reality of things. He or she has a unique ability to recognize the social and cultural flaws in popular consciousness and possesses the gift of bringing these flaws to awareness through symbolic narratives that not only bring condemnation but also,
through wise admonition, point toward a more life-giving way of being in the world. Wisdom and prophecy, for Faulkner, are completely intertwined.

The same can be said of Merton. Patrick O’Connell arrives at this conclusion in his article “Wisdom and Prophecy: The Two Poles of Thomas Merton’s Mature Spirituality.” Interestingly, he is able to substantiate his thesis without any mention of Faulkner’s influence. Nevertheless, his conclusions are applicable here and informative:

…in Merton’s mature spirituality the sapiential is balanced by the prophetic. If wisdom recognizes how creation already manifests the presence of God, prophecy calls attention to the gaps between divine design and human realization, the personal and social failures and consequent brokenness that obscure or interfere with the unfolding of God’s will for the creation. Hence Merton’s attentiveness to the ruptured bonds between creation and Creator, the alienation and isolation caused by the rejection of wisdom, the violation of the divine image through violence and war, racial and religious prejudice, and the exploitation of the poor. But for Merton, as for Jeremiah, the prophetic calling is not just to “root up and to tear down” but “to build and to plant” (cf. Jer. 1:10), not just denunciation but annunciation, a bringing of the future into the present, a call to model God’s covenantal love and justice here and now.

…Without the leaven of prophecy, wisdom might tend to overlook the problems and contradictions of the concrete human condition. Conversely without the grounding of wisdom, prophecy could become shrill, harsh and self-righteous: it could degenerate into what Merton calls the “frenzy of the activist,”

133 Other scholars such as George Kilcourse in his Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton’s Christ (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993) and in his “Spirituality and Imagination: Thomas Merton’s Sapiential Thinking” in Toward an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton’s Journey (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988), 114-131, and Ross Labrie in his “Thomas Merton on Art and Religion in William Faulkner,” Religion and the Arts 14 (2010) 401-17 place more emphasis upon Faulkner’s formative influence upon Merton’s understanding of a sapiential reading of fiction. Kilcourse, however, makes no connection between wisdom and prophecy, and Labrie does so only cursorily. Michael Mott alludes to the connection when he states, “With a careful reading of the works of Camus and Faulkner, Merton was coming to a new sense of the power of certain writers to reach a hidden level of truth through fictional models” (Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton, 477). O’Connell, even while failing to mention the influence of literary figures upon Merton’s understanding of wisdom or prophecy, remains the only scholar to place such an important emphasis upon the symbiotic relationship between the two. He sees the primary influences of wisdom upon Merton coming from the Bible and eastern religions and the primary influences of prophecy coming from the Old Testament prophetic tradition and the monastic movement within Christianity. See also “Prophecy” in TME, 372-74.
which “destroys the fruitfulness of his own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.”

Concluding Remarks

Merton’s early love for literature and his faith in it to communicate important truths of life would become a central interest in his final ten years. Dismayed by the confusion prevalent in the philosophical and theological discourse of his day, Merton was deftly attuned to the resulting void left in the consciousness of a world in desperate need of meaning and direction. Renewed hope was enkindled with his reading of three novelists whose prophetic writings he found were endowed with profound significance.

Of the three, Boris Pasternak is the only writer with whom Merton had a personal correspondence, however brief. Merton’s affection for this “prophet of a new age” was effusive. Unlike with Camus and Faulkner, whose personal lives receive little comment, Pasternak embodied for Merton the life of a prophet. In Pasternak he saw one whose life was in complete conformity with his writing. Pasternak lived prophetically. His Doctor Zhivago, then, should be seen as the fruit of his prophetic existence. With it Pasternak offers a penetrating example of prophetic fiction. Characterized by a narrative imbued with symbolic imagery and humanistic themes, the novel becomes an indictment of shallow, materialistic philosophies which reduce the human person to a social organism. Through its utilization of multiple contrasts (person vs. social organization, true vs. false humanism, spirituality vs. materialism), Pasternak constructs a work of prophetic protest where peace

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and love triumph over violence and hatred. The hero of the novel, however flawed, is the artist and symbolist in whose gadavardic life and sacramental poetry is found the healing and transforming love to save the whole human family. The “new age” of Boris Pasternak is inaugurated through prophetic art which proclaims the triumph of spirit.

The prophet as artist is also a central theme in Albert Camus’ self-understanding as a writer of fiction. Through his mythical novels, Camus demonstrates that the prophet is the one who humbly comes to reconcile a fallen world lost in the chaos of nihilism back to the humanistic values from which it fell. Camus’ program of prophetic revolt begins in one’s decision to live authentically, separated from mass consciousness bent toward a nihilistic void. Found arising in one’s alienated solitude are the “prophetic flutters” which both give evidence to one’s authentic existence and witness to human truth. Camus’ prophet of revolt, rather than a sanctimonious herald of righteousness, is the relentless and self-sacrificial worker who never tires of resisting the void of the absurd. This requires a commitment to bold and lucid communication at whatever cost. Merton gravitates toward Camus’ criticism of the Church in this regard, highlighting the need for better and more effective means of ecclesiastical prophetic communication.

The novel as mythic storytelling takes center stage in Merton’s reading of William Faulkner. Although Faulkner uses a similar methodology to that of Camus, it is not until his reading of Faulkner that Merton is finally able to articulate what he calls a sapiential approach to writing. Through his commentary on “The Bear” and The Wild Palms, Merton explicates the theory which provides the basis for his bold assertion that Faulkner is “the American prophet of the twentieth century.” Through his sapiential-mythic storytelling,
Faulkner perceptively analyzes the race problem in American culture and shines a light upon the many ways in which Americans continue to persist in living with corrupt and deceitful motivations. From Faulkner, Merton learns that the prophet is the one whose choice to live in simple solitude dependent upon the forging forces of nature yields the lessons of wisdom from which flow the mythic narratives which provide for human redemption.

Comparatively studied, prophets in Merton’s reading of Pasternak, Camus, and Faulkner emerge as writers who are first and foremost artists. They are artists who write with a particular proclivity for the symbolic, the poetic, and the mythological. Through their sapiential storytelling, they compassionately, yet resolutely, expose the social injustices and cultural maladies of the world around them. They are inwardly urged to write in forceful and lucid protest through courageous, selfless communication. They write with a cause—the cause of restoring humanistic values back into public consciousness. Their humanism, while not overtly Christian, is deeply religious. They are fearless advocates of the spiritual dimension of the human person and see solitude as the necessary atmosphere where their prophetic consciousness undergoes formation. While Camus’ prophet is of a more philosophical bent, Pasternak and Faulkner’s prophet is more sacramental, emphasizing the transformative encounter with sacred images and symbols. Yet, all three writers’ prophets are gifted with deeply perceptive wisdom and insight enabling them to be liberators of those caught in the muddle of existential chaos and confusion.
PART TWO

The Existentialist as Prophet
Chapter 5

A Prophecy of Faith and Hope: Thomas Merton and Christian Existentialism

*My whole life is an epigram calculated to make people aware.*

-Søren Kierkegaard

Between 1958 and 1965, among the most predominant themes found in Thomas Merton’s letters and journals are the insights he garnered by wrestling with the existentialist thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Merton’s proclivity toward philosophical existentialism can be detected in his esteem for the aforementioned Albert Camus, who while rejecting the existentialist label, certainly promoted existentialist themes in his novels. Yet, Merton’s engagement with the leaders of the existentialist movement was more direct.

It was in 1940, at the age of 25, when Merton purchased his first book of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). The title, *Fear and Trembling*, is an appropriate reference to the affect it had on him in his initial reading. A fascination quickly developed and Merton was found copying excerpts of Kierkegaard in the Boston Public Library as well as in the Widener Library at Harvard when on a brief excursion to Boston in late 1940. Merton’s adolescent enthusiasm for Kierkegaard, however, was short-lived. There is no further mention of him for about sixteen years. It was in the late 50’s, when Merton began

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engaging the popular philosophical and cultural voices of the world, that he picked up Kierkegaard once again and began reading him anew. Yet, his enthusiasm for the existentialist approach had by this point become much broader. Along with Kierkegaard, there was also Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), Karl Jaspers (1883-1973), Martin Heidegger (1884-1976), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), as well as theologians who drew significant inspiration from existentialist ideas; namely, Nicolas Berdyaev (1874-1948) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976). Like the poets and novelists Merton was also reading at this time, much of the writing put forth by these existentialists he considered to be marked with a definite prophetic character, both in content and, in some cases, in expression.

The fruit of Merton’s grappling with existentialist ideas resulted in his essay “The Other Side of Despair: Notes on Christian Existentialism” first published in the October-November issue of The Critic, 1965. It later appeared in his book Mystics and Zen Masters, published in 1967. In it he not only expounds on the major themes in existentialist thought—themes like freedom, authenticity, dread, despair, commitment, and fidelity—but also offers his own original insights seen from the vantage point of a Christian contemplative. This essay can then serve as a worthy framework in our discussion of what Merton considers to be the prophetic dimension of existentialism, both in a general sense and, more pointedly, in the sense of Christian existentialism.

The essay begins with Merton situating the then current responses to the century old existentialist movement, noting, in particular, the conservative reaction, whose appellation “the existentialist revolt,” expressed its preferred perspective on how the peculiar religiosity
of Kierkegaard inevitably led to the outright rebellion of Sartre. He also notes the Church’s cautious response, along with Gabriel Marcel’s eventual repudiation of the “existentialist” label. The “revolt” was primarily aimed at the most popular notion of the existentialist movement—the French literary figures (mainly Camus and Sartre). Yet, this form of existentialism was not the form which most interested the Church. It was the existentialism of Heidegger, which had come to bear such a deep influence upon Christian theology, both Catholic and Protestant, which most interested the Church’s theologians. Disciples of Heidegger, such as the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner and the Protestant biblical scholar Rudolf Bultmann, were considered “dangerous” to many who did not know what to make of this secular approach to the sacred sciences. Such ambiguity was still in the air in the mid 1960’s when Merton wrote his article, which can be understood as his effort to bring clarity to the then current theological confusion.

The first task in Merton’s attempt at clarification was finding an adequate description of what existentialism actually consists. He describes it as “an experience and an attitude, rather than a system of thought.” As an example, he offers the area where existentialism had been expressed most unambiguously—in literature. Ironically, his representative is not Camus but the American writer of fiction, Flannery O’Connor. Merton offers this description of O’Connor’s existential approach: “The first thing that anyone notices in reading Flannery O’Connor is that her moral evaluations seem to be strangely scrambled. The good people are bad and the bad people tend to be less bad than they seem. …her crazy

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people, while remaining as crazy as they can possibly be, turn out to be governed by a strange kind of sanity. In the end, it is the sane ones who are incurable lunatics. The ‘good,’ the ‘right,’ the ‘kind’ do all the harm. ‘Love’ is a force for destruction, and ‘truth’ is the best way to tell a lie.”

What results is an unsettling feeling which comes over the reader: “we are on the side of the fanatic and the mad boy, and we are against this reasonable zombie. We are against everything he stands for. We find ourselves nauseated by the reasonable, objective, ‘scientific’ answers he has for everything. In him, science is so right that it is a disaster.”

Existentialism, as expressed here, is the case against the gods of science and sociology in a positivist society, or, stated positively, “It is a brief for the person and for personal, spiritual liberty against determinism and curtailment.” Existentialists, seeing the gross limitations of positivist know-how which result from only asking the questions how and what, insist on asking the questions who and why. Only then can the concrete personal subject be discovered, as well as the proper use of his or her authentic freedom—and therein is the goal of the existentialist.

Kierkegaard’s The Present Age, a book Merton describes as “completely prophetic,” is brought into the discussion in order to substantiate the chief complaint of the existentialists over against the positivists. In Merton’s words, this chief complaint runs as follows: “the claim of science and technology to expand the capacity of the human person for life and happiness is basically fraudulent, because technological society is not the least

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3 Ibid., 259.
4 Ibid., 260.
5 Ibid., 261.
6 DWL, 275.
interested in values, still less in persons: it is concerned purely and simply with the functioning of its own processes. Human beings are used merely as means to this end….”

Merton highlights a certain “prophetic page” from Kierkegaard’s book in order to demonstrate how the Danish philosopher, a hundred years previously, was already exposing this particular philosophical problem. The ideas which interested Merton are represented by the terms “leveling” and “reflection,” terms which had come to be called “alienation” and “estrangement” in more recent existentialist parlance. By “leveling” is meant the process by which “the individual person loses himself in the vast emptiness of a public mind.”

Equating this abstraction with the truth, such persons forfeit their own experience and intuition and lose their own conscience. This abdication of the self into pure abstraction is the exchange of the soul for the “public void” of a collective myth. As Kierkegaard explains, “More and more individuals, owing to their bloodless indolence, will aspire to be nothing at all—in order to become the public.”

Such “leveling” is likened to a “hopeless forest fire of abstraction”: “The abstract leveling process, that self-combustion of the human race produced by the friction which arises when the individual ceases to exist as singled out by religion, is bound to continue like a trade wind until it consumes everything.”

This danger of losing one’s soul to the public void of abstract myth was the central idea with which the existentialist was most intimately aware and was most concerned

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7 MZM, 263.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 264.
12 Ibid., 81.
13 Ibid., 55-56.
with preventing. For this very reason, the existentialist is condemned, and as Merton notes, this condemnation comes both from the capitalist positivism of America as well as the Marxist positivism of the Communist countries. The existentialist is condemned for one reason above all: “he is a rebel, an individualist, who, because he withdraws from the common endeavor of technological society to brood on his own dissatisfactions, condemns himself to futility, sterility, and despair. Since he refuses to participate in the glorious and affluent togetherness of mass society, he must pay the price of fruitless isolation.” Merton admits that this particular description of the existentialist is a caricature of a particular kind—mainly the overly negative kind of Sartre. Nevertheless, it does demonstrate an important reality that faces the existentialist movement as a whole: its orientation is basically prophetic in nature and the existentialist must be willing to pay the price for his or her prophetic stance against mass society.

Although Merton ends his discussion of The Present Age here, it will be helpful to discuss a few other aspects of Kierkegaard’s book which likely led to his description of it as being “completely prophetic.” Kierkegaard opens his book with a description of the present age as being filled with numbing apathy and endless reflection. What is missing in society is passion and creative energy. It is precisely such passion and creative energy that is the fuel for social revolutions and society’s transformation. Kierkegaard laments, “A revolutionary age is an age of action; ours is the age of advertisement and publicity. Nothing ever happens but there is immediate publicity everywhere. In the present age a

14 MZM, 265.
15 DWL, 275.
rebellion is, of all things, the most unthinkable." The human person has forgotten how to grow and engage his or her social environment because human spontaneity and vitality have been sacrificed to the god of reason. All that is left are sudden outbursts of enthusiasm that quickly wither and fade back into apathetic reflection.

Kierkegaard roots his idea of passion within the moral subject. For him, morality is a character that is engraved deep within the human soul. The problem with the present age is that it is morally ambiguous, and ambiguity enters into life when the qualitative distinctions of good and evil are weakened by a gnawing reflection—hence, the need for a “revolt of the passions.” As Kierkegaard explains, “The springs of life, which are only what they are because of the qualitative differentiating power of passion, lose their elasticity.” What results is the person’s inability to relate qualitatively with its opposite. Kierkegaard offers this example: “A father no longer curses his son in anger, using all his parental authority, nor does a son defy his father, a conflict which might end in the inwardness of forgiveness; on the contrary, their relationship is irreproachable, for it is really in process of ceasing to exist, since they are no longer related to one another within the relationship; in fact it has become a problem in which the two partners observe each other as in a game, instead of having any relation to each other, and they note down each other’s remarks instead of showing a firm devotion.”

16 Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 35.
17 Ibid., 43.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 44-45.
What arises out of this apathetic atmosphere is a consciousness trapped within its own mind. This results in a reflective tension that insulates one’s relational capacities within one’s own self. Inevitably, this reflective tension will formulate a principle around which it will seek to exist. Kierkegaard identifies this principle as envy. *Envy* is the negative unifying principle of the passionless and is ultimately selfish in nature. It is this envy binding a person within his or her reflective consciousness that prevents the passionless from ethical action. Even when the person is finally able to be freed from the bonds of reflection and envy, he or she must still contend with the reflective consciousness of those with whom he or she associates. Kierkegaard’s remedy for this situation is the inwardness of religion and the *enthusiasm* attached to it. It is the absence of such *enthusiasm* that results in the process of leveling.

After Kierkegaard’s analysis of the reflective consciousness and the subsequent leveling process, he discusses their ultimate effect upon the person in terms of the *principle of contradiction*. What a reflective age gains in scope it loses in intensity. All hope is not lost, however, since a corresponding intensity may yet come to the aid of the reflective consciousness and thus achieve a still higher form. Without the corresponding intensity, one is left to live in a contradiction with oneself. The potency of a passionate life that makes “the individual completely at one with himself”\(^20\) deflates into a life that is “nothing at all.”\(^21\) Life’s vitality is located precisely within life’s contradictions.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 68.
\(^{21}\) Ibid.
Kierkegaard proceeds to substantiate his understanding of this principle of contradiction by exploring the meaning of five different terms. In each he demonstrates the vital distinction that is essential to the term’s meaning. Citing one example will suffice. Kierkegaard asks, “What is superficiality and the desire to show off?” He answers:

Superficiality is the result of doing away with the vital distinction between concealment and manifestation. It is the manifestation of emptiness, but where mere scope is concerned it wins, because it has the advantage of dazzling people with its brilliant shams. Real manifestation is homogeneous, because it is really profound, whereas superficiality has a varied and omnium gatherum appearance. Its love of showing off is the self-admiration of conceit in reflection. The concealment and reserve of inwardness is not given time in which to conceive an essential mystery, which can then be made manifest, but is disturbed long before that time comes and so, as a reward, reflection attracts the gaze of egotism upon its varied shams whenever possible.

For Kierkegaard, vital distinction is the sine qua non of the acting person. It is the locus of one’s spirit, identity, and personality—the creative center of the self beyond one’s superficial ego. It is where one discovers what is really real.

To get there requires a face to face confrontation with one’s authentic situation. One can no longer retreat to the wisdom of the past for salvation. One is, rather, saved in what religion has to offer in the present moment. The one thing necessary is a “leap of faith”: “behold, all is in readiness, see how the cruelty of abstraction makes the true form of worldliness only too evident, the abyss of eternity opens before you, the sharp scythe of the

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22 Ibid., 75.
23 Ibid.
leveler makes it possible for every one individually to leap over the blade—and behold, it is God who waits. Leap, then, into the arms of God.”

Kierkegaard ends his book with a poignant lament over the then present condition of inertia found in society. The only proper response that is justified, in his estimation, is to join the many others who are heralding their prophecies, apocalypses and predictions of how they see life’s future unfolding. He concludes with this resolution which, in effect, articulates his book’s *raison d’être*: “…I shall simply be a prophet in the modern sense of the word—for a prophet nowadays means to prognosticate and nothing more. In a certain sense a prophet cannot do anything else. It was providence that fulfilled the words of the older prophets, so perhaps we modern prophets, lacking the addition coming from providence, might say with Thales: what we predict will either happen or not; for to us too has God granted the gift of prophecy.”

Continuing his analysis of the existentialist protest against mass society, Merton cites two other works that have contributed to the discussion: Karl Jaspers’ *Man in the Modern World* and Gabriel Marcel’s *Man Against Mass Society*. These works bare this in common: they both demonstrate that authentic existence is much more than *Dasein*, the inert being-there-in-the-world in a state of alienated passivity. The human person is more than a die in a crap game thrown into being. Rather, the human person bears the power to make a decision to truly exist even in his or her own finiteness and “nothingness.” As Merton explains, when this “nothingness” is approached as a matter of personal choice and not as a “vast,

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24 Ibid., 82.
25 Ibid., 85-86.
formless void of the anonymous mass,” it is discovered to be “a presence, a voice, an option in the actions of the real world….”

For Merton, existentialism is a philosophy of life that finds its fulfillment in its engagement with mass society. It is not a form of “monastic” withdrawal. One of the goals of the existentialist movement is to create and foster authentic community. Because the collectivist consciousness of mass society usurps personal existence with a “false and arbitrary fiction” of a “collective togetherness,” authentic community, which is always dependent upon free persons in open dialogue and exchange, can never be experienced. Authentic community can only happen in a group of authentic people. In order to experience one’s own authentic personality which is suitable for true community, a certain posture toward one’s self and the other is required; namely, openness. Openness is the atmosphere where relational vitality is made possible. It creates the possibility for a genuine acceptance, response, and participation in the varied opportunities of authentic experience which come to us each day. What the existentialist seeks to combat are the falsifications rampant in mass society which produce a personality that is closed off to authentic freedom—both within oneself and toward the other. Merton sees the freedom that delivers one from the void of “nothingness” as the same freedom that enables one to choose without

26 MZM, 266.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 267.
29 Ibid.
being predetermined by public persuasion. This “unconditional” choice is possible because it “proceeds from the inviolate sanctuary of the personal conscience.”

This free choice of the personal conscience is, for Merton, the particular aspect of existentialism which separates atheistic existentialism from its more religious form. Jaspers and Marcel, the main proponents of religious existentialism, both demonstrate how conscience is incomprehensible apart from its interpretation as an aspect of the voice of the “transcendent Ground of being and freedom…” Merton explains, “…the basic choice by which one elects to have one’s own personal, autonomous existence is a choice of oneself as a freedom that has been gratuitously given by God. It is acceptance of one’s existence and one’s freedom as pure gift.” Even Sartre’s blank nothingness becomes, for the religious existentialist, “the luminous abyss of divine gift.” In this sense, Merton notes, even the more non-religious forms of existentialism are unconsciously oriented toward a religious worldview.

The popular criticism of existentialism as a philosophical movement leading to negativism, disillusionment, and immorality is debunked by these religious proponents. Christian existentialism, Merton shows, is grounded in the concrete and personal and is articulated mainly through a Biblical mode of expression. Citing Karl Adam, who, Merton quips, “no one would think of calling an existentialist,” he demonstrates the impact that

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30 Ibid., 268.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 269.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 270.
existentialism can have on theology, particularly when seen through the renewed perspective of the Second Vatican Council: “Every ‘Credo,’ if said in the spirit of the Church, ought to be an act of complete dedication of the entire man to God, an assent springing from the great and ineffable distress of our finite nature and our sin.”36 Such faith, much more than a mental assent to religious doctrine, however sincere, issues from “the intimate spiritual ground of one’s own existence.”37 It is total assent, not partial. As the Bible shows, humankind is, without equivocation, fallen and alienated, estranged in the delusion of its own existence apart from God. What is required is repentance and a complete overhaul of consciousness in order to be set upon the right course. A false optimism about humankind’s condition which underestimates the effects of evil upon both the human person and the human community is something that theological existentialism exposes and seeks to overcome. As Merton expresses it, “We must reemphasize the call of the Gospel to healing and to hope, not merely reaffirm that everything is going to be all right because man is smart and will meet the challenge of evil with the best possible solutions.”38 Without this oppositional stance toward evil and its dehumanizing effects, religion loses its relevance and simply becomes just another social movement impotent to instigate real change. Merton says it well, “…if organized religion abdicates its mission to disturb man in the depths of his conscience, and seeks instead to ‘make converts’ that will smilingly adjust to the status quo, then it deserves the most serious and uncompromising criticism. Such criticism is not a disloyalty. On the contrary, fidelity to truth and to God demands it. One of the most

36 Cited in Ibid., 270-71.
37 Ibid., 271.
38 Ibid., 273.
important aspects of our current biblical-existentialist theology is precisely the prophetic consciousness of a duty to question the claims of any religious practice that collaborates with the ‘process of leveling’ and alienation.”\(^{39}\)

The concept of fidelity, which Merton alludes to in the passage above, carries great significance in his understanding of prophecy as depicted in a number of other passages from his writings, especially in his personal correspondence. To Mother Coakley, a Religious of the Sacred Heart, Merton writes, “For we are called above all to be signs of his Mercy in the world, and our fidelity will in its turn be a small sign to others of his fidelity, not that our fidelity has any value in itself, but it enables him to give us richer blessings and to manifest Himself in doing good to us who are nothing.”\(^{40}\) To Mr. Donn he writes, “The Prophets have taught us that Israel is a great sign of the fidelity of God to His promises and his revealed plan for mankind.”\(^{41}\) After reading Abraham Heschel’s *The Prophets*, he writes the author, “They offer us examples of fidelity to Him and patterns of suffering and faith which we must take into account if we are to live as religious men in any sense of the word.”\(^{42}\) Most important and comprehensive is a passage from *The Springs of Contemplation*, a set of retreats given to contemplative nuns toward the end of his life and posthumously transcribed and published. Merton’s perspective is unique: “We just let

\(^{39}\) Ibid.

\(^{40}\) Merton to Mother Coakley, 3 Jan. 1965, SCH, 261-62.

\(^{41}\) Merton to Mr. Donn, 23 Sept. 1966, WTF, 326. Little is known about the identity of Mr. Donn (no first name is ever mentioned). All that is known is that he sent Merton a copy of the quarterly publication *Israel’s Anchorage: The Voice of Messianic Judaism*.

\(^{42}\) Merton to Heschel, 26 Jan. 1963, HGL, 431. The subject of Merton’s and Heschel’s friendship and correspondence has been studied by Edward K. Kaplan in “Abraham Heschel and Thomas Merton: Prophetic Personalities, Prophetic Friendship” in *The Merton Annual* 23 (2010): 106-115, where he states, “The human prophetic responsibility to the living God is a foundational element of their alliance” (108).
Christ be faithful to us. If we live with that kind of mind, we are prophetic. We become prophetic when we live in such a way that our life is an experience of the infallible fidelity of God. That’s the kind of prophecy we are called to, not the business of being able to smell the latest fashion coming ten years before it happens. It is simply being in tune with God’s mercy and will.\textsuperscript{43} He continues, “In other words, if we trust God to act in us, God will act in us. This is how our lives become prophetic. Prophecy is not a technique, it is not about telling someone else what to do. If we are completely open to the Holy Spirit, then the Spirit will be able to lead us where God wants us to go. Going along that line, our lives will be prophetic.”\textsuperscript{44}

Merton’s line of thought here proceeds along the way of the development of faith in the life of the Christian. The spiritual life is understood as the nexus for prophetic activity because of its environment which fosters fidelity to God. Prophetic activity does not present itself as a goal for which the Christian must strive, but as a fruit of a life lived in the Spirit. The favored interpretation of prophecy, for Merton, is the one presented by the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures whose tenacious faith in God led them to be moved with both passion and compassion for the wayward Israelites and for their reconciliation to God. Total allegiance to God, then, leads to a way of living in the world that is a sign of God’s faithfulness to His people. The prophets’ unfailing commitment to the well-being of the Israelites at whatever cost expressed the depth of God’s loving-kindness toward His people and the extent He was willing to go in order to remain true to His covenantal promises. Our

\textsuperscript{43} Thomas Merton, \textit{The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani} (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), 73; hereafter SPR.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 74. For an in depth treatment of prophecy in \textit{The Springs of Contemplation}, see Chapter 8.
faithfulness in return will inevitably make us prophetic. Yet, Merton’s interpretation of prophecy in terms of fidelity intimates a concern of the Christian existentialists, especially that of Gabriel Marcel. Merton was aware of this concern and struggles with it in a journal passage from early 1963. It runs as follows:

The great trial of fidelity in Christian life—a trial which springs from the fact that we too closely identify fidelity to God and fidelity to external organization in the Catholic Church. Hence there is invariably a great trial when an apparent conflict is precipitated (and it is easily precipitated). There are times when it seems that fidelity to God is not compatible with mere obedience to an external norm, where fidelity to God requires something else: certainly not revolt or disobedience, but a presentation of alternatives and deeper views. A “fidelity” which always demands the sacrifice of the interior and the more perfect in order to conform to an external norm that is mediocre, and requires of us only passivity and inertia, is an infidelity to God and to His Church. Yet at the same time we must not make a fetish out of autonomy and be “faithful” only to our own will, for this is the other way to infidelity. The answer is in the Church considered less as an organization than as a living body of interrelated freedoms. Fidelity belongs not so much to the realm of Law as to the realm of love. But it presupposes obedience and self-sacrifice.45

Merton’s struggle with authority, especially the authority of his abbot, James Fox, is well documented.46 A number of Merton scholars have referred to him as a “rebel.”47 His prophetic writings on peace and non-violence show his intense frustration at how he thought authoritative figures in the Church failed to oppose what, to him, were obvious ethical infringements upon human rights and justice. But to paint Merton simply as a rebellious prophet angrily flailing invectives against ecclesiastical powers is a gross oversimplification of a man who deeply and genuinely cared, to his dying day, about the wellbeing of his Catholic Church and his monastery. This view is substantiated in a particular way in his

45 TTW, 289-90.
46 See especially Merton’s journals.
47 Two popular titles make obvious reference to this: William Shannon’s ‘Something of a Rebel’: Thomas Merton, His Life and Works and Michael Higgins’ Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton.
efforts to come to a mature understanding of obedience in the Christian life, in general, and in his monastic life, in particular.\footnote{Michael Mott writes, “Dom James told many in Merton’s lifetime that Father Louis was ‘a most faithful monk, a most obedient monk’” \textit{(Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton, 279)}.}

A breakthrough comes to Merton in this regard when in 1958 he reads Gabriel Marcel’s \textit{Homo Viator}. In his journal he tells of at once coming upon the essay “Obedience and Fidelity” in the book. This essay, in essence, helps bring clarity to much of the confusion surrounding his relationship with his abbot. The journal entry of early 1963 quoted above demonstrates the result of Merton implementing many of the insights put forth by Marcel in his book.

This existential wrestling with the reality of one’s own freedom and loyalties within the institutional confines and foibles of a spiritual community forms a sort of crucible through which Merton sees one’s faith being purified and perfected. The prophet is one who perseveres through this purifying process and becomes a beacon of the resulting holiness. Much more than a passive acquiescence to the purifying flames of God’s love, faith is truly purified only through a total engagement with the dread of one’s own finite existence in the face of divine mystery. With Jacob, Job, and Jeremiah, one dares to confront God for meaning and insight into the absurdities and mystifications of one’s own existence. Only then does one truly come to know God and have something meaningful to communicate to others. Only then does one come to know the true meaning of faith and obedience. Merton explains, “The prophet is a man of God not only in the sense that he is seized and controlled passively by God, but much more truly in the sense that he is consciously and freely
obedient to the Holy Spirit, no matter what the price may be. And this presupposes fidelity in all the obscure mysterious trials by which his soul is purified so that he may become a divine instrument.”

In developing the idea of fidelity further, it might be helpful to consider Marcel’s notion of *creative fidelity*. Although never mentioned by Merton in any of his published writings, Marcel’s book *Creative Fidelity* promotes a way life exemplified by Merton in many of his relationships, especially with authority figures. For Marcel, the question of fidelity must be approached from the vantage point of the concrete situation of people’s lives, one’s incarnate being in the world. Fidelity is expressed in two fundamental relations in one’s existence: (1) in relation to ourselves; (2) in inter-subjective relations. Sincerity is the characteristic necessary for inter-subjective relationships. This requires a certain malleability on the subject’s part, a willingness to accommodate the other whenever possible. For Marcel, there is no fidelity devoid of love. It is directly opposed to the “fanaticism of the ideal.” While never imposing itself coercively, it is neither passive. The type of commitment necessary for creative fidelity lies in the collaboration of two independent sources. The risk of conflict does not deter from the commitment to seek resolution. In fact, out of conflict arises the hope that commitment assures.

The question of tolerance is addressed in Marcel’s chapter “The Phenomenology and the Dialectic of Tolerance.” In discussing the issue of tolerance, two cases are

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49 DQ, 223-24.
distinguished: (1) the case where one’s personal beliefs run contrary to a certain type of behavior; (2) the case of indifference to two opposing positions. The tolerance of the Christian existentialist is never indifferent. On the contrary, being fully invested within committed relationships of creative fidelity, the Christian existentialist walks the difficult path of personal authenticity and confidence, on one hand, and openness to change on the other. The important question arises: can prophetic activity any longer be justified in an age of tolerance? By rooting fidelity in the divine will of God—in *transcendence*, Marcel gives an affirmative answer. We must always remain faithful to the will of God, no matter what. The danger arises when one turns the will of God into a “simple idol” and uses it to promote one’s own will. The mediator of the truth must always assume a humble stance toward the other whom he or she believes to be blinded. They must

…act in a way such that this blinded consciousness turns towards the will that I serve, that it unfolds to the light which is supposed to illumine me. With this in mind, I must be absolutely sure that the other consciousness does not feel that I am acting out of personal motives, that it is not inevitably made to think that what I call divine will—the will which it does not yet acknowledge—is only a mask behind which I deck out those opinions to which I am wedded as one is wedded to oneself; that it does not reveal a desire to exercise my power; to maneuver the other into a region of which I am the center. It is evident that it is only by showing love to this person that I can evoke the feeling that this is not so, that I am really a mediator between him and an unknown will which refrains from revealing itself as a material power; and this love must go out to the soul to be transformed and to renew itself, to expand and to be reborn; and this must occur in such a way that at the same time its belief, somehow bursting of itself out of the narrow framework in which it had been confined, is transfigured and throws off the elements of heterodoxy, the fate which threatened to strangle it.52

51 Ibid., 218.
52 Ibid., 218-19.
Merton uses the final pages of his essay to demonstrate how the Christian existentialist’s prophetic living of fidelity to God and to the *koinonia* of the Church is the only true hope for calling modern humanity out of its estranged alienation and isolating subjectivism. He sees *existential theology* as being the proper orientation for the existentialist movement and the prophetic signpost which can guide those forms of existentialism, which leave its adherents standing outside and apart from the mass mind, toward a meaningful existence beyond the void. He describes existential theology’s several components: (1) openness to the other in creative dialogue; (2) the emphasis on the formation of conscience; (3) its focus upon grace and love as opposed to nature and law; (4) its concern with the world and the time in which humankind finds itself.

An existential theology is not a theological approach which claims to have all the answers and whose main task is to call others to its own form of fixed dogmatism. It is rooted in the human person’s own limitations and need for the other and, thus, requires openness and respect for the varied manifestations of existence in all its forms. As Merton states, “In a word, it depends on freedom and on love.”\(^5^3\) Because such radical openness to the other in freedom and love requires a developed sense of self, existential theology bestows great value on a well-formed conscience. It is crucial that the collective illusions of mass society be exposed for the illusions that they really are so that the authentic person can mature according to the truth.\(^5^4\) This truth is revealed to us in grace and love and enables us

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\(^{53}\) MZM, 276.

\(^{54}\) In his journal entry for July 22, 1963, after reading an article of Gabriel Marcel’s in *Dieu Vivant* IV, Merton notes eight points of Marcel’s *conscience eschatologique*: “(1) Refusal to accept mass-mind, technological ‘unity’ etc.; (2) Refusal to accept ‘optimisme des esprits posés [optimism of the affectatious persons];’ (3)
to live lives of authentic personal freedom. Merton debunks the myth that existentialism necessarily leads to a “liberal and rationalistic dilution of the Gospel message.”

Rather, because of its strong Biblical content, it insists on the obedience of faith as the only path to freedom in Christ. This grace which is the source of humankind’s only true liberation is an event, “an ever renewed encounter with God and one’s fellow man now, in present reality, in dynamic acceptance and availability….”

By retreating into a static past, one only confines oneself within one’s silent recollection and prevents an authentic encounter with God from occurring, the source of grace.

This Bultmannian emphasis on grace as event came to Merton in the early days of 1964 as he relates: “Bultmann’s Essays have been a revelation to me, so powerful, so urgent, so important that every sentence stops me and I don’t seem to get anywhere. I am snowed under by it.” He continues, “Fantastically good. How many of my own ideas I can now abandon or revise. He has revealed to me the full limitations of all my early work, which is utterly naïve and insufficient, except in what concerns my own experience.”

He was particularly moved by the following quote of Bultmann: “God’s grace is to man grace Awareness of concentration camps as figures of the world to come (under technology); (4) Awareness of the lie involved in equating these horrors with those of other times; (5) Awareness of the imprudence with which the ideals of other times are invoked and revered by the very ones who, claiming to follow them and use them as used and generally understood, have actually destroyed them; (6) Recognition that much (all) that used to be taken for granted is now problematic and there are fewer and fewer answers; (7) Recognition of ‘statism’ as impotence disguised as absolute power; (8) The Egocrat conscience = not ‘le moi captif’ [the captive self] in the habits and prejudices of sensible world which thinks all is ‘business as usual,’ but ‘le moi de l’amour et de la Prière [the self of love and prayer]’ which can face the event is joy of the person one with many in Xt.” Quoted from TTW, 343-44.

55 Ibid., 277.
56 Ibid., 278.
57 DWL, 55.
58 Ibid.
in such a thoroughgoing sense that it supports the whole of man’s existence, and can only be
conceived of as grace by those who surrender their whole existence and let themselves fall
into the unfathomable, dizzy depths without seeking for something to hold on to.”

Yet, Merton is quick to point out the shortcomings of Bultmann’s existential
approach. His criticisms revolve mainly around Bultmann’s ecclesiology, or lack thereof,
and reveal one of the greatest concerns and frustrations in his efforts in promoting ecclesial
and monastic renewal, along with an important insight into his own self-awareness. He
writes:

Bultmann’s inadequate notions of the Church. Good to see clearly where his
existentialism falls short of genuine Christianity. This is of course a danger for me
too. There is no question I think individualistically, to a great extent. But I also
realize the insufficiency of this. At the same time a superficial inadequate
communal spirit will only make things worse for me, not better. There is no
question of the deep inauthenticity of the common life in this monastery, in most
religious communities, and in the Church. It is due in part to the way authority is
conceived and exercised (to the great psychological and spiritual harm of many) and
to the fact that this can hardly be remedied as matters stand (at least here). The
“new” approach, however, seems to me to be equally inauthentic, for reasons that
are more obscure. I think the relationships set up are based more on insecurities and
superficial needs than on the Spirit and on faith. They do not spell authenticity.

Merton understood that the Church as a fellowship of faith possessed within herself the
particular task of bearing witness to the love of God—a task that only she could fulfill.
Existential theology revolts against the mass mentality that has infiltrated into the Church
and religious communities and seeks to make authentic, free persons for authentic, free
relationships. The danger, of which Merton was well aware, was failing to follow through

59 Cited in Ibid., 59.
60 Ibid., 270.
to the end to which this particular brand of theology leads and to remain in one’s isolated individualism. Renewal means, then, a continual struggle toward true koinonia wholly dependent upon the Spirit of God and His sustaining power.

Thus, an existential theology speaks to the inner hopelessness of modern humanity whose despair and confusion has left it wallowing in its own self-isolation and loneliness. By succumbing to the secular and positivist illusions of the fallen world, modern humanity faces only death. The gospel of the Christian existentialist, on the other hand, opens up modern man to a genuine future—“a future liberated from the facticity of life in a depersonalized mass, free from the care and concern with the mere ‘objects,’ free at last even from death.”

Concluding Remarks

Thomas Merton’s natural proclivities for the causes of the existentialist movement are apparent in many ways. Existentialism gave him a philosophical framework from which he sought to live out some of his spirit’s most pressing urgencies: the need for authenticity; the need for unwavering fidelity; the need for obedience properly understood; the need for true freedom; the need for life-giving koinonia. In his essay, “The Other Side of Despair: Notes on Christian Existentialism,” he sets out to chronicle the major themes of the existentialist movement and seeks to clarify their proper integration within Christian theology and life. For Merton, the existential experience and attitude of life is aimed at

61 MZM, 279.
recovering life’s most fundamental reality—one’s own sense of personhood. This requires the monumental task of uncovering the many layers of illusion that mass society has amassed upon one’s authentic self. It requires a Kierkegaardian “leap of faith.”

Kierkegaard’s *The Present Age* offered Merton many insights into the prophetic nature of the existentialist movement. What modern society needed above all was the passion that could motivate humankind toward the ethical imperative and help it break free from its apathetic, reflective subjectivism. The “leveling” of society is the result of this reflective consciousness trapped within itself. What is needed, besides passion, is the restoration of the *principle of contradiction* whose vital distinctions give to life the necessary energy which makes possible authentic communal experience. Only then can the falsifications of mass society be eradicated. The secret ingredient which allows for these vital distinctions is *openness*, both toward oneself and toward the other.

Christian existentialism offered Merton the particular insights which allowed him to form his ideas about prophecy primarily in terms of fidelity—both in the sense of God’s fidelity toward us and our fidelity toward God. Prophecy happens, for Merton, as the fruit of a life lived in total faithfulness to God. Being fully committed to God will make one prophetic. This led him, however, to an existential predicament within his own vocation. How does one maintain fidelity to God and fidelity to one’s faith community when they seem to contradict one another? Mainly through his reading of Gabriel Marcel, he began to refine his understanding of the proper place of obedience in his own Christian life within the Church and within his monastic life at Gethsemani, which led him to greater freedom in
both these regards. Merton found that the proper response to this existential predicament in a healthy balance between understanding the Church primarily as a community of free persons and in understanding the need for personal obedience and self-sacrifice.

Rudolf Bultmann’s notion of grace as event helped catapult Merton’s existential theology toward a radical re-understanding of the extent of God’s desire to refashion the self according to His divine will. Until God alone becomes one’s source of dependence through faith, life’s falsifications will persist. Yet, Bultmann left Merton longing for the true experience of koinonia—the experience of a life-giving community of persons who are truly free. True Christian existentialism is not satisfied with leaving Christians rejoicing in their own individual freedoms. Rather, its ultimate goal is found in the formation of authentic community. Only then are existentialism’s prophetic endeavors fulfilled.
Chapter 6

The Role of Authenticity in Thomas Merton’s Prophetic Spirituality

*A prophet is one who cuts through great tangled knots of lies.*

- Thomas Merton

The trajectory of Thomas Merton’s spiritual journey can be mapped out as one extended expedition aimed toward the discovery of the ground of reality. In Merton’s outlook, the greatest roadblocks to this spiritual expedition are the many illusions that present themselves as the really real but which, when embraced, prove to be only vain and empty fabrications of authentic existence. The result of this most fundamental of sins is a life enslaved to unreality—most often without the awareness that one’s life is enslaved at all—caught in the web of an illusory existence. Often, it is not until one is made to come face to face with one’s superficial life in a forceful confrontation that one will finally begin to see the illusions for what they really are. Here is found the moment of decision and grace and the possibility of the transformation of human consciousness.

Merton’s spiritual writings revolve around this core moment like a central theme expressed in many variations. It is not too bold to assert that what matters most to Merton is the discovery of truth and the freedom found hidden within it. One of the unique features of Merton’s spiritual search is his insistence that the ultimate confrontation with truth be

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1 TTW, 27.
grounded in a personal appropriation and assimilation of its realities. This is why he found the existential writers so convincing. They were articulating many of the same ideas about the need for this personal encounter in order to authenticate existence. As we saw in our last chapter, many of these writers, while offering Merton insight into the path of human transformation, ultimately proved unsatisfactory (with the possible exceptions of Kierkegaard and Marcel). Yet, they were considered prophetic by him mainly because of their outspoken resistance against anything they felt robbed the human person of really living. For many of the existentialists, authenticity was the ultimate goal of life. For Merton, rather than the ultimate goal, authenticity was a proximate end for the truly ultimate goal of life in God. In this chapter, we will examine the special role that authenticity plays in Merton’s prophetic spirituality. This will be accomplished by analyzing two interdependent aspects of Merton’s writings on the spiritual life: the transformation of self-consciousness and the transformation of social consciousness.

The prophetic function of both the transformation of self-consciousness and social consciousness can be understood in terms of the unmasking of illusions in order to reveal the really real. The prophet, in this sense, is the one who has developed an eye for truth and seeks to expose the lies that entangle and oppress. The prophet is a liberator. Merton saw clearly that this prophetic function, in order to be truly authentic, must begin with the liberation of one’s own self. Until this is accomplished, at least to a significant degree, one will not be able to see clearly through the tangled knots of lies in others to be effectively prophetic. Further, the trust needed to bring about change in others would not have been earned without the manifestation of genuine authenticity in one’s own life. For Merton,
only the authentic can make authentic. Without personal integrity, the prophet is only a “resounding gong or a clashing cymbal.”

**Authenticity and the Transformation of Self-Consciousness**

The road to personal authenticity is an arduous one. It involves the very stripping away of the only existence with which one is familiar. It requires supernatural faith and perseverance and often takes many years before significant change is accomplished. In order to attain to one’s own truth, one must first confront one’s own lies. This is the task of the contemplative. Henri Nouwen supports this view of the contemplative endeavor: “Merton understood that the unmasking of illusion belonged to the essence of the contemplative life. The many years of prayer and solitude had confronted him with his own illusion. But through this he was also prepared to show himself and his fellow human beings that which they would rather keep hidden. This unmasking is not a game that one can choose to play or not to play. It is a sacred duty, and regards the here and now of what occurs in this world.”

Merton knew, as mentioned above, that this sacred duty began with one’s self…and he was no exception. “What I find most in my whole life is *illusion.*” What was true of him was also true of the modern person in general. In a letter of 10 July 1965, Merton

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2 1 Cor. 13:1, NAB.
4 DWL, 198.
explores this theme in response to a letter from Charles Anthony Wainwright. It offers insight into how Merton related the particular theme of authenticity to existentialism in general:

It comes quite natural to us, doesn’t it, to think that “modern man” is a man who faces a “moment of truth” once, several times, often in his life…. For my own part, I think that life turns out to be a continual series of moments of untruth in which (when the going gets sufficiently ghastly) a moment of truth finally appears in the midst of all the mess. This I suppose reflects the existentialist type of thinking that has become more and more common with me, and which does not by any means prevent me from living a happy sort of life. In any case, I think it is important to face the fact that modern man, whether he likes it or not, leads a life that is low in authenticity. Things are decided for him, foisted on him, and even experienced for him by others. His existence is more and more secondhand, and even his moments of truth tend to be fabricated for him. That is the problem. I would say that as a result of this, the real moments of truth that do obviously occur (since where there is life there is resistance to inauthenticity) appear at first to be quite other than they are.

This particular problem is also, for Merton, a reality in religion. Continuing along the same lines in his letter to Wainwright, he makes reference to the modern Christian as well:

…I can say as a Christian, and an existentialist Christian, that I have often experienced the fact that the “moment of truth” in the Christian context is the encounter with the inscrutable word of God, the personal and living interpretation of the word of God when it is lived, when it breaks through by surprise into our own completely contemporary and personal existence. And this means of course that it breaks through conventional religious routines and even seems in some ways quite scandalous in terms of the average and accepted interpretation of what religion ought to be. Hence, those for whom religion constitutes in effect a protection against any real moments of truth are people I cannot understand.

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5 Only one letter to “Mr. Wainwright” is published in the collection of Merton letters. Merton’s response to C. A. Wainwright’s letter (which is not extant) was prompted by Wainwright’s project of writing a number of famous people asking about their “moment of truth” in the face of adversity. He began this project as therapeutic writing after the death of his daughter and the loss of his job. Wainwright, after beginning a career in advertising, has been involved in business leadership and served on the board of many charities.

6 Merton to Mr. Wainwright, 10 July 1965, WTF, 253-54.

7 Ibid., 254.
The contemplative life, for Merton, produces the necessary disposition for the sacred “encounter with the inscrutable word of God.” The liberation of the true self can only occur in the atmosphere of solitude. This liberation happens through the grace of divine affirmation. It is only after we develop the ears to hear God speak the truth of who we really are, that we truly come to be. And this coming to be, for Merton, is not simply to be alone with one’s newfound freedom—rather, it is the prerequisite for authentic love. Yet, even in this love is found the threat of illusion: “Often our need for others is not love at all, but only the need to be sustained on our illusions, even as we sustain others in theirs. But when we have renounced these illusions, then we can certainly go out to others in true compassion. It is in solitude that illusions finally dissolve.”

In *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, the final book Merton authored, he draws important connections between contemplative prayer and its function in transforming the self. One significant line of connection is drawn between existentialist thinkers like Heidegger, Camus, and Sartre with their insistence on the need for humankind to probe its own inauthenticity and enter uncompromisingly into the abyss of its own emptiness and the life of the contemplative who, in essence, does the same thing. Merton writes, “After all, some of the basic themes of the existentialism of Heidegger, laying stress as they do on the ineluctable fact of death, on man’s need for authenticity, and of a kind of spiritual liberation, can remind us that the climate in which monastic prayer flourished is not altogether absent from our modern world. Quite the contrary: this is an age that, by its very nature as a time

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8 HR, 117.
9 *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* published in 1969 was later republished in 1971 under the title *Contemplative Prayer* in order to appeal to a wider audience.
of crisis, of revolution, of struggle, calls for the special searching and questioning which are
the work of the monk in his meditation and prayer.”

Coming face to face with one’s own inauthenticity in solitude is described by existentialists as an experience of dread. Making connections with this existentialist theme to the spirituality of St. John of the Cross, Merton explores this idea in the context of contemplative prayer. He writes, “This deep dread and night must then be seen for what it is: not as punishment, but as purification and as grace. Indeed it is a great gift of God, for it is the precise point of our encounter with his fullness.”

The insecurity of our inauthentic existence finds its security only in the realization of one’s life in God. The transition from one way of being to the other is often only traversed through this dark night of dread. Dread is Merton’s remedy for the sickness of inauthenticity, both on the communal level and on the personal:

It is precisely the function of dread to break down this glass house of false interiority and to deliver man from it. It is dread, and dread alone, that drives a man out of this private sanctuary in which his solitude becomes horrible to himself without God. But without dread, without the disquieting capacity to see and to repudiate the idolatry of devout ideas and imaginings, man would remain content with himself and with his ‘inner life’ in meditation, in liturgy or in both. Without dread, the Christian cannot be delivered from the smug self-assurance of the devout ones who know all the answers in advance, who possess all the clichés of the inner life and can defend themselves with infallible ritual forms against every risk and every demand of dialogue with human need and human desperation.

Embracing one’s sense of dread is coming face to face with one’s sense of alienation. For Merton, alienation is what occurs to a person when he or she begins to assume roles assigned by the dictates of society. Without realizing it, one often begins to identify with

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11 Ibid., 136.
12 Ibid., 145-46.
that role and soon loses touch with one’s own authentic self. One believes that one is the mask one is wearing. What results is a “painful, sometimes paranoid sense of being always under observation, under judgment, for not fulfilling some role or other we have forgotten we were supposed to fulfill.”¹³ His remedy is severe: “It is not enough to complain about alienation, one must exorcise it.”¹⁴

This transformation from inauthenticity and alienation through dread to communion with God in an authentic existence expressed in genuine love of neighbor is also a frequent topic of Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander. Here we see that humble self-transformation is the prerequisite for effective prophetic activity: “If we really sought truth we would begin slowly and laboriously to divest ourselves one by one of all our coverings of fiction and delusion: or at least we would desire to do so, for mere willing cannot enable us to effect it. On the contrary, the one who can best point out our error, and help us to see it, is the adversary whom we wish to destroy. This is perhaps why we wish to destroy him. So, too, we can help him to see his error, and that is why he wants to destroy us.”¹⁵ Only after this humble acceptance of our own truth does the face of the true prophet appear:

In the long run, no one can show another the error that is within him, unless the other is convinced that his critic first sees and loves the good that is within him. So while we are perfectly willing to tell our adversary he is wrong, we will never be able to do so effectively until we can ourselves appreciate where he is right. And we can never accept his judgment on our errors until he gives evidence that he really appreciates our own peculiar truth. Love, love only, love of our deluded fellow man as he actually is, in his delusion and in his sin: this alone can open the door to truth.¹⁶

¹³ LE, 382.
¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ CGB, 68.
¹⁶ Ibid., 69.
What makes this self-transformation in truth and the development of an authentic concern for others so difficult, is the way we convince ourselves that we genuinely seek the truth when, in actuality, our search for truth is fraught with subtle and hidden motivations of self-interest. As Merton relates, “what we desire is not ‘the truth’ so much as ‘to be in the right’…. What we seek is not the pure truth, but the partial truth that justifies our prejudices, our limitations, our selfishness.”

Freedom from prejudice, limitation, and selfishness is one of the premiere goals of the contemplative life. Stated positively, the contemplative seeks a pure and whole existence free from the dark undercurrents of a wounded ego. For Merton, it is not simply truth that will free the modern person, but only truth expressed in genuine love.

An added obstacle toward authentic prophetic expression is the baggage that has been attached to language through so much misuse. Words, so often manipulated, are more often sources of fear and mistrust than catalysts for real change. Merton examines this problem with a particular cogency: “There have been so many words uttered in contempt of truth, in despite of love, honor, justice, and of all that is good. Even these concepts themselves (truth, honor, goodness) have become sick and rotten to us, not because they are defiled, but because we are.” What is the modern prophet to do in such a linguistically convoluted situation? Merton’s advice is clear and forceful: “Nevertheless, we must risk falsity, we must take courage and speak, we must use noble instruments of which we have

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17 Ibid., 78.
18 Ibid., 92.
become ashamed because we no longer trust ourselves to use them worthily. We must dare to think what we mean, and simply make clear statements of what we intend. This is our only serious protection against repeated spiritual defilement by the slogans and programs of the unscrupulous. “This is precisely what the gift of solitude enables—a lucid consciousness that cuts through ambiguous manipulations: “What the solitary renounces is not his union with other men, but rather the deceptive and inadequate symbols which tend to take the place of genuine social unity—to produce a façade of apparent unity without really uniting men on a deep level.”

Merton understands that the modern person is situated in a certain existential predicament that implicates the totality of his or her life. Participation in the delusions and illusions of existence is a part of the reality of sin in which we all participate. If one desires to be an authentic Christian, a fundamental choice must be made against this participation. For him, there really is no middle path of compromise. The world is too infected with sin. This is a perspective of Merton’s which does not change even with his “befriending” the world in the 1960’s. His motive to engage the world was not founded upon a desire to become a part of it, but to help save it. The risk is great. It would have been much easier for him to continue the tradition of monastic isolation and insulation from the world and seek to protect himself from its illusions. Perhaps one of the greatest motivating forces for Merton’s eventual engagement with the world was the realization that any existence apart from the world and its illusions is itself an illusion. His encounter with “the world” in the monastery,

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19 Ibid., 92-93.
20 DQ, 188.
in a sense, gave him no other option but to fight against it. Such a predicament gives rise to this assessment: “The priest, the religious, the lay-leader must, whether he likes it or not, fulfill in the world the role of a prophet. If he does not face the anguish of being a true prophet, he must enjoy the carrion comfort of acceptance in the society of the deluded by becoming a false prophet and participating in their delusions.”

Thus, the transformation of self-consciousness according to Merton’s understanding begins in a humble acknowledgement of the many ways in which sin has distorted our vision of reality—both of ourselves and of the reality all around us—and culminates in prophetic self-expression in genuine care and compassion. The course of this transformation is laid out in The New Man, a work published in 1961 whose working title “Existential Communion” communicates something of the nature of the goal of this transformation. “Man’s” descent into unreality commenced at the very beginning of human existence: “Adam’s fall was therefore the willful acceptance of unreality, the consent to receive and even prefer a lie to the truth about himself and about his relationship to God. This lie robbed him of the innocence by which he saw nothing but good in himself, in things and in God and endowed him with the power to know evil, not only speculatively but by experience. The experience of falsity destroyed in him the instinctive taste for spiritual truth. Illusion entered in to spoil the existential flow of communication between his soul and God.” Hope is not lost, however, since a possible return to God and a reversal of Adam’s sin has been made possible in Christ. Merton highlights what is required of us: “The first step in all this is to

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21 FV, 68.
recognize our true condition. Before we can ever hope to find ourselves in God, we must clearly recognize the fact that we are far from Him. Before we can realize who we really are, we must become conscious of the fact that the person we think we are, here and now, is at best an impostor and a stranger. We must constantly question his motives and penetrate his disguises.” Recognizing one’s true condition is the essence of the meaning of humility, and it is the work of humility that brings us ever closer to our own truth and reality. For Merton, this is undeniably an arduous journey. Thus, it requires much grace and discipline: “This demands an ascetic struggle, in which our spirit, united with the Spirit of God, resists the flesh, its desires and its illusions, in order to strengthen and elevate us more and more, and open our eyes to the full meaning of our life in Christ.” Humility and asceticism, the hallmarks of monastic and contemplative spirituality, enable the integration of truth into one’s life, thereby setting it free from illusion and sin. This encounter with the truth of one’s existence authenticates one’s life and rids it of obstructions to the existential flow of God’s Spirit within. In this existential communion with God, one becomes transparent—a type of mirror reflecting divine goodness, love, and truth. This is the spiritual authenticity which allows for the “new man” to come into existence. As was discussed in our last chapter, becoming prophetic, according to Merton, is a result of fidelity to the call of God. By persevering in faith through the existential demands of Christian discipleship, one’s true self emerges and one becomes a reflection of the life of God in the world. For Merton, prophecy is, in its most fundamental sense, this reflection of the transformed self.

23 Ibid., 119.
24 Ibid., 157-58. Merton also emphasizes the need for asceticism to unmask illusions in his novitiate conference tape “True Freedom” (Credence Cassettes AA2803).
Authenticity and the Transformation of Social Consciousness

The God Merton encountered in his solitude as a monk was, he discovered, preeminently a God overflowing with love and compassion for all humankind who had fallen into the alienation perpetuated by an illusory existence. As discussed above, the final decade of Merton’s life was marked by a type of contemplation which made little distinction between solitude and service. In a sense, a life of service to those in need demonstrates that one’s solitude is real. The call to be a monk, for Merton, had become most fundamentally a call to transform society—not necessarily by going out into the world and pastoring churches or preaching missions—but by offering the unique gift of the monk: namely, spiritual insight into the reality of things. By being firmly rooted in a life of contemplation, the monastic vocation blossoms into a prophetic witness to the Kingdom of God.

Writings on Mohandas Gandhi

Authenticity played a formidable role in the manner in which Merton exercised his social concerns in the 1960’s. In Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948), the revolutionary Indian religious and national leader, Merton found both the model and inspiration for what he considered to be the most effective way to cut through the many tangled knots of lies embedded in the consciousness of any given society. This way, satyagraha, which in its root meaning is “holding on to truth,” refers to Gandhi’s insistence that the illusory existence of injustice and violence could only be fought and overcome with the weapons of non-violent resistance. Gandhi’s witness of “active non-violence” had a profound impact
upon Merton’s thinking in the mid-1960’s and informed the way in which he sought to prophetically resist the injustices of racism and war in his own day. It led Merton down a unique and controversial path for a Trappist—writing about issues that his superiors felt were inappropriate for a monk. Eventually, his work in promoting non-violence was suppressed but not before he had published his basic ideas in his 1964 book Seeds of Destruction.\textsuperscript{25} He was also able to publish in the same year his tribute to his beloved mentor in non-violence—a type of Gandhian catechism—\textit{Gandhi on Non-Violence}.\textsuperscript{26} Both of these texts bear witness to the way in which Merton learned the prophetic power of authenticity of life from the humble Indian sage.

In \textit{Seeds of Destruction}, Merton forcefully asserts his idea of the prophetic nature of the contemplative life in the first line of his “Author’s Note” by stating, “The contemplative life is not, and cannot be, a mere withdrawal, a pure negation, a turning of one’s back on the world with its sufferings, its crises, its confusions and its errors. First of all, the attempt itself would be illusory. No man can withdraw completely from the society of his fellow men; and the monastic community is deeply implicated, for better or for worse, in the economic, political, and social structures of the contemporary world.”\textsuperscript{27} A monk, above all things, is a person moved by compassion. In his chapter “A Tribute to Gandhi,” he offers the Hindu leader as a prime example of how contemplative life flowers into prophetic witness. He does so by relating the central place authenticity holds in Gandhi’s philosophy:

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\textsuperscript{25} Thomas Merton, \textit{Seeds of Destruction} (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964); hereafter SD. It is my opinion that Merton, unsatisfied with the insulated idea of contemplation suggested in \textit{Seeds of Contemplation}, intentionally plays off of this earlier title in order to express contemplation’s fuller, prophetic dimension.
\textsuperscript{26} Thomas Merton, \textit{Gandhi on Non-Violence} (New York: New Directions, 1964); hereafter GNV.
\textsuperscript{27} SD, xiii.
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“The vow of satyagraha is the vow to die rather than say what one does not mean.” 28 A life of non-violence is completely dependent upon the full acceptance and integration of the truth into one’s life: “Gandhi’s religio-political action was based on an ancient metaphysic of man, a philosophical wisdom which is common to Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity: that ‘truth is the inner law of our being.’” 29 This inner law of our being is a law based upon experience of truth more than upon logic. The wisdom of Gandhi teaches that “the way of peace is the way of truth, of fidelity to wholeness and being, which implies a basic respect for life not as a concept, not as a sentimental figment of the imagination, but in its deepest most secret and most fontal reality. The first and fundamental truth is to be sought in respect for our own inmost being, and this in turn implies the recollectedness and the awareness which attune us to that silence in which alone Being speaks to us in all its simplicity.” 30 Fidelity to the Word of God again appears as Merton’s pattern for prophetic living. Merton concludes his chapter on Gandhi with these words of admonition: “A Christian can do nothing greater than follow his own conscience with a fidelity comparable to that which Gandhi obeyed what he believed to be the voice of God. Gandhi is, it seems to me, a model of integrity whom we cannot afford to ignore, and the one basic duty we all owe to the world of our time is to imitate him in ‘disassociating ourselves from evil in total disregard of the consequences.’” 31

28 Ibid., 230.
29 Ibid., 231.
30 Ibid., 232.
31 Ibid., 234.
In his introductory essay to *Gandhi on Non-Violence*, entitled “Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant,” Merton offers one of his most perceptive insights into the nature of truth. Henri Nouwen, writing on Gandhi’s influence upon Merton in this regard, captures the essence of this truth: “the spirit of truth is the spirit of non-violence.”\(^{32}\) According to Merton, the non-violent spirit springs “from an inner realization of spiritual unity....”\(^{33}\) Overcoming inner division is the prerequisite for the inner freedom required for meaningful social influence. The social dimension of the spiritual life becomes accessible only in the realization of this spiritual unity. What results is a realization of the spiritual life as much more than a private affair. As Merton notes, “The spiritual life of one person is simply the life of all manifesting itself in him.”\(^{34}\) This insight into Gandhi’s integrated and communal spirituality demonstrated to Merton that Gandhi’s political involvement was fundamentally a religious duty. The liberation of India was but one step to the liberation of all of humankind. Merton notes that for Gandhi, there was no such thing as a secular public sector. All sectors of society were sacred and bore the special concern of God and, therefore, warrant human concern as well.

Yet, society bears within itself “secular” structures which are basically irreligious and are to be rejected as dehumanizing. This was a particular symptom of the affluent industrial society whose organized greed intrinsically tended toward violence because of its structural disorder and moral confusion. Merton notes, “The first principle of valid political action in such a society then becomes *non-cooperation* with its disorder, its injustices, and

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\(^{32}\) Nouwen, *Thomas Merton: Contemplative Critic*.

\(^{33}\) GNV, 10.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 11.
more particularly with its deep commitment to untruth.”  

Satyagraha plays a vital role in this non-cooperation. It fastens the satyagrahi to the truth and integrity of his or her own authentic existence through which he or she becomes a witness to truth in society: “The first job of a satyagrahi is to bring the real situation to light even if he has to suffer and die in order that injustice be unmasked and appear for what it really is.”  

It was precisely the way that Gandhi existentially identified himself with the helpless and vulnerable that, in Merton’s view, gave him the power to expose injustice and reveal truth. This Christ-like condescension led Merton to write, “In Gandhi the voice of Asia, not the Asia of the Vedas and Sutras only, but the Asia of the hungry and silent masses, was speaking and still speaks to the whole world with a prophetic message. This message, uttered on dusty Indian roads, remains more meaningful than those specious promises that have come from the great capitals of the earth.”  

It was also seen in the extent to which Gandhi embodied his own belief in satyagraha. His famous fast unto death on behalf of the Harijan (outcasts, untouchables) was a prophetic action which, he hoped, would help integrate them into the social life of Indian culture. For Merton, what made this symbolic gesture so prophetic was precisely its effectiveness in overcoming the reality of sin entrenched in society. His approach is noteworthy. Merton writes, “He did not seek to reproach and confound others with the spectacle of his own penitence for their sin. He wanted them to recognize from his example that they could learn to bear and overcome the evil that was in them if they were...

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35 Ibid., 15.
36 Ibid., 16.
37 Ibid.
willing to do as he did.” 38 The non-violent approach to prophetic witness in Gandhi is, therefore, unlike that of the scolding Hebrew prophets whose aggressive invectives often fell on deaf ears. Gandhi had the particular Christian insight, according to Merton, that true power lay in weakness and humility. He also had the particular Christian insight that only a transformed self made alive in the embrace of truth can really transform others. Merton expresses this insight and its effectiveness when he writes:

Gandhi’s symbolic acts (which were meaningful as symbols only because they marked his own flesh with the stamp of their acute reality) were aimed at three kinds of liberation. First, he wanted to deliver Indian religious wisdom from the sclerosis and blindness into which it had sunk by reason of the gross injustices of a system which had become untrue to itself. Second, he wanted to liberate the untouchables, the Harijan, not only from political and economic oppression, but from the incubus of their own self-hate and their despair. And, finally, he wished to liberate the oppressors themselves from their blind and hopeless dependence on the system which kept things as they were, and which consequently enslaved everybody both spiritually and materially. 39

What strikes Merton most about Gandhi’s approach to active non-violence is how comprehensive it is in “its breadth, its integrity, and its unity.” 40 Fighting violence with violence was, for Gandhi, the greatest of illusions preventing true peace in the world. His legacy to the world is, for Merton, summed up in this perceptive statement: “The evils we suffer cannot be eliminated by a violent attack in which one sector of humanity flies at another in destructive fury.” 41 The truth of the situation, in Gandhian teaching, is that everyone, without exception, shares in a common evil. The solution, therefore, is also common. The reason why most of us don’t undertake this common task of active non-

38 Ibid., 25.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
violence is “because we are not ourselves.”\footnote{Ibid.} Thus, Merton points out, “the first duty of every man is to return to his own ‘right mind’ in order that society itself may be sane.”\footnote{Ibid.} As can be seen, the cure of society’s insanity according to Gandhian principles of non-violence comes about primarily through the prophetic witness of individuals who humbly and radically embrace the self-sacrifice which makes authentic mercy and compassion possible. Merton notes, following the line of thought presented by Ananda Coomaraswamy, that the prophetic witness of the satyagrahi is aimed at, above all, the restoration of humankind’s “right mind.” The “vow of truth” which Gandhi professed was “the necessary preamble to the awakening of a mature political consciousness…”\footnote{GNV, 30.}—or a “right mind.” Without the full embrace of one’s authentic existence in peaceful truth, there will never be peace on earth.

\textit{Writings on Monastic Renewal}

Authenticity is also the central theme in Merton’s writings on monastic renewal. Often considered as one of the primary ways in which he functioned prophetically,\footnote{The most important study on this perspective to date is John Eudes Bamberger’s \textit{Thomas Merton: Prophet of Renewal} (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005).} Merton’s writings on monastic renewal have garnered much attention in post-conciliar monasticism as religious communities have sought to adapt and acclimate themselves to the modern situation. These writings offer another dimension to Merton’s conception of the

\footnote{Ibid. This idea of “right mind” Merton takes from Coomaraswamy’s article “On Being in One’s Right Mind,” in \textit{Review of Religion}, November, 1942. Merton writes, “Coomaraswamy, in an important article, once outlined the meaning of the process called metanoia, or recovery of one’s right mind, the passage from ignorance of self to enlightened moral awareness” (pp. 25-26).}
prophetic power of authenticity, whose goal was both the restoration of spiritual vitality in religious life and, through this, the restoration of the “right mind” in society.

In an article on St. Aelred of Rievaulx posthumously published in *Cistercian Studies* in 1985, Merton shares his ideas about the true spirit of the Cistercian reform. He writes, “At the root of the Cistercian reform was a hatred of artificiality and an intense impatience with the illogical compromises into which monks are led when they yield to the obscure enticements of the world, the flesh and the devil, and live like worldlings under the guise of religious. St. Stephen Harding and his companions were consumed by the passionate desire for truth.” The monastic goal of purity of heart was interpreted by the early Cistercian writers mainly in terms of living an authentic existence free from the false self which had come to identify itself with an artificial reality. In the recovery of one’s true self is discovered one’s pure heart. Merton’s efforts at monastic renewal must, therefore, be understood predominantly in terms of renewal or aggiornamento and not in terms of a radical departure from the Cistercian tradition. In this respect, his prophetic role mimics that of the Hebrew prophets whose vocation was to call God’s people back to covenantal faithfulness.

The problem with which Merton came face to face, especially in his dealing with monks in formation, was how the then current structure of his Order was inadequately aligned with the true spirit of the early Cistercian reform. For Merton, the early Cistercians were convinced that their monastic vocation bore within it a definite prophetic role. This

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prophetic dimension is one of the essential elements of the Cistercian vocation that had been lost and was in need of recovery if true renewal was to take place. For John Eudes Bamberger, what was true of the Cistercian Fathers was also true of Merton. In his *Thomas Merton: Prophet of Renewal*, he states, “Thomas Merton contended that bearing prophetic witness to the transcendent holiness of God continues to be a major function of all Cistercian communities true to their vocation.” Merton’s remedy, according to Bamberger, was to begin by reforming the program of monastic formation. Essential in this reform was his insistence on authenticity of life. He writes, “Merton’s desire for the authentic, for truth, and for a radical transformation motivated Merton’s concern for reforming the studies in the Order.” The foundational issue in the reform of monastic formation was found in the development of “a more personal and authentic spirituality that gave greater scope for individuals and for the individual communities of the Order to respond to their monastic charism with a larger measure of personal responsibility and creativity.” The recovery of the prophetic dimension in monasticism, for Merton, begins with the authentication and personalization of each individual monk. Fidelity to the monastic way of life will then lead to the recovery of monasticism’s prophetic dimension. It is such fidelity that Bamberger saw in Merton that leads him to this assessment: “His perceptiveness, his courageous persistence, and his loyal fidelity in spite of misunderstandings and frustrations, places

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48 Ibid., 40.
49 Ibid., 36.
50 For a fuller treatment of Merton’s understanding of the prophetic dimension of monasticism, see Chapter 7.
Merton among the prophetic voices that called the Order to follow in the footsteps of the holy Fathers, and the Church to return to the wholeness of the Gospel.”

In his writings on monastic renewal, Merton was cautious about the efforts being made and believed that much which was being hailed as *aggiornamento* was little more than a superficial reconfiguration. The test of authentic renewal would be found precisely in the integration of the prophetic role and contemplative life. He writes, “…the contemplative orders must take special care to avoid a superficial adjustment which, in the name of a poorly understood *aggiornamento*, would end by depriving them of the authentic riches of their mystical and prophetic traditions.”

Elsewhere he states that, “…it is misleading to talk so much of the *contemplative* life in a way that obscures the fact that what we need to renew is not so much the ‘contemplative’ and enclosed and abstract dimension of our life, as the *prophetic and eschatological* witness of our silence, poverty, etc.”

What monasticism suffered, for Merton, was only a microcosmic representation of the ailment found in Catholicism at large. Writing to Colman McCarthy, a former monk from Holy Spirit Abbey in Conyers, Georgia, Merton makes reference to Carl Amery’s idea of “milieu Catholicism.” His comments succinctly assess his sense of the problem causing the inauthenticity found in religious life and the price being paid for it. He writes:

Milieu Catholicism is Catholicism which is so completely committed to a social and cultural established milieu that when there arises a choice between the Gospel and the milieu, the choice is not even visible. The milieu wins every time, automatically. In such a situation there may perhaps be saints and even prophetic

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52 MZM, 214.
53 Merton to Mother C, 14 April 1968, SCH, 377. “Mother C” is a reference to Mother Mary Consolata, a Clarissine Abbess of the Madres Clarisas monastery in La Paz, Bolivia.
individuals. But the institution will strive in every way either to suppress them or to absorb them. Instead of exercising a prophetic and iconoclastic function in the world, instead of being a dynamic and eschatological sign, such monasticism is occupied entirely in constructing a respectable and venerable image of itself, and thus ensuring its own survival as a dignified and established institution.54

Merton’s criticism of the tendency for institutional self-preservation found in monasticism is also the central critique of his book *Contemplation in a World of Action*. In the Introduction to the 1971 edition, Jean Leclercq cites a letter which Merton had written to him shortly before he embarked on his Asian journey where he was to meet his unexpected death. The significance of this brief letter warrants a full quotation:

> Thanks for your good letter about the arrangements for Bangkok. I will be glad to give the talk on Marxism and so on. Important indeed!! I’ve familiarized myself pretty well with Herbert Marcuse, whose ideas are so influential in the “student revolts” of the time. I must admit that I find him closer to monasticism than many theologians. Those who question the structures of contemporary society at least look to monks for a certain distance and critical perspective. Which alas is seldom found. The vocation of the monk in the modern world, especially Marxist, is not survival but prophecy. We are all busy saving our skins… Do I speak in English or French?55

Echoing his letters mentioned above, Merton expresses his concerns about the superficial reforms which he saw being lauded by many leaders as authentic renewal. Leaders who were not open to the “full dimension—the mystical and prophetic”56 of monasticism would simply replace inauthentic old structures with inauthentic new ones. In his chapter entitled “The Identity Crisis,” Merton, after mentioning modern thinkers whose work highlights the dehumanizing tendencies found in human consciousness since the

55 Merton to Dom Jean Leclercq, 23 July 1968, SCH, 392.
56 Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 27; hereafter CWA.
industrial revolution, thinkers like Marx, Freud, Jung, Darwin, and the existentialists, exposes what he believes to be the root sickness in the production of these inauthentic social structures: “Right or wrong, these prophets are all concerned with the main problem that faces us: Man is not himself. He has lost himself in the falsities and illusions of a massive organization. How can he recover his authenticity and his true identity? All these thinkers, even the Christian, tend to regard conventional forms of religion as being in league with the forces which have diminished and depersonalized man.”

Thus, he states, “Monastic renewal must now more than ever aim at authenticity.”

Related to this admonition is this assessment which expresses the root cause of monasticism’s floundering: “We are failing in the prophetic aspect of our vocation.”

Merton is not completely pessimistic in his critique of monasticism’s current situation. He is hopeful that genuine renewal is possible and is realistic about the limitations which face any form of organized religious life. He also can admit that responsibility for renewal rests upon each individual monk and undue expectations of others are only evasions of this fact. He expresses this insight when he writes, “Thus, my new life and my contribution to a renewal in monasticism begin within myself and in my own daily life. My work for renewal takes place strictly in my own situation here, not as a struggle with the institution but in an effort to renew my life of prayer in a whole new context, with a whole new understanding of what the contemplative life means and demands. Creativity has to

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57 Ibid., 60.
58 Ibid., 74.
59 Ibid., 215.
begin with me and I can’t sit here wasting time urging the monastic institution to become creative and prophetic.”

Rembert Weakland, in his Foreword to *Survival or Prophecy?: The Correspondence of Jean Leclercq and Thomas Merton*, substantiates this perspective of the prophetic dimension of the renewal of monasticism when he writes, “Finally, both authors, but especially Merton, saw their roles as prophetic witnesses…. The prophetic stance was one of the enduring and most attractive aspects of the monastic renewal in the last half of the twentieth century; and both Merton and Leclercq, cognizant that the Christian monastic tradition had first emerged as a form of prophetic witness against the ever more worldly Church, brought it to bear on the Church of their own day.”

Michael Casey, in his Afterword to the same book, draws attention to the ambivalent nature of Merton’s and Leclercq’s protest against religious institutionalism. On the one hand, he writes, “In a sense it was because they were not institutionalized that they were able to operate as prophets.” On the other hand, speaking particularly of Merton, he offers this nuanced perspective in regard to Merton’s persistent flirtation with leaving Gethsemani for a less institutionalized form of monasticism: “If Thomas Merton had left Gethsemani to go into deep solitude, he could have operated as a prophet only if… he had capitalized on his status as an ex-Trappist. This dubious distinction would not for long have provided him with the pulpit he needed.

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60 Ibid., 222.
And so he stayed at Gethsemani.”

Casey’s insightful reading of Merton’s vocational motivations gives proper priority to the centrality of prophecy in Merton’s spiritual impulses. He continues his analysis: “Rather than opposing prophecy and institution, it probably needs to be said that prophecy needs the survival of the institution if it is to exist. There is a certain symbiosis, a love-hate relationship. The institutions simultaneously supported Jean Leclercq and Thomas Merton in their activity as prophets and simultaneously provided them with accessible targets for their criticism. May monasteries long continue to survive—because monastic survival is the matrix of prophecy.”

With the retirement of Abbot James Fox and the election of Flavian Burns as Fox’s successor, Merton was allowed more freedom from what he considered to be the unnecessary and overly-restrictive constraints of his monastic pursuits—in other words, he was freer to live his monasticism more prophetically. Although there have been suggestions that Merton would have left institutionalized monasticism had not it been for his fateful trip to Asia, his journals and letters attest to the contrary. What he desired was a hermitage away from Gethsemani, yet, connected to it by affiliation. This, his new abbot supported and it formed part of the agenda of his itinerary abroad. What Merton desired was not an institutionless monasticism but a simpler and more authentic one—a monasticism with its institutional and charismatic components properly integrated. Yet, there is no doubt that, for Merton, the institutional component must always be at the service of the charismatic. This is evident in the final statement of his conference in Bangkok on “Marxism and Monastic

63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
Perspectives” when he states, “If you forget everything else that has been said, I would suggest you remember this for the future: ‘From now on, everybody stands on his own feet.’ …we can no longer rely on being supported by structures that may be destroyed at any moment by a political power or a political form. You cannot rely on structures.”

Concluding Remarks

Thomas Merton’s passionate concern for an authentic life found both validation and added impulse in his encounter with the writers of existentialism. The boldness of their conviction that life’s illusions must be unmasked at whatever price inspired Merton to come face to face with the illusions within himself, with illusions in the Church, and with the illusions in the world. Existentialism also gave Merton a paradigm for understanding authenticity as a type of catalyst in the transformation of the self and in the world around. The personal and social dimensions of authenticity’s aims were, for Merton, interdependent and complementary. Through the transformation of the self into an authentic existence, the transformation of the world becomes possible. Both together form Merton’s integrated vision of God’s desire for recreating the world in God’s image and likeness—of reconciliation.

Merton was not too modern to admit that it is sin that leads to an inauthentic life and to its fabrication—and ultimately to its destruction. Salvation from the lie of sin comes through the grace of God which effects humankind’s authentication as truly human. Using

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65 AJ, 338.
language from the existentialists, Merton asserts that this transformation most often occurs when one freely accepts the dread of one’s current situation in all its limitation and brokenness. This dark night is the seedbed for faith’s birth and maturation and for the ultimate victory over illusion. It is where one can finally meet one’s true self. Solitude is the atmosphere which provides the necessary clarity and grace to admit one’s complicity in illusion and to see with the eyes of faith the pure self of God’s divine intention.

Prophecy, in this context, arises in one’s fidelity to God in the midst of the experience of the dread of this dark night. Prophecy is an overflow of one “vowed” to authenticity of life—to one’s true self. By being faithful to one’s deepest truth as a child of God, one becomes prophetic.

The authentic life which results from the unmasking of illusions liberates others because it is grounded upon selfless concern and compassion—a willingness to suffer with others. Authenticity is Merton’s answer to the problem of modernity’s distortion of language. An authentic life speaks a language which is pure and lucid. Prophecy is the language of a transparent life.

The life of Mohandas Gandhi proved to be of great inspiration to Merton precisely because of this type of transparency. He was an example of a contemplative prophet whose authenticity of life grounded in satyagraha offered a model for effective social transformation. His obdurate non-cooperation with the social injustices of his day coupled with his willingness to bear the pain of the oppressed demonstrated a prophetic resistance that was, for Merton, most compelling.
Authenticity also formed a central component of Merton’s writings on monastic renewal. At the heart of monasticism’s problems, for Merton, was an over-dependence upon its institutional element which resulted in either a complacent or overly-restricted form of life. What was needed was an authentic aggiornamento which recovered monasticism’s original spirit. At the heart of the original spirit of monasticism, according to Merton, is monasticism’s charismatic dimension—and at the heart of monasticism’s charismatic dimension is the prophetic spirit that bears witness to the world of the reality of God’s Kingdom on earth.

For Merton, God acts and speaks to the modern world through life made authentic.
PART THREE

The Contemplative as Prophet
Chapter 7

Prophetic Monasticism

_I am even more convinced of the role of monasticism in today’s world. A prophetic and even charismatic role._

-Thomas Merton

The sources from which Benedictine monasticism sprang in the early sixth century are identified in the final chapter of the rule St. Benedict wrote for the monks living under his tutelage. What can be discerned are two traditions, each stamped with St. Benedict’s seal of approval and offered as valuable guides in the monk’s further growth along the monastic way. One tradition, represented by “the Conferences of the Fathers, their Institutes and their Lives” and the other by “the rule of our holy father Basil” have been largely understood to represent two distinct streams of the monastic spirit: the former representing the more eremitical life of the Egyptian desert reaching St. Benedict mainly through the writings of John Cassian, the latter representing the more cenobitical life of St. Basil’s _koinonia_ as depicted in his longer and shorter rules. Monks following the Rule of St.

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1 Merton to Dom Ignace Gillet, 11 Sept. 1964, SCH, 235. Dom Ignace Gillet was elected Abbot General of the Cistercian Order in early 1964, following the death of Dom Gabriel Sortais.


3 Ibid.

4 The value of St. Benedict’s synthesis of these two streams has been widely acknowledged in recent decades. The article, “The Rule of St. Benedict” in _The Rule of St. Benedict_, highlights this important point: “The disparate branches of the monastic tradition are brought together and harmonized, correcting and completing one another, so that the richness of the whole deposit may be preserved without loss. Diverse elements are not merely juxtaposed but fully assimilated, so that they find their rightful place in a larger unity” (p. 90).
Benedict throughout the centuries have found their monastic identities somewhere along this fluid continuum between solitude and community. Merton’s monastic identity is undoubtedly grounded within the more eremitical tradition of the Egyptian desert. This is manifested in more than his eventual life as a hermit in the final years of his life at Gethsemani. It is seen in the many years of restlessness within community life, his attraction to the Desert Fathers, his interpretation of the Cistercian tradition and his writings on monastic renewal along those lines, his experience of God in solitude and nature, and, most notably, the way he begins to articulate monasticism as a form of prophetic ministry to the world.

In this chapter, we will examine the various sources which inspired Merton’s interpretation of monasticism as a form of prophetic witness. Most foundational is the witness of the Desert Fathers whose marginal existence offered Merton a wisdom inaccessible to life in the world. Merton also saw in the Cistercian reformers, especially St. Bernard, a particular prophetic spirit in keeping with the monks of the Egyptian desert. His attraction to the original Carmelite spirit was likewise based upon an attraction to monasticism interpreted as prophetic withdrawal. His profound respect for Russian monasticism of the nineteenth century was mainly due to his esteem for its prophetic and charismatic spirituality. Finally, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hahn, embodied for Merton the ideal integration of the contemplative and prophetic streams of monastic spirituality. Each of these monastic sources offer meaningful insight into Merton’s developing notion of the monk as a prophetic witness to the modern world.
Desert Monasticism

The spirit that drew the early monks into the Egyptian desert in the fourth century manifested itself in an exterior response which sought to fulfill two primary spiritual needs. The first need was distance from superficial society and tepid religious life. The second need was the atmosphere of solitude conducive for seeking God. This process of withdrawal and attachment defined the early monastic movement. According to Merton, this did not mean that the monks of the desert lost all concern for the world which they left behind. They sought a new way of being in the world that, in a certain sense, simultaneously transcended it and made it into what God intended it to be. Going out to seek God apart from society was not a compassionless neglect of social responsibility leaving the problems burdening humanity to fix themselves. Merton understands the primitive monastic motive more positively. In his book of translations of sayings of the Desert Fathers, The Wisdom of the Desert, he writes, “The Desert Fathers did, in fact, meet the ‘problems of their time’ in the sense that they were among the few who were ahead of their time, and opened the way for the development of a new man and a new society.”5 For Merton, what these early monks resisted was “the herd mentality” and the passivity which sucked vitality out of the human spirit. This impulse against spiritual superficiality and for spiritual vitality was prophetic, for Merton, because it presented to the world a way of life that made the human person more fully alive—more fully human. The transformation of life happening out in the desert through solitude and labor, poverty and fasting, charity and prayer, was a program of life

that allowed for the purging of the superficial self and the emergence of the true, real self found hidden with Christ in God. The models for these spiritual pioneers, in Merton’s opinion, were other prophetic desert dwellers like St. John the Baptist, Elijah, Elisha, and the Apostles who were likewise seized with a similar spiritual urgency that demanded a similar radical response. The early martyrs also gave inspiration to the monks of the desert. And, for Merton, the Christian martyr of the early Church assumed the mantle of the prophets of Judaism. Making the connection between the Desert Fathers and the prophets, he writes, “Not only are the Desert Fathers heirs of the vocation of the martyrs, but the martyrs are the heirs of those pre-desert fathers, the prophets. In either case, {there is} [sic] the idea of {the} prophetic vocation of the Christian saint as witness to the presence of Christ in the world (classic example—St. John {the} Baptist—model of martyrs, of monks, and of prophets).”

Here, the monk is prophetic because, with his life, he testifies to Christ alive in the world.

In his book *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Merton offers an extensive exploration of his ideas on monasticism’s history, essence, and future. In reflecting upon the initial call of the monk, he emphasizes the inner need for a life of freedom and detachment, “a ‘desert life’ outside normal social structures.” This counter-cultural stance of the monk is a prophetic witness bearing a prophetic character—the monk is a witness to freedom. Monastic freedom is freedom from “the massive automatic functioning of a social machine

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7 CWA, 8.
that leaves nothing to peculiar talent, to chance, or to grace.”

It is directed, on the other hand, to a particular end—namely the experience of the grace of God: “The monastic vocation calls a man to desert frontiers, beyond which there are no police, in order to dip into the ‘ocean of unexploited forces which surrounds a well-ordered society and draw from it a personal provision’ of grace and vision.”

As a place of prayer and witness, the monastery in Merton’s vision is not only a place for the development of the contemplative ideal. It is just as much a place for the development of a life of prophecy. The contemporary monastery ought, then, to have a distinct ‘desert’ quality conducive to prophetic formation. He writes, “The monastic life is not only contemplative but prophetic. That is to say, it bears witness not only to a contemplative mystique of silence, enclosure and the renunciation of active works, but it is alive with the eschatological mystery of the Kingdom already shared and realized in the lives of those who have heard the Word of God and have surrendered unconditionally to its demands in a vocation that (even when communal) has a distinctly ‘desert’ quality.”

The monastic community by living and being formed in the presence of God becomes a living sign of God’s presence in the world. This is its primary prophetic function.

Monastic freedom also testifies that “God is on the side of freedom.” Merton admits that this is a “scandalous” idea indeed, yet one charged with great significance for the modern world. By being for freedom, the monk reassures the modern world that in the

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8 Ibid., 179.
9 Ibid. Merton here quotes from Claude Lévi-Strauss’ Tristes Tropiques.
10 Ibid., 194.
11 Ibid., 216.
struggle between thought and existence the monk is firmly on the side of existence and not simply on the side of an ideological abstraction. By being for existence, the monk seeks to testify that “God is the source and the guarantee of our freedom and not simply a force standing over us to limit our freedom.”12 For Merton, this is the witness of the gospel as articulated in the New Testament, and it is in this “scandalous gospel” that the monk is confronted with the seriousness of his prophetic calling. Of this “scandalous gospel” Merton remarks, “Surely this is the ‘message’ the monk should give the world.”13

The distinctive ‘desert’ quality of monasticism is also a predominant theme of a lecture Merton gave entitled “The Monk: Prophet to Modern Man.”14 In his lecture, Merton uses the writings of Rufinus (340/345-410), the monk, historian, and theologian who spent a number of years learning the monastic way in the Egyptian desert, to articulate the prophetic component of monastic life. For Rufinus, one of the central images for monastic life was the prophet—the one who manifests the truth of the Word of God to the world. Merton sees that what is unique about this ideal of monk as prophet is that it is an ideal that makes itself real. The ideal and the real are both present at the same time in the life of the monk-prophet. Merton likens the prophetic ideal of the monk to a type of Jungian archetype. The prophet is an archetype for the monk. What archetypes do is shape one’s mind in a certain way which enables, because of the grace embedded within the particular symbol, a certain response. Through his reading of the Prophets, the monk learns how to be prophetic. He then becomes

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
a “sign of contradiction”—one who contains a word of truth that calls others to that truth. He is a sign of Christ in the world. Merton notes that it is psychologically impossible to see Christ in ourselves. We see Christ in others, and they see Christ in us. One of the goals of the monk is to see Christ in all things. If this is accomplished, then Christ will live in us. The monk’s approach to living Christ in the world must be modest, yet assured, since, as he notes, people come to the monastery to see Christ in the monks.

Elsewhere, Merton utilizes Rufinus’ Latin translation of the Historia Monachorum\(^{15}\) to make a similar point. In his novitiate lectures posthumously published and entitled Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 2, Merton quotes Rufinus: “Vere vidi thesaurum Christi in humanis absconditum vasculis.”\(^{16}\) Merton’s reflection on this text highlights the transparent nature of the monk’s prophetic witness: “It is the triumph of Christ’s grace that makes the virtues of the Desert Fathers possible…. In making this treasure known to others the writer brings them salvation and also saves his own soul. This implies a very clear notion of the monastic vocation and {its} [sic] charismatic place in the Church.”\(^{17}\) Merton goes on to list a number of points regarding general information about the monastic life and virtues. His second point is another quote from Rufinus. It reads, “Novos prophetas, tam virtutibus animi, quam vaticinandi officio suscitatos....”\(^{18}\) Merton follows this Rufinus quote with, “{Note the} [sic] trope of the ‘prophetic’ life of the monk:

\(^{15}\) The Historia Monachorum is a translation of an unknown original account of a journey to the desert which became one of the main sources of Antonian spirituality.

\(^{16}\) Thomas Merton, Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 2, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell, Monastic Wisdom [MW], vol. 9 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006), 29. O’Connell provides the translation in a footnote: “I have truly seen the treasure of Christ hidden in human vessels.”

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) Ibid. O’Connell’s translation reads: “new prophets, raised up by the virtues of their souls as much as by the function of prophesying....”
a living witness to the truth of God’s word, of His promises, and of His demand for penance. The monk is the man who has taken the word of the Lord literally.”

The monk, then, remains a sign of contradiction to the modern world just as Christ was to his. The monk’s silent witness forms the heart of his prophetic power as a sign of contradiction. As Merton expresses, “The lone man remains in the world as a prophet to whom no one listens as a voice crying in the desert, as a sign of contradiction.” Monastic silence was, for Merton, one of the most potent forms of prophetic communication to the modern world. Expressing this idea in a letter to Allan Forbes, Jr., he writes, “Yet as you say, if there is anything of the prophetic spirit left in us, it can find something to do while we are here in silence. And I myself do not underestimate the power of silence either. I know that as a matter of fact I can do much more for peace here, in silence, than I can by coming out and showing my head above ground so to speak. This is just another way of saying that there are many, many unexplored aspects of resistance and of witness.” The prophetic silence of the monk is a sign of contradiction to the modern world because, as one wholly devoted to the eschatological Kingdom of God, the monk’s prophetic silence is a sign of a different world—the world to come. The desert spirituality of the monk ensures that the world to come comes in actuality for the one who values listening over speaking, obedience over rebellion, humility over pride.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Primitive Carmelite Spirituality

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19 Ibid.
20 DQ, 204.
21 Merton to Allan Forbes, Jr., early April 1962, WTF, 48-49. Allan Forbes, Jr. (1921?-2006) was a documentary film maker, writer, and peace activist.
Monasticism in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was most predominantly characterized by numerous reform movements which sought to revitalize the spiritual ethos of increasing institutionalization and secular dependency. Two such movements were particularly significant to Merton. The Cistercian reform, mainly under the inspiration of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and the primitive Carmelite movement, were two separate, yet similar, responses to the spiritual needs of religious life at the time. Both of these movements, Merton will note, owe much to the desert spirituality of early Egyptian monasticism. Like their forebears, the Cistercians and Carmelites sought a way of life that was simultaneously contemplative and prophetic. It was not isolationism that the early Cistercians sought in building their monasteries in remote locations. It was the atmosphere of solitude which would be conducive to spiritual transformation enabling the monastery to become a witness of the Kingdom of God alive in the world. It was not absorption into God that the early Carmelite hermits sought but the spiritual center of existence from which they could make the gospel known. As Merton mentions in his Introduction to Amédée Hallier’s *The Monastic Theology of Aelred of Rievaulx*, “The aim of medieval monasticism was not simply to gain heaven by rejection of the world… but a positive witness to the presence of Christ in the world. The monastic witness was not so much ascetic as eschatological. Not so much a denial of man and the flesh as an affirmation of the Word made Flesh, taking created things to himself, in order to transform and fulfill them in himself.”

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This particular orientation of medieval monasticism owes most to one of the towering figures of medieval Christendom: St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153). Merton’s writings on St. Bernard, which include two books and a number of articles, Forewords, and Introductions, attest to his esteemed affection for one who was decisively formative for his monastic identity. St. Bernard’s influence upon Merton is especially obvious in Merton’s developing relationship with the world. In Bernard, Merton found more than a justification for his “worldly” concern, he found a model. In his Foreword to Henri Daniel-Rops’ book, *Bernard of Clairvaux*, Merton writes, “Bernard of Clairvaux was plunged deep in the mystery of the Cross, which was the mystery of God’s will for his world and ours. He who had left the world to become a monk was thrown back into the world to be an apostle, a worker of miracles, a peacemaker and a warmaker, the reformer of abbeys, the monitor of Popes and a prophet sent to alarm kings.” Yet, for Merton, St. Bernard’s concern for the spiritual wellbeing of Europe in no way compromised his monastic disposition. Instead, what Bernard gave to Europe was the fruit that issued forth from his years of living “deep in the mystery of the Cross.” It was precisely in St. Bernard’s contemplative orientation as a monk that Merton locates the effectiveness of his charismatic ministry. For Merton, there is a reciprocal action to life in the Spirit. The Spirit draws us into the life of God only to draw us out into the life of the world. This is a continuous action that knows no end in our life here on earth. Contemplation and action coexist and are

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interdependent. In relation to St. Bernard, Merton expresses himself this way: “Bernard, the contemplative, was a great man of action because he was a great contemplative. And because he was a contemplative he never ceased fearing to be a mere man of action…. The natural sincerity and the supernatural zeal for divine truth that burned within him could not help showing him the faults of frailty and passion which even a saint could commit in the heat of ruthless and energetic action…. Bernard is sent to instruct us how human a saint must be, to forge out the will of God in the heat of the affairs of men.”

Merton makes it a point to highlight what is not altogether obvious in the character of St. Bernard, namely, his humility. Even in the midst of his grandiose dealings with the most notable of European society, along with his trenchant self-confidence, Merton notes that he had the humility to be himself in all such circumstances. St. Bernard was even willing to admit a certain ambivalence in his own monastic stability and in the way he approached other such monastic formalities and acknowledged the validity of a contrary point of view on such matters. Monastic humility did not, for St. Bernard, mean non-action and passivity in the face of injustice when one has the capacity to be a voice for the will of God. In embracing the righteous indignation of the prophets, St. Bernard has at times acquired a reputation for self-righteous egotism. Merton believes this characterization to be unfortunate and unfair. He expresses his view of St. Bernard more positively: “Bernard, the passionate Bernard, who even in his anger and in his passion was a saint, will not blind everyone to the merciful Bernard, the gentle and longsuffering monk who could be as tender as a mother to anyone who did not give evidence of being a hardened Pharisee, and who had

25 Ibid.
in his heart something of Christ’s unending patience with the weak sinner and his compassion for the publican.” Prophetic humility, the kind of which is most appropriate for the monk, does not reveal itself in a self-effacing hiddenness which cowers from all forms of self-confidence and assertion. The humility which characterizes the monk is rooted in uncompromising fidelity to the holiness of God—and such fidelity compels one toward prophetic action. The only boast of the monk is in the cross of Christ.

Fidelity to the holiness of God is also the subject of Merton’s article, “St. Bernard, Monk and Apostle,” published in Disputed Questions. He begins his discussion commenting on the prophetic nature of sanctity, of which St. Bernard becomes the exemplary personification. Merton describes a saint as “a sign of God.” With his life “he bears witness to God’s fidelity to promises made to man from the beginning. He tells us who God is by fulfilling God’s promises in himself and by being full of God.” Here again we see Merton’s connection of prophecy with fidelity. The saints “fulfill the prophecies of freshness, renewal, rebirth, and abundance which spring up everywhere in Isaias.” With his or her life, the saint becomes an “irrefutable witness of the mystery of God with us….” The sanctity that revealed itself in the witness of St. Bernard’s life and apostolic ministry must be understood in this existential light. The passion which moved Bernard beyond the walls of his cloister was, for Merton, not born from a call to teach or pastor. It was above all the charismatic call to be apostle and prophet, much in the line of the great Isaiah.

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26 Ibid., 7.
27 DQ, 274.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 275.
30 Ibid., 276.
holiness of St. Bernard is again likened to Isaiah in the following passage: “It is like the flame of sanctity that burned the lips of Isaias in his vision of God flaming forth in a fire of love and truth, radiant with prophetic vision coruscating with miracles and other charisms, imparting the substance of its own life to other men and making them share in something of the apostle’s own vision of eternity.”31 The prophet is one who coruscates—who shines and glitters with the glory of God. As Merton attests, the surest sign of God alive in the world is the evidence of His presence on the faces of his people. St. Bernard illustrates Merton’s idea that prophecy is most profoundly spiritual embodiment.

Merton’s article “The Primitive Carmelite Ideal,” also published in Disputed Questions, contains one of his most comprehensive discussions on the nature of prophecy. In the first section, entitled “The Prophetic Spirit,” he analyses the spiritual motivations which formed the beginning of the primitive Carmelite movement. Unlike the earlier monastic communities, the first Carmelites formed loose-knit communities of hermits with openness to occasional apostolic service. Merton cites the purpose of the Carmelite’s vocation. In the words of their Rule: “Let each one remain in his cell or near it, meditating day and night on the Law of the Lord, and vigilant in prayer, unless he is legitimately occupied in something else.”32 What appealed to Merton was the simplicity and flexibility of this primitive approach to religious life: “The purpose of the life was solitude and contemplation, but within a framework that allowed complete liberty for the individual

31 Ibid., 282.
32 Cited in Ibid., 220.
development of each one under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.” This, in a nut-shell, sums up all that Merton was advocating in his writings on monastic renewal. This charismatic, prophetic dimension was the key to the revitalization of religious and monastic life and the only way for it to bestow its peculiar gift upon the world.

Merton traces the early Carmelite lineage ironically to the devastating Crusade preached by St. Bernard. They were those who followed the promptings of St. Bernard and became warrior-pilgrims. In the end, they renounced the world with its ambitions and wars to live lives consecrated to God in solitude on Mount Carmel. As Merton notes, “It is certain that Bernard himself must first have communicated to them something of the spirit and power of Elias, the burning and shining light that was in him.”

It is significant to note that, in a broad sense, Elijah is considered the “founder” of the primitive Carmelite movement. More than anything, this claim reflects the definite inspiration that the first Carmelites attributed to the great desert-dwelling prophet. Merton acknowledges this significance when he writes, “The first Carmelites then were not only hermits and descendants of the early desert fathers, but they were also very conscious of a certain prophetic character about their vocation. This meant of course that they were inclined to give precedence to what we would call the ‘mystical’ side of their vocation over the ascetic, never of course neglecting or excluding that latter.”

33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 228-29.
35 Ibid., 222.
Reflection on this prophetic character of the Carmelite vocation leads Merton to articulate in greater detail his understanding of the prophetic vocation. For him, as has already been mentioned, the prophet in the traditional sense is much more than one who, under divine inspiration, foretells future events. His preferred understanding is that of a “witness” in a similar way that a martyr is a witness. Yet, there is an element of a prophet’s witness that is distinct from that of a martyr. While the martyr suffers death, “[t]he prophet suffers inspiration, or vision. He shoulders the ‘burden’ of vision that God lays upon him. He bows under the truth and the judgments of God, sometimes the concrete, definite historical judgment pronounced on a given age, sometimes only the manifestation of God’s transcendent and secret holiness, which is denied and opposed by sin in general. But above all the prophet is one who bears the burden of the divine mercy—a burden which is a gift to mankind, but which remains a burden to the prophet in so far as no one will take it from him.”

This understanding of prophecy as bearing the burden of divine mercy is reminiscent of Abraham Heschel’s notion of prophecy as sharing in the divine pathos. Merton, while very impressed with Heschel and his writings, had not yet read *The Prophets* or any of his other books which he would soon come to highly regard. Nevertheless, what is similar to both writers is the priority of divine hesed over divine judgment in the prophetic ministry. This is poignantly brought to bear early in Merton’s writing career when, toward the end of *The Sign of Jonas*, he writes, “The Voice of God is heard in Paradise: ‘What was vile has become precious. What is now precious was never vile. I have always known the

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36 Ibid., 222-23.
38 For Merton’s correspondence to Heschel, see HGL, 430-36.
vile as precious: for what is vile I know not at all.’ ‘What was cruel has become merciful. What is now merciful was never cruel. I have always overshadowed Jonas with My mercy, and cruelty I know not at all. Have you had sight of Me, Jonas My child? Mercy within mercy within mercy.’” 39

The Hebrew Prophets, especially Elijah, then offer the early Carmelite Fathers the greatest inspiration in the formation of their rule of life. A foundational text, noted by Merton, is 1 Kgs 17:1-4: “Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab: ‘As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, during these years there shall be no dew or rain except by my word. The word of the Lord came to Elijah: Leave here, go east and hide in the Wadi Cherith, east of the Jordan. You shall drink of the wadi, and I have commanded ravens to feed you there.” 40 The entire Carmelite vocation is interpreted in light of this event in the life of its prophetic founder. Its prophetic spirituality issues forth from the primary position of standing in the presence of God and listening to his Word. An obedient response in humble service follows upon God’s request. The divine summons is to “hide” and “drink.” Merton notes what this meant for the Carmelite: “To hide in the torrent of Carith is to embrace the ascetical life, which leads to the perfection of charity by one’s own efforts, aided by the grace of God. To drink of the torrent is to passively receive the secret light of contemplation from God and to be inwardly transformed by His wisdom.” 41

39 SJ, 362.
40 NAB.
41 DQ, 225-26.
What these desert-dwelling contemplative-prophets offer the Church is a paradigm of religious life which expresses itself in a spiritually integrated fashion. Contemplation and prophecy form the pillars of a way of being simultaneously toward God and toward the world. Through this disposition the Carmelite becomes, in Heschel’s description of the prophet, a hyphen between heaven and earth. Their lives proclaim the message that “we do not have on this earth a lasting city, and that we are pilgrims to the city of God.” The goal of their message is even more direct. Through his witness and preaching the Carmelite seeks “to lead others in the ways of prayer, contemplation and solitude.” It is obvious that Merton moved in the direction of this Carmelite instinct in his life as a Trappist monk who spent much time writing on the ways of solitude and contemplation. While some looked with suspicion on this form of activity as being incompatible with the vocation of a monk, it would have never been questioned by a Carmelite. For Merton, neither should it be questioned by a Cistercian, whose own Fathers demonstrated prolific writing capabilities and exercised a writing apostolate much like his own.

Merton concludes his section of “The Prophetic Spirit” by drawing attention to another inspirer for the early Carmelites, namely, the Blessed Virgin Mary. He sees Mary as an embodiment of the perfection of the Carmelite ideal, “beyond prophecy.” Mary is the symbol of hiddenness, ordinariness, and perfect humility. There is nothing pretentious about Marian spirituality. It listens and obeys. Merton makes a parallel between Mary and St. John of the Cross whose own spirituality “goes to great lengths to exclude everything that

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42 Ibid., 226.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 227.
savors of heroic show and mystical display…. The reason Merton offers this insight about the Marian, Juanist disposition is because he believes it necessary to root the prophetic spirit in humility and egoless concern. As he points out, “It would therefore be a tragic mistake to look at the Carmelite ideal too exclusively from the prophetic viewpoint. This would lead to distortion and dramatization, to violence and ultimately to a kind of pharisaical pretense.” The proper relationship between contemplation and prophecy comes into clearer focus with this analogy. Prophetic expression is just that—an expression of what one has heard and seen in the Spirit. Merton brings his ideas together in his concluding paragraph: “It can be said that the Carmelite spirit is essentially a ‘desert’ spirit, a prophetic ideal. And that Elias represents the exterior, the more material aspect of that ideal. But that the Virgin Mary is the symbol and source of the interior spirit of Carmel. Which means that in the long run, the desert spirit and prophetic ideal of Carmel are understood most perfectly by those who have entered into the ‘dark night’ of Marian faith.”

*St. Seraphim of Sarov and Nineteenth Century Russian Monasticism*

Beginning in the late 1950s and continuing well into the 1960s, Merton explored the world of Russian theology and spirituality whose monasticism, he came to see, had a particularly mystical-prophetic bent. Russian mysticism can largely be traced to the center of Orthodox spiritual life, Mount Athos. From there flowed the springs of liturgy,
asceticism, and the mysticism which would come to shape Russian monasticism until the present day. One of the most notable mystical influences which rapidly spread throughout Russian monasticism and the Russian laity alike was that of the Greek Hesychast way of prayer whose mantra-like “Jesus Prayer” solidified Russian spirituality in a contemplative ambiance.

Like monasticism in the West, Russian monasticism also underwent numerous renewal movements which sought to maintain the spiritual vitality so integral to its charismatic identity. One such movement held particular significance for Merton. It was the movement of the startsy, or charismatic, prophetic monks of the nineteenth century. Startsy, specialists in asceticism and Hesychast prayer who offer spiritual direction to those seeking spiritual wisdom, became the pillars of Russian mysticism in the nineteenth century and helped make it the golden age of Russian spirituality.

Merton undoubtedly took interest in the startsy influence upon Russian monasticism because of its charismatic, prophetic nature and the evidence of renewal which took place through their leadership. As he writes in his journal in March of 1960, “More and more impressed by the seminal and prophetic stuff of Russian nineteenth century. If there was something I intended to study I think it would be that.”

St. Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833) was one of the most significant and best known of the Russian mystics and startsy of the nineteenth century. As one who lived his own ‘desert’ life in the Russian forest, his spirituality is unique in its originality and authenticity.

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48 SFS, 380.
In his article entitled “Russian Mystics” published in *Mystics and Zen Masters*, Merton notes how many post-medieval desert-dwellers suffer from mimicry and artificiality in their approach to seeking God in solitude, even to the point of obsession. Their approach often led to “a negative, gloomy, and tense spirituality in which one is not sure whether the dominant note is hatred of wickedness or love of good.” And as he points out, “hatred of wickedness can so easily include hatred of human beings, who are perhaps less wicked than they seem.”

St. Seraphim, on the other hand, moves in a different direction. Characterized by a spiritual spontaneity, his life in the forest was marked by an effusion of joy which poured forth from his austere and simple life, revealing a gentle and compassionate concern for those in need of spiritual guidance. Likened to the spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Anthony of the Desert, St. Seraphim’s mysticism, for Merton, is a mysticism of light. Merton tellingly draws a comparison between St. Seraphim and another of his favorite mystics: “The only contemporary figure in the West who speaks so eloquently and with such ingenuous amazement of the divine light shining in darkness is the English poet William Blake.”

In the mysticism of St. Seraphim, Merton observes the two defining streams of Christian spirituality, *apophaticism* and *kataphaticism*, perfectly wedded. With Russian mysticism in general, St. Seraphim’s integrated approach to life in God has much appeal to Merton precisely because the negative and positive aspects are so interdependent. Light shines out of darkness and makes known what is hidden. Yet, Russian mysticism is much

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49 MZM, 181.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 182.
more than an intellectual apprehension of hidden truth come to light. It is primarily transfiguration. Its goal is not just to reveal truth but to make true all that has fallen into the disfigurement of untruth. Grounded in the mysterious unknown, the mystical approach of St. Seraphim and the nineteenth century Russian monks demonstrates a spiritual vitality that Merton describes as “unquestionably prophetic.”52 Usually, Merton notes, spiritual vitality implies a certain variety which can often lead to conflict. There was something special, however, about nineteenth century Russian monasticism. “In nineteenth-century Russian monasticism we find darkness and light, world-denial and loving affirmation of human values, a general hardening of resistance to forces of atheist humanism and revolution, and yet an anguished concern at the sinful oppression of the poor. We cannot with justice dismiss the whole Russian monastic movement as negative, pessimistic, world-hating. Nor can we identify its deep and traditional contemplative aspirations with mere political or cultural conservatism. There was an unquestionably prophetic spirit at work in the movement, and St. Seraphim is only one among many examples that prove this.”53 What Merton finds in the mysticism of these Russian monks is not only a legitimization of a monastic, prophetic spirituality, but an effective paradigm whereby the prophetic spirit can express itself both through individual monks and through a monastic movement. The Russian paradigm was also a paradigm based upon an embrace of God through the “negative” theology passed down from Pseudo-Dionysius and St. Maximus the Confessor which was completely compatible with the positive theology of a mysticism of light which

52 Ibid., 184.
53 Ibid.
saw absolutely no compromise in manifesting itself in merciful and compassionate concern for the world.

Merton proceeds to speak of a “less prophetic” spirit active in the golden age of Russian monasticism which nonetheless carried deep implications in regard to social influence and national aspirations. This spirit, characterized by “ascetic fervor, of discipline, of order,” asserted itself in a more aggressive contempt for the world. Merton writes, “The ascetic who renounced the city of man in order to lament his sins in the poustyna (desert) may well have been giving his support to a condition of social inertia by implicitly affirming that all concern with improvement was futile and even sinful.” In this comparison of “prophetic” and “less prophetic” spirits in Russian monasticism, an important aspect of Merton’s understanding of prophecy comes into focus. Prophecy is integrally tied together with concern. One’s way of life may influence and affect change in the world, but it would not properly speaking be considered a form of prophetic living. Prophetic living involves a disposition of concern toward the world. What is unique about nineteenth century Russian monasticism and its particular brand of mysticism is that, like the Carmelites, it possessed dual dispositions: one toward God, the other toward the world. The antimony between these two dispositions, which has been a significant theme in the Western monastic tradition, plays only a minor role in the monasteries of nineteenth century Russia. It is obvious that St. Seraphim and the other startsy of nineteenth century Russian

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 185.
56 Ibid.
monasticism made an indelible impression upon Merton because they confirmed and modeled for him the type of monasticism in which he was seeking to live.

_Thich Nhat Hanh_

On May 28, 1966, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk who had become well known for his nonviolent resistance to the Vietnam War, visited Merton at Gethsemani. In Nhat Hanh Merton found more than just a friend or “brother,” in many ways he found a soul mate. Writing a few days after their meeting, Merton describes Nhat Hanh as “a true monk; very quiet, gentle, modest, humble, and you can see his Zen has worked. Very good on Buddhist philosophy and a good poet.”

The significance of the relationship formed between these two monks is expressed (from Merton’s point of view) in greater depth in a short piece Merton wrote called “Nhat Hanh is My Brother” first published in _Jubilee_ of August, 1966. In this heartfelt tribute and plea on Nhat Hanh’s behalf, Merton expresses a form of compassion which is unparalleled in any of his other relationships. It also expresses a meaningful statement about the prophetic ministry he saw Nhat Hanh embodying. In a lecture entitled “Reflections on a Buddhist Monk,” Merton explicitly describes Nhat Hanh as a prophet called to a prophetic ministry and uses him as a template in discussing the prophetic function of monastic life. In the lecture, Merton states, “The monk should be able to stand up and say that in the name of truth this is wrong. Or I say that in the name of God this should not be done.”

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57 LTL, 76.
was doing and why his life was in great danger. Merton’s plea in “Nhat Hanh is My Brother” was written for the purpose of trying to protect his friend from harm.

In “Nhat Hanh is My Brother,” Merton is not seeking to provoke a political response but a human one. In order to accomplish this, he first makes explicit his complete and total acceptance of Nhat Hanh and the way he was, as a monk, resisting the social injustices he felt compelled to resist. Merton’s radical compassion and unwavering conviction are clearly heard when he writes that Nhat Hanh is “more my brother than many who are nearer to me by race and nationality, because he and I see things exactly the same way. He and I deplore the war that is ravaging his country. We deplore it for exactly the same reasons: human reasons, reasons of sanity, justice and love. We deplore the needless destruction, the fantastic and callous ravaging of human life, the rape of the culture and spirit of an exhausted people.”

In his defense of his “brother,” Merton explains Nhat Hanh’s position as being completely free from ideological persuasion; he represents neither a political nor even religious (Buddhist) movement. Rather, he represents the “young, the defenseless, the new ranks of youth who find themselves with every hand turned against them except those of the peasants and the poor, with whom they are working.” For Merton, Nhat Hanh was giving voice to new insights and judgments swelling up in the social consciousness of Vietnam. He was the one who courageously stood up in risk of his life to make this new voice heard.

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60 Ibid.
Nhat Hanh’s favorable reception upon his visit to the United States demonstrates, for Merton, that Americans still desire the truth when truth is made known to them and still have the sense to favor the human person over the political machine in most cases. But Nhat Hanh did not seek refuge in the United States; he went back to his home in Vietnam where he would once again face the death threats of the Vietcong. This move, more than any other, prompted Merton to write “Nhat Hanh is My Brother.” The heart of Merton’s message to his fellow Americans is heard when he writes, “We cannot let him go back to Saigon to be destroyed while we sit here, cherishing the warm humanitarian glow of good intentions and worthy sentiments about the ongoing war. We who have met and heard Nhat Hanh…, must also raise our voices to demand that his life and freedom be respected when he returns to his country. Furthermore, we demand this not in terms of any conceivable political advantage, but purely in the name of those values of freedom and humanity in favor of which our armed forces declare they are fighting the Vietnam war.”61 In this statement, we hear one prophetic voice risking his reputation in advocacy for another. For Merton, the prophetic ministry of Nhat Hanh was that important. So was the cause for Nhat Hanh’s prophetic ministry: life and freedom.

The prophetic character of Nhat Hanh, for Merton, was most vividly expressed in the freedom in which he lived his life. It was precisely his life in the midst of the precarious situation in Vietnam that proves and reveals the depth of Nhat Hanh’s personal freedom. As Merton notes, “Nhat Hanh is a free man who has acted as a free man in favor of his brothers

61 Ibid., 264.
and moved by the spiritual dynamic of a tradition of religious compassion." This tradition, Zen Buddhism, was, in Merton’s mind, perfectly expressed in the life of Nhat Hanh. As he admits, “More than any other he has shown us that Zen is not an esoteric and world-denying cult of inner illumination, but that it has its rare and unique sense of responsibility in the modern world.” As Merton will conclude, it is precisely because of his grounding in Zen that his prophetic spirit is able to take flight: “Wherever he goes he will walk in the strength of his spirit and in the solitude of the Zen monk who sees beyond life and death.”

Concluding Remarks

It is now clear that Merton’s primary interpretive lens for the monastic vocation was the spirit that inspired the first monks to separate themselves from the superficialities of Egyptian culture and to seek a more meaningful existence in the solitude of the desert. Through his writings on the Desert Fathers, Merton overtly traces this spiritual impetus to the prophetic ethos of the Hebrew prophets and, preeminently, to John the Baptist. This desert motif becomes the most predominant and perduring element in the development of his ideas of a prophetic monasticism.

For Merton, the Desert Fathers developed a counter-cultural society out in the desert for the express purpose of bearing witness to the principles of the Kingdom of God. Their motive was not simply to get lost in the contemplation of God. In order to establish the

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
Kingdom of God on earth, two spiritual movements were necessary: withdrawal and attachment. It was in these movements that the transformation of the monk from “worldly” to “eschatological” took place. Whether alone or in a community, this transformation is what gave birth to prophetic monasticism.

The witness of the Kingdom of God in a transformed life is a witness to freedom. It is significant that Merton seldom makes reference to peace or joy as characteristic signs of the Kingdom of God’s presence in the world. More than anything, the monk’s witness is a witness to freedom. With the freedom of a transformed life, the monk witnesses to the Transcendent alive and present in the world and testifies to a different existence than what most people are used to. In a sense, the monk’s life is shocking to modern sensibilities—and, for Merton, this is as it ought to be. One of the monk’s prophetic tasks is to shock the modern person into a new consciousness. Through his or her life of silence, poverty, simplicity, humility, and obedience, the monastic becomes a prophet pointing toward eternal realities.

St. Bernard’s Cistercian reform and the primitive Carmelite movement were, for Merton, two significant renewal movements of the twelfth century which reinvented many of the spiritual impulses of desert monasticism and brought them to bear on medieval religious life and society. In these two movements is modeled a vocation in which the contemplative and prophetic ideals were exemplarily wedded. St. Bernard helped Merton form a more nuanced way of relating the active life with the contemplative and helped him justify a prophetic form of contemplative living from within his own monastic tradition. In
St. Bernard, Merton learned that monastic, prophetic activity must remain true to the monastic principles of spirituality, especially humility, but need not be afraid to embrace a passion for justice. Yet, this passion must be controlled, free from egocentric self-righteousness. In doing so, monastic passion radiates the reality of one’s intimate life with God and becomes a sign of divine love for the world.

The relationship of prophetic action and contemplation is further explored in “The Prophetic Spirit,” where Merton discusses the primitive Carmelite ideal. Dependency upon the Holy Spirit is what makes the early Carmelite spirituality vital and prophetic, and continued dependence upon the Holy Spirit is the key to maintaining the charismatic element of the desert spirituality which marked the primitive Carmelite spirit. Elijah as “founder” of the Carmelites reflects, for Merton, the prophetic nature of the Carmelite vocation and leads him to speak of the prophet in terms of one who suffers the burden of inspiration, vision, and divine mercy. Mary is the archetypal symbol which grounds the prophetic spirit in egoless concern.

Nineteenth century Russian monasticism also interested Merton for its admirable integration of contemplation and prophetic witness. The charismatic, prophetic monks who characterized this era of Russian monasticism, of whom St. Seraphim of Sarov was the most popular, saw no threat to the contemplative ideal in exercising the apostolate of spiritual direction and wisdom formation. St. Seraphim presents a mysticism of light, spontaneity, joy, and compassion which Merton finds compelling. In St. Seraphim, Merton finds the
perfect integration of the spiritual streams of darkness and light along with the necessary dual disposition (toward God and toward the world) which makes monasticism prophetic.

In Thich Nhat Hanh, Merton finds another model of the prophetic monk who admirably, even heroically, integrates the contemplative spirit with the prophetic. Above all, Merton admires Nhat Hanh for his witness to freedom—his freedom from ideology and fear—alive to the truth of conscience in total allegiance. In many ways, “Nhat Hanh is My Brother” communicates how much Merton really wanted to be like Nhat Hanh. This is poignantly depicted in the essay’s final plea: “If I mean something to you, then let me put it this way: do for Nhat Hanh whatever you would do for me if I were in his position. In many ways I wish I were.”

The prophetic monasticism for which Merton became an ardent advocate through both his writings and his own monastic life did not go unnoticed, neither in his lifetime nor in the subsequent decades following his death. Writing in an article entitled, “Merton and History,” published in 1978, Jean Leclercq nicely sums up the way prophecy formed one of the central components of Merton’s monastic vocation. He writes:

He did not play the prophet, but was a member of a body—monasticism—which, because it does not aim at immediate action, can look far ahead, foresee and foretell. He felt that this was not restricted to Christian monasticism. In other religious traditions, what interested him was not so much the lofty and subtle doctrines, as the monks themselves, those who today, as in the past centuries, live according to these doctrines, thus attesting to their practicality. In such action fired by contemplation, Merton discerned an energy capable of changing the course of history….

A prophet is a person of neither vague ideas nor ready-made solutions. He or she is a person who, by reason of the vigor of his or her concepts and the intensity

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65 NVA, 264.
of his or her contemplation, compels other persons to act, giving them worthy reasons for doing so. Because he was a person of vision—not of ‘visions’—and a powerful catalyst, Merton was a prophet, and there is nothing to say that he was the last of the prophets.

That a country like the United States should produce someone of such wealth, and continue to listen attentively and so broadly to his message, augurs well for the future of the Church and the world. Is there any reason not to hope that God will raise up at all times other such witnesses of his own eternal contemplative action, Love?  

Chapter 8

The Contemplative-Prophetic Vocation in *The Springs of Contemplation*

_We have a prophetic task. We have to rock the boat, but not like the hippies._

-Thomas Merton

The Second Vatican Council’s call for the renewal of religious life was heard by Merton as a confirmation of his personal concerns and efforts in the revitalization of monasticism and its contemplative ideal. As discussed in the last two chapters, contemplation and prophecy and their mutual interdependence formed the heart of Merton’s conception of an authentic monastic renewal. Seeking ways to aid in this renewal process, Merton invited a group of contemplative nuns to his hermitage once in December of 1967 and again in May of 1968 to discuss in a creative interchange of ideas the issues facing female contemplative communities. These informal gatherings were facilitated by Merton who began each conference by initiating a particular topic for discussion but which often took a life of their own through the interchange that took place. These discussions left a significant mark on Merton’s spirit. After the completion of the first gathering, he comments, “The last four or five days have been quite fantastic: among the most unusual in my life. I hardly know how to write about them. There should be a whole new key—and a

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1 SPR, 80.
kind of joy unusual in this journal….” The fifteen nuns present on this particular retreat caused Merton to rethink some of the “superficial ideas and judgments” he made about contemplative religious life. They gave him an unexpected sense of hope that a remnant of genuine contemplative life was alive and well in North America. Merton’s comments after the second retreat in May of 1968 were more sober: “Once again, realization of the paralyzing problems of these contemplative convents and of their need…. Many of the convents were afraid of any change, don’t know what to do, preserve silly or inhuman regulations and customs, are under attack from all sides, and see hope only in utter conservatism—which means purely and simply their extinction. Others want to develop and are prevented from doing so.”

The Springs of Contemplation consists of transcriptions of these two retreats. The themes explored in these retreat conferences all examine in some way the nature of contemplative life and its relevance (or “irrelevance”) to the contemporary Church and society. Merton draws inspiration and insight from Che Guevara and Malcolm X, from Zen masters and Teresa of Avila, from Martin Buber and Herbert Marcuse. He highlights the tension between solitude and community, between charism and institution, between fidelity to tradition and adaptability to modernity. Perhaps the most predominant and overarching theme that runs throughout the conferences, though, is the prophetic aspect of the

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2 OSM, 20.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 123.
5 In Patrick O’Connell’s “The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani” in TME, 451-52, he notes that one of the conferences attributed to the first retreat, “Contemporary Prophetic Choices,” was actually given at the second, since it makes reference to both the assassination of Martin Luther King and the Catonsville Nine draft board raid, events which post-date December 1967.
contemplative vocation. Many of the ideas set forth in the course of this study resurface and find their summation in these two Gethsemani retreats. They represent Merton’s most mature conceptualization of a prophetic spirituality.

The first two conferences, “Presence, Silence, Communication” and “Changing Forms of Contemplative Commitment,” direct the conversation toward exploring the themes of the essential nature of the contemplative life and the possibilities of adaptation to a post-Vatican II Church. In the first of these conferences, Merton introduces the topic of contemplation by drawing upon its dynamic significance. He states, “In the contemplative life we all face the question ‘What are we supposed to do?’” One obvious and practical answer for Merton is gathering in informal meetings amongst other contemplatives to explore issues facing contemplative life in church and society. Being present to one another should be a priority for contemplative communities. This was of special importance amidst the sweeping changes which were taking place in the Church in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Likewise, this is also of special importance for any community seeking to live in the creative power of the Holy Spirit. As Merton notes, Pentecost means “new life,” which means frequent change.

The issue of silence is offered as an example of a theme in transition in many contemplative communities. On the one hand, it is essential to contemplative life; on the other, instead of promoting presence in a contemplative community, it has the possibility of

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6 The titles to the conferences were provided by the editor of The Springs of Contemplation, Sr. Jane Marie Richardson, S.L.
7 SPR, 3.
promoting absence through evasion and avoidance. The job of the contemplative is, then, to cultivate a silence that fosters communion. This happens by each member of a community contacting the ground of one’s being and accessing the streams of spiritual activity which constantly flow deep within. Drawing upon an article by Joost A. Merloo, a Dutch psychoanalyst, Merton speaks of various “modulations” of silence. He states, “Silence can carry many different messages; it can be a powerful form of communication.”\(^8\) Most appropriate for a contemplative community, silence communicates “a loving presence.”\(^9\) More than that, silence carries with it the unique abilities of spiritual intuition and discernment. In reference to a Muslim Sufi he once met who he describes as being as much of a “finished product” as anyone he’s ever met, Merton shares how impressed he was in the way this Sufi when asked a question was able to provide an answer of such depth and insight that it addressed what the person asking the question really wanted to know. For Merton, this is a sign of how a true spiritual master teaches.

Merton then proceeds to insist on the communicative aspect of silence—of not “reducing silence to muteness, against depriving individuals of their right to a many-voiced silence, their right to hear both on the level of grace and on the level of nature.”\(^10\) In keeping with the Rule of St. Benedict, silence is for listening—for hearing and being moved to obey what is heard with the utmost concern. Contemplative communities gathering together for spiritual discussions is one significant way of collectively listening to what the

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\(^8\) Ibid., 7.
\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^10\) Ibid., 14.
Spirit is saying and fostering mutual compassion from the Spirit’s lead—to dream out loud and purify the air.

In the second of the conferences, Merton further explores the idea of presence and authentic communal living. Renewal is spoken of as probing the basic form and truth of a particular vocation and insisting on an institutional paradigm that nurtures genuine personal development. In making this point, Merton states, “Wherever there is human presence, we have to be present to it. And wherever there is a person, there has to be personal communication. There Christ can work. Where there is presence, there is God. A Christian is one who continues to communicate across all the boundaries, a sign of hope for a convergence back to a kind of unity.”11 What is paramount for vibrant contemplative communities in Merton’s mind is the life of the community itself, not so much the institutional structure on which it is based, since community is the place where God is present and the place where the Spirit works.

The third conference, “Responsibility in a Community of Love,” is the first to introduce the theme of the prophetic vocation. Warning against the tendency in some communities to make themselves look dynamic for the sake of being “with it” and who end up being outdated in only a few years, Merton says a true contemplative community must, rather, respond to the Word of God at whatever cost. In addition to this, he mentions that there exists an obligation “to a prophetic call”12—and this includes an obligation for

11 Ibid., 31.
12 Ibid., 37.
centuries-old forms of religious life. As he states, “…even in our somewhat rigid institutions, I think we can be prophetic.”

After being asked to elaborate on the charismatic, prophetic element in contemplative communities, Merton explains that something charismatic is a gift from God which fosters a special kind of freedom. This freedom of the contemplative makes one fully accessible to God’s initiative and inspiration. For Merton, this is why it is essential that contemplative life not be tied down to routine duties like parish work. In his view, it restricts spiritual spontaneity and availability, and it has the potential to stifle the flow of prophetic inspiration which becomes accessible in a contemplative stance toward God. As he explains, “An inspiration of the Holy Spirit may have nothing to do with anything terribly important in itself, but it gives us the conviction that when we follow through on this ordinary thing, we are on the right track. We need to be free for that. We are not in our monasteries simply saying prayers. We are remaining open to something, the unexpected. Something is going on at a deep level.” What gives us access to the spiritual churnings at this deep level is prayer: “Prayer is where charism operates. And prayer and charism lead to a pure heart.”

Contemplative prayer, then, is marked by a certain emptiness—a freedom from egocentric concern which gives way to a state in which God can move freely in and through the contemplative. This is what purity of heart means for Merton and why it is the prerequisite for genuine prophetic activity. This contemplative way is prophetic, “not in the sense of sudden illuminations as to what is going to happen at some future moment, but in

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13 Ibid., 37-38.
14 Ibid., 46.
15 Ibid., 48.
the sense that we are so one with the Holy Spirit that we are already going in the direction the Spirit is going. You can, in some way, anticipate things in the church and you’re ready for what is coming along…. Our life is meant to give us that kind of sensitivity and that kind of atmosphere, a state of real humility and peace and simplicity.”

The function of the contemplative life is depicted here as putting one into as intimate contact with the Spirit of God as possible and finding ways to be sustained in this distinctive relationship. In this spiritually charged atmosphere arises the prophetic ministry which intuits and anticipates the movement of the Spirit in the world. The prophet is the one who leads others in the way of the Spirit.

As a harbinger in discerning the action of the Spirit in the world, this ministry of the contemplative-prophet, for Merton, is crucial for the well-being of the Church. Without this ministry the Church becomes stagnant, overly dependent and perhaps even fixated upon institutional propagation. Merton’s ecclesiology is essentially charismatic in nature. Although he never denies the significance and necessity of the institutional aspect, the Church, in order for it to fulfill its mission, must be led by charismatic leaders.

In “Vocation: ‘The Time When You Were Called,’” attention is drawn to the way the contemplative life helps one to see what is artificial—how it helps discriminate and make critical judgments. This is of particular value in American culture, for Merton, since in his estimation Americans, and Western culture in general, have fallen deeply into the sin

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16 Ibid., 49.
of artificiality. For this reason, Americans have trouble understanding the relevancy of the contemplative life. A pragmatic, materialistic society sees no purpose in it.

With this in mind, a reference to Robert A. Heinlein’s 1961 best-selling science-fiction novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, is brought into the discussion.\(^\text{17}\) It tells of a human child who visits Mars and brings back a new religion which is a kind of parody of modern, popular religion in America. A major part of the spiritual discipline of this new religion is learning the Martian language. One Martian word is of particular interest for the discussion. It is the word *grock*. Merton explains, “*Grocking* is really a form of prophetic intuition which is able to project forward and to anticipate what’s coming, so that people in this religious elite, by virtue of their discipline and their study of the Martian language, are *grocking* what’s ahead.”\(^\text{18}\) Applied to Christianity, one book mentioned by Merton suggests that the Christian should be able not only to be orthodox but also to see what’s going to happen and to make it happen. Merton’s response to such a suggestion is not favorable: “This is the Marxist view of things: you get in the know about the laws of history and you are so smart and so disciplined that you can make things move in that direction.”\(^\text{19}\) This form of prophetic intuition, according to the reviewer (in Merton’s words), is “a rejection of faith in favor of demonstrable truth and hard discipline.”\(^\text{20}\) Young Americans are favorable to it because they have grown weary of a faith that is used as an excuse to evade hard questions and one that no longer requires discipline for its members. What they want is

\(^{17}\) The title of the novel is not mentioned by Merton, only the review of it is, which he read in *Motive* magazine.  
\(^{18}\) SPR, 66.  
\(^{19}\) Ibid.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 67.
human responsibility in religion—they want an elite group of contemplatives who *grock* the future. While Merton admits that this depiction may be silly, he admits that it reflects something very real about the modern world and its relationship to religion—about how the world continues to look to contemplatives, not just for some peace and solace when the world becomes too chaotic, but for direction and meaning for the most fundamental aspects and pressing needs of life.

In reference to another article, Merton speaks of vocation as a creative possibility, leading to things we never suspected. What is essential to communities and individuals alike is to keep as open as possible to these possibilities—to never close one’s self off to vital potential. What threatens this radical openness is the desire for security and not wanting to be bothered by “nitwit ideas.”21 A community which wants to live in the dynamism of the Spirit must develop a patient tolerance for sifting through mediocre possibilities, much like a composer does when fashioning his magnum opus. The creative process can be a very tedious one. By way of example, Merton mentions Native American rituals which form young people into spiritually sensitive adults. Crucial to this vocational formation are the crisis moments which help in personal realization and in turn foster authentic community life.

Relating these two articles to Christian contemplative communities, Merton cites a passage from St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians where the Apostle mentions that not many wise were called by God, rather it was the foolish who were called to confound the

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21 Ibid., 68.
wise. The passage is significant, for Merton, because it stands in direct contradiction to what it means to grock. The purpose of life is not to form elite communities separated from the realities of the contemporary world. Authentic religious community is based upon poverty and humility, not gnosticism and elitism. The genesis of religious community is located in the simple obedience to the call of God to follow Him in a certain way. As previously discussed, such fidelity to the call of God is the sustenance of a prophetic vocation.

In “Contemporary Prophetic Choices,” Merton speaks about the prophetic task incumbent upon both the Church at large and contemplative communities in particular. Prophetic action, he mentions, will often be met with misunderstanding and confusion—and when its message is fully comprehended, with outright hostility. A specific case is referenced to illustrate his point. Dan Berrigan’s conscientious objection to the Vietnam War and his willingness to go to jail since he considered living in the world as a form of imprisonment was, for Merton, a symbolic, prophetic action that was difficult for most people to understand. Part of the reason for the ambivalence in prophetic communication is due to living “in a society where everything is so predetermined that being prophetic is simply not going to fit anybody’s preconceived ideas.” Because of this, the contemplative life, as long as it is true to its prophetic vocation, will never find much approval from the world—even from those who look to contemplatives for guidance and direction. Thus, the motivation of contemplative communities can never be the support of society. Its prophetic

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22 1 Cor. 1:26-2:5.
23 SPR, 79.
vocation necessitates a marginal position in relation to the world—and even, to a certain degree, in relation to the Church.

This prophetic stance which Merton advocates for contemplative communities has not been one traditionally held by most over the course of the Church’s two-thousand year history. Merton notes that contemplative communities have in large part been seen as the conservatives who acquiesce to ecclesiastical power because of their known humility and obedience. But, according to Merton, this attitude is a hindrance to the Church. The Church needs healthy argumentation, criticism, and dialogue for its growth and development. This is one of the prophetic tasks of contemplative communities. Yet, Merton once again cautions against an over-zealous “prophetism” that leads only to revolution. This is the reason why he is critical of French Catholic liberals whose social criticism was basically Marxist.

Che Guevara and Malcolm X are offered as two examples of men whose prophetic lives provide exemplary patterns for social transformation. Both, by being “mystery men,” fulfilled the desire for a prophet many young people tend to always have. Che, by laying his life on the line—even without achieving much with his life—inspired the young with his death. Malcolm X, by liberating himself from an oppressive social system, demonstrated how to make choices which gave honor and dignity to one’s own “soul.” According to Merton’s assessment, both he and Che give evidence of a type of prophetic formula. “If we cannot be like that, we should at least be followers of people like that.”

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24 Ibid., 86.
King, although more involved in the establishment, is also mentioned as an example of one who acted unequivocally, which, Merton asserts, is necessary for the prophetic vocation.

Prophecy is the central theme of “Contemplative Life as Prophetic Vocation.” Merton begins this conference with the claim that the prophetic aspect of the contemplative vocation which he will present has never before been spoken about. He first points out that current prophetic movements fail because they fit too cozily into society. He reasons that this is because society has adapted in such a way that it now incorporates dissent into itself. As he explains:

In other words, the thesis behind this position is that we’re living in a totalitarian society…. It’s organized for profit and for marketing. In that machinery, there’s no real freedom. You’re free to choose gimmicks, your brand of TV, your new car. But you’re not free not to have a car. In other words, life is really determined for everybody. Even the hippies in their dissent are living a predetermined kind of life, although they are trying to get out of it. They rock the boat, there’s a splash, everybody is suitably shocked and scandalized, a bit titillated by it. After three years the whole thing vanishes and another fashion starts. It all means nothing.25

This is a situation, Merton warns, that requires a genuine prophetic response.

Merton locates the solution to this prophetic problem in the history of prophecy in the Old Testament. Abraham is told to leave his people. The prophet, Merton notes, has to get out of a certain kind of society or social structure. It requires total trust and dependence in God for provision and sustenance. Moses was likewise told to get out of the oppressive Egyptian structure. Egypt robbed the Jews of their freedom to have God determine the totality of their lives. They were determined, instead, by the Egyptians. For Merton, these

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25 Ibid., 129-30.
scenarios lead to a form of alienation which prohibits authentic human existence. The prophetic vocation here again reveals its goal as human liberation and authentic human living.

Elijah is compelled to stand against the whole structure of the kingdom in which he lived—one which wanted him dead. His response is to escape into the desert and hide in a cave where he can assert his own prophetic choices. This is also the pattern of St. Francis of Assisi who likewise made a radical break from the world so that he could be free to make his own choices and live from a more authentic motivation. John the Baptist is cited as another who follows this prophetic path. As Merton expresses it, the essential aspect of the prophetic vocation is this: “[w]henever you make a choice from your own deepest center, you are not being predetermined by somebody else.”26 This mature sense of self-autonomy often leads to the proclamation of a subversive message which, Merton admits, is unacceptable to most: the prophetic task is not to tell slaves to be free but to tell people who think they are free that they are slaves. This, in essence, was the message of all the prophets listed above.

The great challenge to the integration of the prophetic element in contemplative life, as Merton sees it, is the manner in which contemplative life has evolved to become not only non-prophetic but also anti-prophetic. As he laments, “It’s designed to block any kind of prophetic reaction at all.”27 Speaking of his own monastery, Merton quips, “If someone did something prophetic around here, it would upset the whole place, the community would be

26 Ibid., 133.
27 Ibid., 134.
shocked. We’d have no way of handling it.” Merton offers a difficult solution to this difficult problem: ideally, contemplative communities should not just produce prophetic individuals but should become prophetic themselves. This is the task, for Merton, of the contemplative community: “not to produce prophetic individuals who could simply end up as a headache, but to be a prophetic community.”

This last comment provokes one sister to ask, “Then we don’t try to identify with the people of our time?” Merton’s response removes any suspicion about his interest in relating to contemporary society. He is emphatic: we relate to the society in which we find ourselves as “a sign of contradiction which reminds them of the freedom they’ve forfeited.” As an example of a prophetic community, Merton offers the witness of the black community whose jazz (in which he had a special interest) in some of its forms was largely conceived as protest music. This is contrasted with what the racial majority of America has produced: “It’s completely different from the innocuous Muzak, accepted by white society, that you hear in the dentist’s office, totally the opposite.”

The prophetic community then witnesses, on one hand, against unjust social or religious structures and, on the other hand, warns against an unhealthy dependence upon any structure whatsoever. The prophetic community is, therefore, a mature community—one that has learned how to ride without training wheels. It is made up of authentic human beings who are comfortable existing on the margins of a given structure—“who can create

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 135.
their own existence, who have within themselves the resources for affirming their identity and their freedom in any situation in which they find themselves.”\textsuperscript{33} These ideas reiterate Merton’s approach to early desert monasticism as being essentially a non-conformist movement.

What the contemplative-prophetic vocation seeks is \textit{qualitative} change, while what society seeks is \textit{quantitative} change. As Merton observes, “New products, new gimmicks are everywhere. We can buy more and different things and replace them quickly because they get obsolete so fast. The human race has never been so standardized and so bound to a predetermined situation as it is today.”\textsuperscript{34} Contemplative vision sees beyond the changing fads of superficial, materialistic fluff and searches for what life offers as its most meaningful and permanent values. The contemplative heart is fully set upon the truth of these values so as to not be swayed by the lure of the desire to be relevant. In Merton’s view, the Middle Ages, unlike the modern age, although often referred to as an age of unfreedom, provided societies where its people were largely able to choose for themselves.

Merton estimates that the Church was largely failing, and had for most of its history failed, to provide adequate structures for this prophetic vocation. Prophecy, thus, has become an activity aimed not only at the reformation of society but also, in a more pressing sense, at the reformation of the Church itself. And, for Merton, it is an activity aimed not simply at ill behavior but, more specifically, at ill structural systems which are at the root of sick societies and unhealthy forms of religious life. Living through a system is the antithesis

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 138.
of living prophetically, in Merton’s mind. Dependence must be upon God, our conscience, and our community of faith. These are Merton’s pillars for prophetic living. This is why the prophetic life is so difficult to maintain. It requires that we really live. And Merton notes, “…this may be a much less spectacular thing than protesting.”35

In beginning his conference, “Prophecy, Alienation, Language,” Merton makes a bold assertion about the place of the prophetic vocation in the contemplative life. He remarks, “Yesterday we talked about the prophetic aspect of our vocation. I wanted to get down to the most fundamental root of our life—the prophetic function.”36 By describing prophecy as the “fundamental root” of contemplative life he is asserting that it is a non-negotiable aspect of that life—that it is what is most essential and basic to it. It is that which plays the central role in the formation and well-being of a particular life—the key to its flourishing. For Merton, neither conservatives nor progressives functioned prophetically. Each in their own way—conservatives by trying to fit everyone into a medieval society and progressives by trying to fit everyone into a modern one—were missing the mark when it came to genuine prophetic activity.

Merton’s critique reveals, once again, that freedom is his interpretive key in assessing genuine prophetic activity. He cites Herbert Marcuse, described as a “monastic thinker,”37 as the major influence on his personal perspective on the issue. The elemental question in his mind reiterates his concern about the illusion of democratic, free societies

35 Ibid., 141.
36 Ibid., 143.
37 Ibid., 144.
offering greater liberty to their people. He asks, “Are we going to be caught in a society that is more permissive than the rigid ones of Marxism but yet also totalitarian?” This was the major concern brought out in his previous conference. In the present conference he relates why this is of major significance for contemplative communities.

In setting forth the answer of the contemplative to the problems of the alienated and spiritually enslaved society depicted above, Merton speaks of the basic purpose for monastic, contemplative communities. Those who have come to seek God behind the walls of a cloister have come to the realization that, “in following the ordinary approved paths, you cannot live your own life.” They have the keen insight into the contradictions embedded within a predetermined society. The cloister is meant for more than simply “skipping movies because they’re no good or giving up dancing because it’s frivolous;” it is meant to reorient one’s life toward its deepest center so that one can follow one’s deepest needs and desires. In Merton’s mind, much of religious life had been watered down and was heading toward disrepair precisely because this insight was being neglected and compromised. In such an atmosphere, religious life losses one of its fundamental reasons for being: namely, “to provide a place where people can find something that they cannot find elsewhere.”

One of the most pressing needs of a society that has become, in Marcuse’s words, “one-dimensional,” is for such people living in such a society to have the opportunity to

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38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 147.
40 Ibid., 148.
41 Ibid.
experience life being lived in its multi-dimensional forms. This, in Merton’s mind, the monastery should provide. A one-dimensional society “makes people need things and need them so badly that everything is put aside for the sake of fulfilling these needs.”\(^{42}\) It is an addicted society—addicted to an illusive promise of fulfillment. The contemplative, prophetic community sees through these illusive promises and testifies to the true reality of human fulfillment. The contemplative-prophetic community is truly itself when it is most free.

Taking his cue from Marcuse, Merton asserts that the major source of illusion in one-dimensional societies is the misuse and distortion of language. As mentioned in the first section of this study, changing times contribute to the changing of the meanings of words. This is only exacerbated with the proliferation of technology, especially mass media. Thus, it becomes incumbent upon contemplative-prophetic communities to raise their level of awareness of the “factors behind the facts.”\(^ {43}\) As Merton expresses, “To live prophetically…[y]ou’ve got to be aware that there are contradictions. In a certain sense, our prophetic vocation consists in hurting from the contradictions in society…. And the contradictions in our own background and in our own Christian lives, contradictions for which we are not totally responsible but which we have to live with and face constantly. We have to work with them and resist the temptation to scapegoat others.”\(^ {44}\) A prophetic community must learn to acquire a high tolerance for ambiguity and learn patience when sifting through the murky waters of uncertainty. In Merton’s view, all too many Christians

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 151.  
\(^{43}\) Ibid., 156.  
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 157.
lacked the fortitude for such prophetic endeavors. The easy way out was to too quickly point the finger in one direction or the other instead of remaining with the discomfort of ambiguity. The Old Testament prophets, many of whom did not want to be prophets at all, attest, for Merton, to the type of fidelity required of the true prophet. As Merton remarks, “…we’re in the same boat. God lays on us the burden of feeling the contradictions in our world and Church and exposing them, insofar as we are honestly able to do that.”

A key concept in Merton’s prophetic methodology, here, is seen in the phrase “insofar as we are honestly able to do that.” As already mentioned, Merton has little tolerance for a rogue “prophetism” with little regard for humility and personal integrity. In Merton’s view, the true prophet must be formed in the ways of selfless concern, free from egocentric interests and ideological preservation, before he or she is able to prophetically minister in an authentic Christian spirit. True prophetic activity, for Merton, is completely dependent upon purity of heart.

Merton’s answer to the problem of language and the challenge of the contradictions of society, as has previously been mentioned, is silence. He asks, “What does a contemplative do about this? The mere fact of living in silence, a kind of silence that might be called electric with this sense of contradiction, is important. Our silence can’t be just nice and cozy, narcissistic and sweet. It’s a silence in which there is pain, where we know we should say something but haven’t got anything to say. People should be able to sense that our silence comes from deep reflection and honest suffering about the contradictions in

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Yet, Merton laments, what often happens is quite the opposite: “Instead, they often see us living a silence that is reassuring and pleasing to our benefactors, in which the world’s all right, after all.” In such a scenario, silence becomes a way of evading one’s prophetic responsibility. Instead of escaping behind the façade of silence, contemplative communities are challenged with discovering creative ways to communicate effectively in a society where we function with a closed language where meanings of words exist on shifting sand.

Of “The Feminine Mystique” Patrick O’Connell comments, “Perhaps the most significant (and, in its own way, the most prophetic) conference is one that deals with a topic not discussed elsewhere by Merton in any detail: the role of women in the church and in society.” Merton begins speaking about this sensitive topic by first acknowledging the struggle that many women face in finding their place in the Church. The struggle, for Merton, pivots around what he calls the “feminine mystique,” which he describes as “an idealization of supposed special feminine qualities which are put on a pedestal and made much of.”

A deeper problem facing the women religious he was addressing was what he calls “a cloistered, contemplative mystique.” By this he means that the contemplative nun is stereotyped into being essentially “passive” and “mysterious.” The problem with such a caricature, as with any stereotype, is that it limits the personal value of a given individual or group. Cloistered women are certainly not the only group who can be considered “passive”

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46 Ibid., 158.
47 Ibid.
49 SPR, 161.
50 Ibid.
and “mysterious.” As Merton remarks, “But everybody is mysterious and sometimes passive.” What adds to the confusion is that many women are favorable to the stereotype and find security in playing a particular role. Of course, the problem with role playing, for Merton, is by now obvious: it limits authenticity.

Merton is bold in his assessment as well as his remedy. He tells his audience that “[w]e have to face the fact that the cloistered contemplative nun has been ‘officially’ appointed to live out this feminine mystique. I think you have an absolute duty to rebel, for the good of the Church itself.” The options, in Merton’s view, are twofold: either perpetuate the “image of the mysterious, veiled, hidden woman who is an ‘enclosed garden’” or assert the truth which is that they are simply “people loving God.”

As Merton sees it, the feminine mystique arose at a time when social structures were built exclusively by men where women were forced to assume a special role in society and thereby began to be treated more as a commodity than a value—more as a thing than a person. The feminine mystique initially offered religious women an opportunity to find their way into a form of life which provided them with the communal protection to grow beyond such dehumanizing social structures. The cloister became about the only place possible for a woman to find liberation and become an authentic person. What was once a tool for freedom and authentication had become, in Merton’s view, a tool for control and

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51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 162.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 163.
domination by an all-male hierarchy insensitive to the needs, aspirations, and unique gifts of female contemplative communities.

Merton’s humanism surfaces in this conference as the most significant component to authentic renewal for women religious. As he states, “Being a person is what has to be emphasized.”55 And what is true of women contemplative communities is ultimately true for all contemplative communities. He points out that the same struggles faced by women religious were also a part of his own monastery. All contemplative communities must, therefore, work together and “fight against this.”56 Merton suggests the need for a new theological anthropology which could offer new insight into what a human being is—both as man and woman. This perspective once again reiterates that, for Merton, the prophetic stance against dehumanizing tendencies of social and ecclesial structures ought to be approached with the full faculties available to the human person and not simply as an emotional reaction or rebellion due to pent-up frustration over an unfulfilled ideological agenda.

Concluding Remarks

Merton’s decision to lead two retreats with contemplative nuns demonstrates both his pastoral concern for a group within the Church he felt needed special attention in the wake of the sweeping changes occurring within religious life after the Second Vatican Council as well as his methodological approach to such renewal. At the heart of his particular method is dialogue and creative interchange—sharing struggles and discerning the movement of the

55 Ibid., 172.
56 Ibid.
Spirit in a gathered contemplative community. As in other forms of religious life, the central test for genuine renewal here is authenticity of life where the nun is able to free herself from outdated sanctimonious accretions and develop a mature spiritual relationship in the spontaneity of a lively faith. Only practices which foster such human and spiritual development ought to be embraced. Practices which threaten it ought to be resisted.

Merton locates the root of the prophetic vocation in the quiet listening and discernment of this authentic way of being in the world. It is in the context of this sort of charismatic community where the Word of God is revered and obeyed above all else and where the community has given itself in full availability to it that the prophetic vocation becomes a vital form of life within both individuals and the community as a whole. Merton, therefore, encourages the nuns to remain true to a contemplative posture of silence and humility toward the Word of God which promotes spiritual inspiration and purity of heart and protects from egocentric illusions which easily corrupt the prophetic endeavor. He affirms that their vocation to be prophetic contemplatives is crucial for the well-being of the Church. It is one of the ways God uses to lead the Church along the way of truth.

The contemplative posture toward the Word of God that Merton promotes is grounded in an ascesis of patient trust that provides space for the difficult and often messy process of discernment. As the Word of God emerges within the life of a contemplative community, the community learns the demanding lessons of selflessness and fidelity. Merton insists that the prophetic vocation can only properly function within such an atmosphere.
The Word of God will inevitably lead the prophetic community to the margins of society—and, to a certain degree, to the margins of the Church. It is a life which defies preconceived ideas and so if often misunderstood and is thus often persecuted. Yet, while marginal, it remains part of both society and Church. Its prophetic credibility depends upon the maintenance of this binding (however loose) relationship.

Prophetic communities provide a vital ministry to the Church’s growth and development through its unequivocal, yet charitable, critique and persuasive dialogue. It is significant to note that Merton is always careful to caution against what he calls “prophetism”—the tendency toward revolution built upon obstinate ideological notions. Proper patterns of prophetic living, on the other hand, are given in the examples of Che Guevara, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. who demonstrate selfless concern over unjust social structures and inspire others by their willingness to be fully committed to what they believe to be the cause of justice.

Perhaps the most original insight Merton offers in his conferences pertains to the impotency of current prophetic movements. Because dissent has become an accepted reality in society, it has little power to transform. His answer to this predicament is found in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. Like the Hebrew prophets, we must break free from society’s predetermining conditions and create forms of life which foster authentic freedom. By doing so, our relationship with the world becomes a sign of contradiction which demonstrates to the world its own enslavement to an illusory existence. Contemplative communities must provide a way of life that is multi-dimensional—free from
the addictive patterns of promise and empty fulfillment indicative of one-dimensional societies.

A major problem in regard to one-dimensionality revolves around the corruption of language. Words have become too equivocal. Meaning is largely communicated through distorted ideas. Prophetic communities must pierce through this distortion and learn creative ways of communicating unequivocally. This is a tedious task requiring great patience and intuitive discernment. Silence once again surfaces as Merton’s answer to society’s problems. Silence is the cure of an unhealthy language. Contemplative silence, Merton points out, communicates compassion and presence to the contradictions embedded in a confused and chaotic society.

Merton’s own prophetic insights are revealed most sensitively and forthrightly as he draws attention to the problem of what he calls “the feminine mystique.” In doing so, he exposes the dehumanizing tendencies of many in the Church toward both female religious and contemplatives. Through the use of stereotypes, contemplative nuns have largely been controlled and contained. This has had an effect of limiting growth and contributing to artificial forms of life which deny the primary role of the Spirit in the life of a community. Merton encourages the nuns to rebel against such tendencies. They must assert their unique personhood and spirit if they want to carry their form of life into the future. Yet, this assertion must be as rational as it is emotional. Only then will such a prophetic revolt have the traction for lasting change.
Conclusion

He did not say anything utterly strange,
At any rate to a thoughtful person.
Why then do we honor him, and call him prophet?

Because he said what we had always understood
When we were alone, when we were thoughtful.
We honor him because he made us remember,

Why, that we ourselves were serious once,
That we were children, and loved peace.
He gave us again the quietness of our minds.

The only strange thing was, his wild look.
But of course it was terrible to be where he had been:
To have dug those utterly simple sentences out of the soul’s grave.¹

-Mark Van Doren

Through the course of this study, the distinctive developmental pathways of Merton’s prophetic spirituality has come into clearer focus. Although not immediately evident in the early years of his monastic life, Merton’s prophetic spirit was there germinating awaiting release at the opportune moment. For Merton, that moment came on March 18, 1958. With his experience on the corner of Fourth and Walnut, Merton’s spiritual need to express himself prophetically was justified and blessed. It was a mystical insight that reconciled his early passion for justice with his equally passionate desire for

¹ “Prophet” by Mark Van Doren in The Selected Letters of Mark Van Doren, ed. George Hendrick (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 235. This poem dated February 4, 1962 was addressed to Merton. After the typed poem, Van Doren writes, “Your last two pieces, on Christian Action and Father Metzger, came just as I was about to type this poem, which (believe it or not) it has taken me years to finish. I send it to you because I know now whom it fits. You. [P.S.] Whom, I mean, among the living. Live forever.”
solitude. It redefined his monastic identity enlivening it with a goal far beyond the walls of Gethsemani’s cloister. The ten years which followed would be marked by an alternative spiritual trajectory because of it. This paradigm shift in his consciousness, while controversial at the time, was, as he would argue, in full accord with monasticism’s initial *raison d’être*. Merton’s efforts at monastic renewal, thus, were primarily an *aggiornamento* of monasticism’s prophetic dimension.

The final ten years of Merton’s monastic life were, thereby, characterized by a distinctively prophetic quality. It has been the purpose of this study to demonstrate the foundational components of this prophetic quality by examining a number of figures Merton describes as prophetic and ascertaining why he describes them as such. In so doing, a significant dimension of Merton’s spirituality, which has been little explored up to now, has come into clearer focus. What follows are four major components to Merton’s prophetic spirituality that have been discerned through the course of this research, along with an assessment of the contemporary relevancy of Merton’s basic approach to the prophetic dimension of the spiritual life.

First, Merton’s prophetic spirituality is conditioned by a certain way of seeing—what can be called *prophetic vision*. From his childhood, Merton was exposed, through the poetry of William Blake, to an alternative vision of reality springing from a highly sensitized imagination. Over the course of his life Merton’s admiration of Blake’s prophetic imagination only increased. Blake helped Merton realize that this prophetic imagination was an integral component in diagnosing humankind’s sicknesses as well as in formulating
creative remedies to heal them. The prophetic imagination also strengthened the support of one’s fidelity to the basic values of human life—values like simplicity, authenticity, and love—in the midst of modernity’s efforts to disparage such values. Merton was also impressed with how this prophetic imagination allowed Blake to assert himself as a courageous witness in the face of the shameful ridicule that came his way because of his critique of the modern mind.

This creative, prophetic vision is also evident in the Latin American poets and novelists examined in this study. Merton believed that poetry and literature were creative ways to cut through the distortion of language which modernity perpetrated upon the way human beings communicate with one another and provided a way of reaching into humankind’s soul with potent symbols and imagery which were able to transform both mind and heart. This way of communicating prophetic insight is enabled by a creative intuition that is not bound and enclosed within the confines of the consciousness of the status quo. Rather, it is based upon a contemplative mysticism (widely understood) that fosters the immediate experience of the divine in silent prayer as well as a more mediated experience mainly through the liturgy and nature. For Merton, attentiveness to God awakens one’s prophetic sensibilities and inspires prophetic action.

Secondly, Merton’s prophetic spirituality is characterized by the pre-modern values of simplicity and authenticity of life. It is through solitude that one’s true self emerges and is liberated from the mechanizing tendencies of a technological society. Living authentically from one’s true self exposes the dehumanizing effects of a one-dimensional
society’s addictive lifestyle and unmasks illusions which keep people trapped in them. Merton’s reading of the leaders of the existentialist movement gave him a paradigm for understanding authenticity as a type of catalyst in the transformation of the self and of the world around him. It also showed him the need to promote a healthy understanding of Christian humanism which gives sufficient priority and value to the formation of the human conscience and one’s unique individuality. This is practically depicted in Merton’s advice to women’s contemplative communities to break free from the “feminine mystique” which limits their own authentic, individual expression as human beings.

Thirdly, and most significantly, Merton’s prophetic spirituality is firmly rooted in the charismatic dimension of the spiritual life. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of this study has been the priority Merton gives to this charismatic dimension in the last ten years of his life, so much so, that Merton’s spirituality in his last ten years can be more rightly labeled “charismatic” than “contemplative.” This study reveals that the contemplative dimension of the spiritual life, for Merton, is to be fully intertwined with the prophetic dimension. His insistence upon this vital relationship helps highlight that the essential ground of each is a dimension deeper than either is in itself. This deeper dimension is a spirituality which enables one to live in openness and availability to the spontaneous movements of the Spirit of God—which he calls “charismatic.” The charismatic dimension of the spiritual life is,

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2 This designation is legitimate only if the term “charismatic” is understood as Merton uses it—as the experiential dimension of the spiritual life encompassing the whole person leading toward total availability to the spontaneous movements of the Spirit—and not understood in reference to meanings associated with the Catholic “charismatic renewal” of the second half of the twentieth century, with its focus upon the exercise of the spiritual gifts, mainly articulated by St. Paul in 1 Cor 12.
therefore, a designation which, for Merton, encompasses both contemplative (living in the Spirit toward God) and prophetic (living in the Spirit toward the world) realities.

As a spirituality which insists upon personal experience as a crucial component in the spiritual quest, it seeks to foster a prophetic ear—a way of listening and discerning God’s voice and will. This is an activity done both individually for one’s self and collectively in one’s community. By developing a prophetic ear, reality, which is bubbling-over with eschatological anticipation, is discerned, accessed and made a reality in the world.

It is also a spirituality that freely incorporates affect into one’s expression with the divine. The passion of the prophets is depicted as a catalyst that motivates others away from an apathetic subjectivism and toward the ethical imperative of living justly with God and in the world.

Merton’s efforts in the renewal of monasticism largely revolve around the need to restore the charismatic dimension to monasticism. The same could be said about the Church in general. Too much dependence upon the institutional component of monasticism or the Church to the detriment of the charismatic was the source, for Merton, of the diminishment of spiritual vitality in both religious and ecclesial life. Therefore, the institutional aspect of religious and ecclesial life must always be the servant of the charismatic. Merton at times, especially in his journals and letters where he was allowed to be most candid, expresses much frustration and disillusionment toward those authority figures he believed to be incompetent. Yet, even then, he demonstrates loyal fidelity and obedience. In the course of his life, his understanding of obedience, mainly through the help of Gabriel Marcel,
developed to the point that simultaneously allowed for his own spiritual maturation as well as for his ongoing fidelity to institutional authority. This brings us to the final component of Merton’s prophetic spirituality.

Fidelity to God is the foundational component of Merton’s prophetic spirituality—it is its essence. Living prophetically is completely dependent upon one’s faithfulness to the Word of God. In fact, one should not be concerned with playing the prophet at all. Rather, focus should be placed upon being true to God in all of life’s circumstances. Merton saw great danger in assuming the role of the prophet for the sake of championing one’s ideological agenda. This revolutionary impulse he calls “prophetism.” To safeguard from being consumed by this revolutionary spirit, Merton insists on the need for humility and selfless concern—for purity of heart—in the prophetic endeavor. Nevertheless, fidelity to God often leads to a marginal existence where one becomes a sign of contradiction to the values of the world and the misplaced values that may be present in the Church.

The goal of these four components of Merton’s prophetic spirituality was the reconciliation of humankind, indeed the whole cosmos, with the God who loved it all into existence. The prophet’s job is to help make heaven and earth one. Through one’s own life in the Spirit, the prophet’s spirit becomes a type of magnetic force making the future reality of the eschatological Kingdom approach earth’s moment in time a little more quickly.

Many of the elements of Merton’s prophetic spirituality have been supported in the teachings of the late Pope Blessed John Paul II and the current Pope Benedict XVI. In his first encyclical Redemptor Hominis, John Paul II, in writing about the Church as being
responsible for the truth, emphasizes the role of fidelity and simplicity in the prophetic ministry of the Church. He writes:

In the light of the sacred teaching of the Second Vatican Council, the Church thus appears before us as the social subject of responsibility for divine truth. With deep emotion we hear Christ himself saying: “The word which you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me.” In this affirmation by our Master do we not notice responsibility for the revealed truth, which is the “property” of God himself, since even he, “the only Son,” who lives “in the bosom of the Father,” when transmitting that truth as a prophet and teacher, feels the need to stress that he is acting in full fidelity to its divine source? The same fidelity must be a constitutive quality of the Church’s faith….

Consequently, we have become sharers in this mission of the prophet Christ, and in virtue of that mission we together with him are serving divine truth in the Church. Being responsible for that truth also means loving it and seeking the most exact understanding of it, in order to bring it closer to ourselves and others in all its saving power, its splendor and its profundity joined with simplicity.3

In his Foreword to Niels Christian Hvidt’s Christian Prophecy: The Post-Biblical Tradition, Benedict XVI (the then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger) makes the following descriptive statements about the nature of prophecy:

The prophet is someone who tells the truth on the strength of his contact with God—the truth for today, which also, naturally, sheds light on the future. It is not a question of foretelling the future in detail, but of rendering the truth of God present at this moment in time and of pointing us in the right direction…. Essentially, he does not describe the ultimate realities but helps us to understand and live the faith as hope.4

Even if, at a moment in time, the prophet must proclaim the Word of God as if it were a sharp sword, he is not necessarily criticizing organized worship and institutions. His mandate is to counter misunderstanding and abuse of the Word within the institution by rendering God’s vital claim ever present.5

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5 Ibid.
I tend to see the root of the prophetic element in that ‘face to face’ with God, in “talking with Him as with a friend.” Only by virtue of this direct encounter with God may the prophet speak in moments of time.\(^6\)

It seems clear to me that—considering the entire life of the Church, which is the time when Christ comes to us in Spirit and which is determined by this very pneumatological Christology—the prophetic element, as element of hope and appeal, cannot naturally be lacking or allowed to fade away. Through charisms, God reserves for himself the right to intervene directly in the Church to awaken it, warn it, promote it and sanctify it. I believe that this prophetic-charismatic history traverses the whole time of the Church. It is always there especially at the most critical times of transition.\(^7\)

While fidelity to the truth and a conjoined simplicity of life is mentioned by John Paul II, Benedict XVI focuses upon another aspect of Merton’s understanding of the role of the prophetic ministry in the life of the Church: in the person of the prophet is the convergence of past, present, and future. The prophet must simultaneously call God’s people back to covenant faithfulness and forward to eschatological fulfillment, both of which are made concrete in the present moment. Benedict also admits to the possible “abuse of the Word within the institution” which the prophet is to remedy—a marked concern of Merton. The contemplative and charismatic elements are also brought out by the current Pope. Thus, the thrust of Merton’s thinking in regard to a prophetic spirituality has found significant support from the Church’s most eminent teachers.

Yet, in light of Merton’s valuable contribution in this area of spirituality, an important question arises which calls for deeper consideration and further study. What has become critically important, as is evidenced in the current struggle between the Vatican and

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\(^6\) Ibid., viii.

\(^7\) Ibid.
Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), is the need for greater clarity in the place of the prophetic charism in the life of the Church. Merton’s own struggle to find the proper integration of the charismatic and institutional elements of religious and ecclesial life can, perhaps, serve as a model in the current debate. While the liberal champions of democracy and self-autonomy in religious life would like to invoke Merton’s name to support their causes, it is important to note that his evolved understanding of obedience never took him into the realm of public dissent or rebellion. Traditionalists could also benefit from the one who was torn over the loss of a Latin liturgy but knew it was in the best interest of the Church to make its worship more vital and authentic. Perhaps Merton’s balanced vision of the prophetic life can be a source of reconciliation and wholeness in a highly polarized Church as she seeks to bear witness to the Kingdom of God at the beginning stages of this third Christian millennium.

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8 A number of women religious interpret their resistance to Vatican mandates as an exercise of their particular prophetic charism. For a treatment of this perspective, see Sandra M. Schneiders, Prophets in their Own Country: Women Religious Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).
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