

Voices from the Desert: Merton, Camus and Milosz

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Thomas Merton collaborated with two public intellectuals who, like himself, lived on the margin of society and from there resisted twentieth-century movements that prevent human life from flourishing. His correspondence with Czeslaw Milosz¹ and his reading of Albert Camus² presented Merton with an opportunity to study their critical reflections on the modern world. He found in Milosz and Camus perspectives that provided insight into the root causes of the violence that plagued the twentieth century, sacrificing countless innocent men, women and children to the ideologies of sociopolitical movements. Equally important, he found in Milosz and Camus friends outside the monastery that sought to articulate not only in words and actions but also within themselves a sense of *being* that affirms life and opposes the reduction of humanity to vague abstractions. This article will provide a brief history of the relationship between these three men that focuses on the common ground that they shared at the margin of society, their distinctive voices as writers addressing the world of the twentieth century, and their critique of modernity as the loss of our true self.

The titles given to Merton's private journals³ present his life as a

1. Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz, *Striving towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. Robert Faggen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997); subsequent references will be cited as "STB" parenthetically in the text.

2. Merton's "Seven Essays on Albert Camus" are collected in Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 179-301; subsequent references will be cited as "LE" parenthetically in the text.

3. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995); Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996); Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) (subsequent references will be cited as "SS" parenthetically in the text); Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) (subsequent references will be cited as "TTW" parenthetically in the text); Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997); Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997); Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick

journey through various periods of formation: *Run to the Mountain* [pre-monastic years of discernment], *Entering the Silence* [early monastic years of formation], *A Search for Solitude* [maturing and deepening of contemplative life], *Turning Toward the World* [expanding of contemplative life beyond monastic walls], *Dancing in the Water of Life* [becoming a hermit], *Learning to Love* [falling in love], and *The Other Side of the Mountain* [journey to the East]. The period described as “turning toward the world” was anticipated by his Fourth and Walnut experience of March 18, 1958, narrated in the preceding journal, *A Search for Solitude* (SS 181-83). The juxtaposition of this epiphany and the subsequent turning indicates that for Merton the maturing of his monastic vocation required the branching out into the modern world.

During this period, the books that Merton was reading reflected his shift of attention toward the world and his interest in the problem of nihilism. For example, on August 11, 1962, Merton noted in his journal: “Henry Miller’s tremendous essay on Raimu deeply significant, touches the real nerve of our time, the American nihilist, the movie dreamer, who commits crime in his sleep, a bomb wrapped in ideals” (TTW 237). On December 11, 1962, he wrote:

I have been shocked at a notice of a new book, by Rachel Carson [*Silent Spring*], on what is happening to birds as a result of the indiscriminate use of poisons. . . . Someone will say: you worry about birds: why not worry about people? I worry about *both* birds and people. We are in the world and part of it and we are destroying everything because we are destroying ourselves, spiritually, morally and in every way. It is all part of the same sickness, and it all hangs together. (TTW 274)

Another book that caught Merton’s attention was *The Captive Mind* by Czeslaw Milosz.⁴ Written in Paris during 1951-1952, when French intellectuals were seriously looking at Stalin’s communist Russia as a vision of the new world order, Milosz focused his attention on the vulnerability of the twentieth-century mind to seduction by sociopolitical doctrines and its readiness to accept a totalitarian world for the sake of a hypothetical future (see Milosz, *Captive Mind* v). The book explores the cause of this vulnerability and finds it in the modern world’s longing for certainty, anything that will provide a sense of certainty, even the most illusory. This longing for certainty is understood in the context of a world torn by

Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998).

4. Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981); subsequent references will be cited as “Milosz, *Captive Mind*” parenthetically in the text.

a great dispute, a world where people have come to believe that they must conform to one or the other of the systems advocated by the participants in the debate – systems equally, though differently, totalitarian. Milosz's book is a search for a third position, a position of integrity for the individual who longs for a place to stand in the modern world.

Merton responded to Milosz's book with enthusiasm. After reading *The Captive Mind*, he initiated a correspondence with Milosz that extended from 1959 to the end of his life, published in 1997 as *Striving towards Being*, a title that expresses a primary concern of the two writers to which they returned time and again. It is also a title that defines in part the third position that occupied their attention. It is this striving for the third position of being that drew Merton to Milosz. His first letter stated without reservation his intention to join with the Polish writer and others "who risk our heads and our necks and everything in the difficult, fantastic job of finding out the new position" (STB 4) as they confronted the social malaise of the twentieth century.

Merton and Milosz quickly became friends, as reflected in the closing lines of their letters that read: "I am glad that you exist / with love [Czesław]" (STB 63); and from Merton to Milosz: "Deep affection and solidarity in Christ – Tom Merton" (STB 20), as well as other expressions of endearment throughout the letters. The relation would soon include a third writer, a close friend of Milosz. In a letter dated February 28, 1960, Milosz writes:

By the way, I would like to convince you to comment upon *La Chute* de Camus, a very ambiguous book, which is a cry of despair and treatise on Grace (absent). Perhaps it would be useful if you write a theological commentary. I am far from wishing to convert you to Manichaeism. Only it is so that the palate of your readers is used to very strong sauces and le Prince de ce monde is a constant subject of their reflections. That ruler of Nature and of History (if laws are different, necessity is similar) does not annoy you enough – in your writings. (STB 65)

Responding to what Milosz believed to be Merton's lack of attention to evil in history and nature, we see here Milosz encouraging Merton to read the works of Albert Camus. Merton took Milosz's advice and found Camus much to his liking. In a letter dated May 6, 1960, Merton writes:

I enjoy and respect Camus, and think I understand him. What you said about *La Chute* struck me very forcibly when I read it: it is a fine piece of Manichaeism and very applicable to this (Trappist)

kind of life. . . . I was deeply saddened by his death. In politics I think I am very much inclined to his way of looking at things, and there is in him an honesty and a compassion which belies the toughness of his writing. (STB 70-71)

By the summer of 1964, Merton had read Camus' novel *The Plague*. While he would not write his first essay on Camus until two years later,⁵ his notebooks after this date record a considerable amount of attention to Camus' novels, short stories and essays. During this period, his opinion of Camus took shape. He came to consider Camus "the greatest writer of our times."⁶ In Merton's opinion, Camus sufficiently embodied the contemplative life that he would refer to him as "that Algerian cenobite"⁷ and include him in his select hermitage library. Eventually Merton would write seven literary essays on the works of Camus with the intention of publishing a book, a project left unfinished due to Merton's untimely death. Perhaps just as important to note is the friendship, odd as it might sound, that developed *within* Merton between these two men who had never met, since Camus had died in January 1960.⁸ Commenting on the relationship, Merton wrote:

[A] monk today stands much closer to someone like Camus . . . than he does, for example, to someone like Billy Graham [I]t is easy for me to take his kind of position: that of a man who at once loves the world yet stands apart from it with a critical objectivity which refuses to become involved in its transient fashions and its more manifest absurdities.⁹

In addition to their concern for the modern world, Camus and Milosz shared what Merton describes here as "stand[ing] apart." All three writ-

5. The mimeographed text of "Terror and the Absurd: Violence and Nonviolence in Albert Camus" (LE 232-51) is dated August 1966; for an overview of the first phase of Merton's writing on Camus, including this essay, see David Joseph Belcastro, "Merton and Camus on Christian Dialogue with a Postmodern World," *The Merton Annual* 10 (1997) 223-33.

6. See David D. Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press) 208.

7. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) 35.

8. Camus' talk to friars at the Dominican Monastery of Latour-Maubourg in 1948 reveals that while he was clear regarding his position as a non-Christian, he was nonetheless open to dialogue with Christians (see Merton's essay "Camus and the Church" [LE 261-74] for his reflections on this address). We find the same openness in Merton, so it is not difficult to imagine a conversation between them.

9. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 227; subsequent references will be cited as "CWA" parenthetically in the text.

ers, while speaking to the world, lived on the margin of that world, in a solitude both imposed and willingly accepted. In a letter to Milosz dated March 28, 1961, Merton writes: “We have to get used to our total moral isolation. It is going to get worse. We have to regain our sense of *being*, our confidence in reality, not in words. . . . Bear your solitude. It is a great pain for you & there is great strength in it” (*STB* 115). The encouragement to “bear your solitude” was deeply personal and, as Merton knew, true for all three writers. As with Milosz and Camus, who had become marginalized because of the positions that they had taken on current affairs, he too had become marginalized for the same reason. Merton however understood his marginal position as a desert experience and therefore an invaluable perspective that provided common ground with Camus and Milosz. Merton shared their solitude and found with Milosz and Camus a solidarity of support in their mutual striving for being. Merton writes to Milosz:

as far as solidarity with other people goes, I am committed to nothing except a very simple and elemental kind of solidarity, which is perhaps without significance politically, but which is I feel the only kind which works at all. That is to pick out the people whom I recognize in a crowd and hail them and rejoice with them for a moment that we speak the same language. Whether they be communists or whatever else they may be. Whatever they may believe on the surface, whatever may be the formulas to which they are committed. I am less and less worried by what people say or think they say: and more and more concerned with what they and I are able to be. (*STB* 40)

The recurring focus of the letters on the ability to be, the regaining a sense of being, and the “striving towards Being” (*STB* 133) indicates the problem with modernity that concerned the three writers. The modern world with its focus on the future creates totalitarian systems that reduce human beings to servile subjects of agendas for productivity whether it is for the future of a communist state or the success of a capitalist corporation.

In opposition to totalitarian movements of any sort, Merton, Milosz and Camus chose to live at the margin of these movements, in a monastic desert of their own making, and to speak from there to life in the city. It is here, in solitude and silence, that they each discovered the third position of being, a position of integrity, which refuses subjection to the pressures of totalitarian regimes. Perhaps more importantly, it was here that the three writers discovered in their own ways the place, which is no-place, from which true freedom flows and life flourishes.

In addition to the difficult task of finding the third position, the three

writers were faced with the additional challenge of finding a voice in the desert that could be heard in the city. In a letter to Milosz, Merton writes:

If there is one ambition we should allow ourselves, and one form of strength, it is perhaps . . . to *be* a complete piece of systematic irony in the middle of the totalitarian lie – or the capitalist one. And even the official religious one. . . . It gets back to the fact that we all have our game with Caesar, the Little Father who is no longer human and who therefore *ought* to be cheated, in the name of humanity. (*STB* 56-57)

In different yet complementary ways, each became a piece of systematic irony in the middle of the totalitarian lie. And, in the case of these three writers, the form of irony may best be understood as a kind of “Socratic” irony whereby the three writers raise questions, pretending not to fully understand, to lure the modern reader into an opening that reveals the deeper reality of Being.

Camus took on the problem of the absurd in the modern world. From nihilists to evangelists the opinion was that the world is absurd and not a fitting place for humankind. Consequently, programs were constructed to transcend this world with movements that would eventually transform the world or provide an escape route to another. While these movements would anoint themselves as saviors of the world, the institutions that they constructed embodied the very absurdity that they sought to transcend and so became instruments of death and destruction. Camus saw through this and would point to the folly of these movements. With novels, short stories and essays, he labored to awaken the reader to the absurd as not in the world but within us. We experience the world as absurd because we have “divorced” ourselves from it. The absurd is our problem and can only be resolved according to Camus by returning to the Mediterranean world of the past and living a life of moderation that accepts life on its own terms, challenged by the hardships and sustained by its graces – following Sisyphus up the hill with the boulder before us and walking with him down the hill with a sense of satisfaction and happy with our lot in life – striving to live a good life and die a happy death.

Milosz sees the modern world fragmented by its own contradictions that inevitably leave us separated from life itself. Faced with the contradictions of the modern world, contradictions that he was unable to reconcile, he chose simply to witness in his poetry to those disconnects but with the intention of awakening the reader to the loss of meaning that follows, a loss that contributed in his opinion to the loss of the sacred,

the human soul, the deepest dimension of our lives.¹⁰

Milosz's work reveals a poet in quest of the sacred space in a world now defined by Copernicus and Darwin. While the astronomer's discovery deprived our world of its heavenly vault and subterranean worlds, as well as its central place in the universe, the biologist's theory drew into question the significance and meaning of human life and death. Accepting the insights offered by both scientists, Milosz laments the loss of that "other" space in his last collection of poems, entitled *Second Space*. This loss is understood by Milosz to be something of importance, believing as he does that what has been lost was/is essential to human nature and happiness. Summarizing decades of reflection, Milosz's poem entitled "Scientists" raises a question that inevitably leads the reader to the folly of the modern world and, if attentive, to an opening into the sacred that is present in this world:

The beauty of nature is suspect.
 Oh yes, the splendor of flowers.
 Science is concerned to deprive us of illusions.
 Though why it is eager to do so is unclear.
 The battles among genes, traits that secure success, gains and losses.
 My God, what language these people speak
 In their white coats. Charles Darwin
 At least had pangs of conscience
 Making public a theory that was, as he said, devilish.
 And they? It was, after all, their idea:
 To segregate humans, write off as a genetic loss
 Some of their own species and poison them.
 "The pride of the peacock is the glory of God,"
 Wrote William Blake. There was time
 When disinterested beauty by its sheer superabundance
 Gratified our eyes. What have they left us?

10. In his introduction to Czeslaw Milosz, *Legends of Modernity: Essays and Letters from Occupied Poland, 1942-1943*, trans. Madeline Levine (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), Jaroslaw Anders writes: "the old feeling of unity between the material world and the human spirit, between reason and imagination, between history and transcendence, has been taken away from man, possibly forever, and that striving to reconstruct that unity from the heap of broken fragments is both futile and dangerous. Though intellectually at odds with modernity, he seems to accept modernity's chief message: not everything adds up; some contradictions will never be reconciled; some gaps are not meant to be closed. In a letter written in the last years of the war, the young writer mapped out, in touchingly modest terms, what would become his epic intellectual journey of the next sixty years: 'I am satisfied with sketching contradictions; a stroll through the garden where "pro" and "contra" grow side by side suffices me'" (xvi).

Only the accountancy of a capitalist enterprise.¹¹

Motivated by a love of the sensuous experience of earthly pleasures and a need for something enduring beyond such experiences, Milosz pursued this lifelong quest for the sacred in the world, not outside the world and certainly not one artificially constructed by an official agency of a government or the commercial enterprise of a corporation but one found by turning to this world. Recognizing that the geography of this place cannot be located with map and compass, he chose to explore the border between the intellect and the imagination within the interior life. This search eventually led him to Merton. In a letter to Merton, Milosz shares a concern of great importance after reading *The Sign of Jonas*:¹²

I waited for some answers to many theological questions but answers not abstract as in a theological treatise, just on that border between the intellect and our imagination, a border so rarely explored today in religious thinking: we lack an image of the world, ordered by religion, while Middle Ages had such an image. This was not the aim of your diary and I have no reason to demand from one book of yours what can be demanded from all your work. But a reader (I can judge by introspection only) is eager to learn (gradually) what is the image of the world in Thomas Merton. In a period when the image accepted by majority is clear: empty Sky, no pity, stone wasteland, life ended by death. I imagine a reader who says: he possessed a secret, he succeeded in solving the puzzle, his world is harmonious, yet in his diary he tells already about sequences while we would be ready to follow him in 5 volumes through a very vision of the world redeemed by Christ. (*STB* 61-62)

Merton identified with Camus' and Milosz's search for the sacred in the world and their perspective on modernity as fragmented and thereby lacking the wholeness necessary for the flourishing of human life. As indicated in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, he was deeply concerned about the fact that "Modern man is not in agreement with himself [and that he] has no one voice to listen to, but a thousand voices, a thousand ideologies, all competing for his attention in a Babel of tongues" (*CWA* 27). Merton turns to the world, understanding that his responsibility to modern men and women begins with and within himself, and that he must recognize that the problems of the modern world are also his, and refuse imagining that

11. Czeslaw Milosz, *Second Space: New Poems*, trans. Czeslaw Milosz and Robert Hass (New York: Harper Collins, 2004) 25.

12. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953).

he lives in a totally different world. He knew that these problems would not to be solved merely in words, however carefully crafted into essays and poems, but must be lived through until the answer is found within himself, embodied in his life. It was the very nature of Merton's vocation to embody an interior life whereby the sacred that was lost would be rediscovered, an interior life that provides, as Milosz suggested, a vision of the world redeemed by Christ.¹³ While we have the literary works of Camus and Milosz, it is his life as a vision of redemption by Christ that Merton leaves us and which continues to attract readers – as a systematic irony in the midst of the totalitarian lie.¹⁴

13. Merton had been considering this issue for some time, as is reflected in numerous essays such as *Day of a Stranger*, "Rain and the Rhinoceros" (Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* [New York: New Directions, 1966] 9-23) and "Vocation and Modern Thought" (*CWA* 26-55); see also "Christian Humanism," Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 149-50.

14. An earlier version of this essay was presented on June 11, 2011 at the Twelfth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society at Loyola University, Chicago, IL.

