

Cities of the Dead: Thomas Merton and the Crisis of Urban Civilization

By Eric Anglada

As the end approaches, there is no room for nature. The cities crowd it off the face of the earth.
Thomas Merton, “The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room”¹

I.

In 2008, forty years after the death of Thomas Merton, a quiet yet singularly momentous event occurred: a child was born in a city; and for the first time in the history of the world, there were more human inhabitants of cities than of the land. In the United States, the numbers are even higher, with 4 out of 5 people now living in metropolitan areas. The UN has declared the twenty-first century “the century of the city.”² Our world is undeniably an urban one. Is this new reality a blessing or a curse, a *cause celebre* or a specter haunting the globe? What are the social, spiritual, and ecological impacts of our urban civilization?

The prophetic voice of the twentieth-century monk Thomas Merton sheds some light on the attempts to answer these crucial questions. Though he lived in relative seclusion at the Abbey of Gethsemani in rural Kentucky, the city surfaced as an ongoing theme in Merton’s writing throughout his compelling monastic career. While Merton certainly felt compassion towards the urban dweller, he was primarily a critic of urban civilization. Far from bringing him into closer contact with God’s creation, cities were more typically for Merton an experience of trash, frustration, noise, incessant advertising, senseless movement and dilapidation, and the site *par excellence* for the sterility of technology to run rampant.³ At best, I contend, Merton was deeply ambivalent about the city; at worst, he was opposed to the city’s very existence, seeing it as “the consummately unholy place.”⁴

Throughout his twenty-seven years in the monastery, Merton did occasionally find himself in cities – mostly Louisville, the metropolis situated closest to Gethsemani. After his first seven years as a monk, Merton stepped foot off abbey grounds for the first time in 1948, having been called upon to act as a translator for a day in Louisville. While Merton noted that he felt empathy for those from whom he had been cut off since his arrival to Gethsemani, he laconically noted in his journal that Louisville was “boring.”⁵ Over the next twenty years, Merton would have occasion to visit Louisville for a variety of experiences: medical care, intellectual pursuit, visits with friends, romantic love, and of course his famous “vision” at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in the spring of 1958. His impression of the city as boring largely didn’t get much better. In a September 1962 journal entry he noted, “Louisville left me with a sense of total placelessness and futility” far different than the sense of “belonging” he felt in the hills and woods around the abbey (*TTW* 244). His observation was significant enough for him to revise it for a journal entry in *Conjectures of a*



Eric Anglada

Eric Anglada lives at the New Hope Catholic Worker Farm in La Motte, Iowa, where he spends his days gardening, chopping wood, hauling water, taking care of chickens and, of course, reading Thomas Merton.

Guilty Bystander: “Cities, even Louisville . . . leave me with a sense of placelessness and exile” (CGB 234).

A significant exception to this experience came in the summer of 1964, when Merton accepted an invitation from the famous Zen master D. T. Suzuki to meet with him over several days in New York City. This meant a return to the metropolis that was his home for several years before his final move in 1941 to the monastery. “I can think of nowhere I would less rather go than New York,” he wrote anxiously in his journal before leaving.⁶ But upon his arrival, Merton was filled with nostalgia at seeing familiar houses and places. He loved it, even as his room on the edge of Harlem was filled with “the noise of traffic and the uninterrupted cries of playing children, cries of life and joy coming out of purgatory, loud and strong the voice of a great living organism. Shots too” (DWL 114-15). Upon his return to Kentucky, still thinking about his “lovely vacation,” Merton penned his most superlative words in regards to any city: “A stately and grown-up city! A true city, life-size. A city with substance and scale, large and right. . . . It is she, this city. I am faithful to her!” (DWL 125). But his exuberance didn’t last long.

Six months after he took in the sights and sounds of New York, Merton sat listening to the “perfectly innocent speech” of rain filling the “crannies” of the woods with water around his hermitage. The “gratuity” of nature was on his mind, as were cities. That night he began writing an essay, “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” which many now consider to be his finest piece of prose. He wrote provocatively and sharply, juxtaposing the enchanted rhythms of the natural world with the artificiality of urban life. After declaring himself “alien to the noises of cities,” Merton boldly proclaimed:

The city itself lives on its own myth. Instead of waking up and silently existing, the city people prefer a stubborn and fabricated dream; they do not care to be a part of the night, or to be merely of the world. They have constructed a world outside the world, against the world, a world of mechanical fictions which condemn nature and seek only to use it up, thus preventing it from renewing itself and man. (RU 10-11)

References to the city are woven throughout Merton’s poetic career. Virtually all of his urban-themed poetry harbors a tension, if not an outright hostility, between the City of God and the City of Man. Poems such as “A Letter to My Friends,” “Figures for an Apocalypse,” “Aubade – The City,” “How to Enter a Big City,” and “Hymn of Not Much Praise for New York City,”⁷ all feature an urban landscape where mammon, artificiality and the machine reign. Merton frequently juxtaposes the beauty of creation with the unpleasant cityscape, as in “The Ohio River – Louisville,” where he contrasts the “loud voice of the city” with the “tremendous silence” of the Ohio River (CP 79-80). Drenched in the world-denying acerbity of his early monastic years, Merton scornfully wrote in his poem, “The Captives – A Psalm,” “Blessed is the army that will one day crush you, city, / Like a golden spider. / Blest are they that hate you” (CP 212).

Merton would later regret some of this youthful poetry, embarrassed at his arrogance in seeing the monastery strictly as good, and the world (and thus the city) only as the whore, Babylon (see DWL 225 [4/7/65]). Still, even after he had shed much of his earlier *contemptus mundi*, Merton’s dis-ease with the city is still present in his verse, as in “And So Goodbye to Cities,” a poem published in the 1963 collection, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*:

For cities have grown old in war and fun.
The sick idea runs riot. . . .

Covered with garbage from the black explosion
 Wine of dragons and the warming
 Old machine runs loose again,
 Starting another city with a new disgrace.⁸

Merton's antipathy towards the city, however, didn't mean that he failed to love the *people* who dwelled there; he saw them primarily as victims. "It is the people that I love," Merton makes clear, "not the roles in the city and not the glitter of business and of progress" (CGB 260). As much as Merton gazed lovingly upon urban dwellers, though, he still believed that on the whole the urban project too often failed to fully acknowledge the blessed nature of humanity. In his short essay, "The Street is for Celebration," a meditation on urban space, Merton grieves that so many cities have become sites of alienation rather than celebration. In Merton's estimation, the city is paradoxically full of people, but still feels atomized: "The alienated city isolates men from one another in despair, lovelessness, defeat."⁹ Given this, Merton believed that urban life was rife with challenges for those desiring to cultivate a fruitful interior life. "Everything in modern city life," Merton mused in his spiritual classic, *No Man Is An Island*, "is calculated to keep man from entering into himself and thinking about spiritual things. Even with the best of intentions a spiritual man finds himself exhausted and deadened and debased by the constant noise of machines and loudspeakers, the dead air and the glaring lights of offices and shops, the everlasting suggestions of advertising and propaganda."¹⁰

Merton's own spiritual path, like the anarchistic Desert Fathers who found their spiritual center on the geographical margins, led him away from the placelessness of the metropolis and toward the silence, stillness, rhythms of nature and sense of place among the hills and pine trees he found in the country. In the summer of 1965, shortly after his full-time move to the hermitage, and more than a year after his visit to New York, Merton reflected in his journal that "coming to the hermitage has been a 'return to the world,' not a return to the cities, but a return to direct and humble contact with God's world, His creation" (DWL 293).

II.

Merton doubted that humanity's modern, urban way of life was a wholesale improvement upon its "primitive" origins; in his intellectual pursuits he found himself unearthing wisdom and sanity in the culture and traditions of humanity's past. It has been amply documented that Merton was a Romantic,¹¹ in the company of Blake and Thoreau, and opposed to the industrial era in which he dwelled. Like many Catholic traditionalists of his day, Merton also looked back with pleasure to a medieval Catholic past. Less acknowledged, however, is that Merton was profoundly enamored with the peoples of traditional, pre-urban, Stone-Age cultures, whom he believed weren't the "savages" that moderns made them out to be.

Through the 1960s, Merton read prodigiously within anthropology, archeology, history, social science and mythology. Through an eclectic array of writers and thinkers such as Laurens van der Post, Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, Claude Levi-Strauss, and perhaps above all Lewis Mumford, Merton dismissed the notion that primitive life was, as philosopher Thomas Hobbes famously wrote, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." Quite the contrary, he was moved by the vast evidence that Stone-Age communities were largely free of war, patriarchy, destruction of nature and dominating

hierarchies. Merton gradually found himself awakening to the profound ontological unity and contemplative ecology of what he alternately called “archaic,” “primitive,” or “Stone-Age” man. (These broad labels describe both what anthropologists call the older “paleolithic era” of hunter-gatherers and the later agrarians of the “neolithic era.”)

It was through Merton’s intellectual encounter with the eminent scholar of urbanism, Lewis Mumford, that he deepened his own visceral skepticism of modern, urban civilization. Mumford’s monumental tome, *The City in History*,¹² articulated the historical fact that the first city was the city of the dead – the necropolis, the cemetery where all were buried. Until then, Merton noted, people like Abraham lived nomadic existences, “on the move, all the time.” The necropolis was the first instance of people crowding into one, “fixed” place. Writing in his 1966 theo-political volume *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, after having read *The City in History*, Merton reflected that while the first cities of the living emerged out of the shadows of the necropolis, “the metropolis, with all its affluence and all its bursting pride of apparent life, is [still] a center for death.” The government buildings erected by the likes of Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin, and even the architecture of Washington, DC, evoked for Merton images of ghastly white tombs (CGB 123).

According to Mumford and other scholars of pre-history, the first cities grew up in Mesopotamia and Egypt around 6,000 years ago as a result of an agricultural surplus channeled into the hands of a ruling minority.¹³ Merton articulated this development in 1968 among a group of intellectuals at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions: “with the building of the city, you get a new element. Here you get the tyrant, then you get his army, and then you get the accumulation of wealth, and then you get the lust for power,” resulting in “the idolatry of the city, followed by the idolatry of the nation.”¹⁴ In this statement, Merton crystallized the heart of the crisis of urban civilization: the city has almost always been linked to the intractable issues of tyrannical rulers, greed, power over people and creation, war and idolatry.

Merton knew that the fundamental definition of the city – a human community that exceeds the carrying capacity of its land base and thus is dependent on the land of others – has typically resulted in a mentality of aggression. In order to perpetuate their existence, cities’ kings have engaged in human sacrifice in order to placate the gods and win their inevitable battles. At its root, Merton wrote, “Urban culture is . . . committed to war,” wryly adding, “We live, of course, in the most advanced of all urban cultures” (CGB 124). Merton lamented the ultimate symbol of this bellicosity: the creation of the atomic bomb.¹⁵

In contrast to the anxiety, control and unrest characteristic of virtually all urban civilizations, Stone-Age cultures valued peace and harmony with creation, and lived lives of leisurely abundance.¹⁶ Again and again, Merton looked back to the people of the Stone Age, not only for their relatively peaceful ways, but also for their ability to be directly present to the world around them. Archaic man, Merton asserted, lived concretely in the cycles of days and seasons, by the fruits of their own labor (CGB 70). By contrast, he felt that urban civilization tends to be mired in the past and future – rarely attentive to the unfolding natural processes of the present.¹⁷ And because of the ability of those in the Stone Age to relate directly with the natural, human and spiritual worlds around them, Merton believed that their connection with each other was much more palpable than in our distracted age. In his essay, “Symbolism: Communication or Communion?” Merton opines: “in the early Stone Age, communication among men must have been more basic, more articulate, and more humane” (L&L 65).

Particularly fascinating for Merton were the discoveries of some of the earliest human artifacts: Paleolithic cave art.¹⁸ Admitting that it was some of his favorite art, Merton saw cave art as a “sign of pure seeing” and an “expression of direct awareness of a kind we are no longer capable of conceiving” (*CGB* 281). This art is “far deeper and more complex than a modern city dweller’s craving for this or that kind of meat”; it was “an acknowledgment of a deep communion with all living beings” (*L&L* 71).

Merton was also drawn to the late Stone Age, or Neolithic era, as “the time when we were really civilized people” (*PAJ* 51). He was impressed with the Neolithic, among other reasons, for what he described as their “feminine values,” believing that problems with gender go back at least to the beginning of cities. Merton discussed this issue of gender with a group of religious sisters at the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1968. “When we get into the city culture,” he remarked, “there’s a cultural shift into a war-making society, and the establishment of a hierarchical, priestly society with men at the top.” And yet, the Neolithic, a period “of several thousand years,” had been a balanced, more feminine culture, situated peacefully in the village. Rather than a hierarchical model, Neolithic society was “wide open.”¹⁹

Even with all of his discomfort with the history of urban civilization, as well as his experience of placelessness in the city, Merton was still delighted by the archeological discoveries of the first cities of the Americas. He wrote in his journal: “I love the Mayas and Incas as perhaps the most human of peoples, as the ones who did most honor to our continents” (*TTW* 346). Unlike other ancient cities of Egypt and Mesopotamia, the early Mayan and Zapotecan cities, such as Monte Albán, were not capitals of empires; there is no evidence of human sacrifice, kings, armies or war.²⁰ Nor, to Merton’s glee, did they adore all technological advance. (They had wheels, but only used them for toys! [*PAJ* 86].) Rather, these cities were places of worship and celebration, largely uninhabited except by priests and scholars. In other words, Merton concluded that these cities were not, in fact, truly *urban* cultures (*PAJ* 79). The Indian of what Merton calls “the sacred city” felt himself “completely at home in his world and understood his place in it perfectly” (*PAJ* 78). Merton found value in studying these cultures, if only to be reminded that “peace, tranquility, and security were once not only possible but real” (*PAJ* 92).

Merton cautioned against idealizing our current cities, however, as the values of cities like Monte Albán do not easily translate into our contemporary urban culture. “[W]e are not pre-classical Mayans or Zapotecs,” he warned harshly. “We did not build our own city. We have been thrown out into this alienated camp of rats, in which we are not wanted, in which we are constantly reminded by everything around us that we are powerless” (*L&L* 52).

Some might accuse Merton and other intellectuals who have interest in the Stone Age as indulging in the dubious fantasies of the “Noble Savage.” There is perhaps a grain of truth in that critique, but Merton, though an intellectual, was certainly no stuffy ivory-tower academic who spoke of ideas entirely in the abstract. Rather, he luxuriated in the primitive simplicity of life in and around his hermitage and its surrounding ecology. As he walked through the fields and woods, Merton could feel, however dimly, the primeval delight in the natural, non-urbanized world that archaic man had known for millennia. “I love the woods, particularly around the hermitage,” he wrote in his journal. “Know every tree, every animal, every bird. Sense of relatedness to my environment – a luxury I refuse to renounce. . . . Those city Christians can live in their world of Muzak and CO2 and think they are in touch with ‘creation.’”²¹

III.

Did Merton abdicate his responsibility to the wider, *urban* world? This was the tack taken – nearly relentlessly – by the theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether in her correspondence with Merton from 1966-68. In a February 1967 letter, Ruether asserted that “those who wish to be at the ‘kingdom’ frontier of history” must be in the “big city.”²² She overtly challenged Merton’s geographic marginality. A passionate correspondence ensued. Somewhat defensively, Merton began justifying his monastic life in the country. Merton’s understanding of monasticism was that the monk saved the world, not merely theologically, but “literally, protecting it against the destructiveness of the rampaging city of greed, war, etc.” (*AHM* 35). Weeks later, still stewing over her contentious letters, he continued the correspondence by emphasizing the vital necessity of “sensual contact with matter,” urging, this “is something you city people need and need very badly indeed” (*AHW* 43).

Merton reiterated his thoughts in an essay, “Wilderness and Paradise,” written in the midst of his at-times contentious debate with Ruether. “Surely there are enough people in the cities already,” he wrote, perhaps with Ruether’s accusations in mind, “without monks adding to their number when they would seem to be destined by God, in our time, to be not only dwellers in the wilderness but also its protectors.”²³ Merton’s notions of cities and monastic life, as well as his dynamic spirituality, increasingly mingled with the ecological consciousness that gained momentum in the 1960s – a consciousness, Merton lamented to another correspondent, lacking among urban and suburban life.²⁴

Yet, as Merton admitted in a March 1967 letter to Ruether, for all of the apparent solidity of the division between city and country, there exists a mutual penetration of the two worlds (*AHW* 42). Much of the trouble Merton saw in urban life – its anti-ecology, the prevalence of artificiality and machinery, its propensity for a war-making mentality, the emphasis on noise and money – was now increasingly found in rural areas, as well.²⁵ Even the bucolic environs of Gethsemani sometimes set Merton abuzz in his journals upon the dissonance of seeing and hearing the “alien frenzy” of cars (*LL* 316), the “frightful racket” of bulldozers (*DWL* 21), the “utter fury” of chainsaws, the tractor “clacking its despair” as it is “making war on the soybeans” (*TTW* 336, 228, 257). Today, Merton would note, an increasing amount of non-urban geography has been “citified” by the suburban sprawl of subdivisions with their chemically-saturated green lawns; bleak industrial zones; vast inter-state highways; abandoned farms that resemble wastelands; monoculture agricultural deserts that only machines touch; and disappearing forests that make way for factory farms that pollute creation.

Conversely, however, the wild world of nature has not been totally wiped out of our metropolises.²⁶ In a section of his early poem, “Figures for an Apocalypse,” entitled “In the Ruins of New York,” Merton includes a surprisingly hopeful image of a New York City amid apparent destruction. It contains a possibility of what the metropolis might become, a city not of the dead, but of the *living* – vibrant, green city, bursting with life. Almost unconsciously, he seems to stumble upon a compelling unity of both the City of God and the City of Man. It is an urban space with room for people (note the Neolithic farmer and the Paleolithic hunter) as well as the natural world. These gripping images are a portent of New York, and perhaps all cities, *re-wilded*:

Grasses and flowers will grow
 Upon the bosom of Manhattan.
 And soon the branches of the hickory and sycamore
 Will wave where all those dirty windows were –
 Ivy and the wild-grape vine
 Will tear those weak walls down,

Burying the brownstone fronts in freshness and fragrant flowers;
 And the wild-rose and the crab-apple tree
 Will bloom in all those silent mid-town dells.

There shall be doves' nests, and hives of bees
 In the cliffs of the ancient apartments,
 And birds shall sing in the sunny hawthorns
 Where was once Park Avenue.
 And where Grand Central was, shall be a little hill
 Clustered with sweet, dark pine.

Will there be some farmer, think you,
 Clearing a place in the woods,
 Planting an acre of bannered corn
 On the heights above Harlem forest?
 Will hunters come explore
 The virgin glades of Broadway for the lynx and deer?
 Or will some hermit, hiding in the birches, build himself a cell
 With the stones of the city hall,
 When all the caved-in subways turn to streams
 And creeks of fish,
 Flowing in sun and silence to the reedy Battery? (CP 145)

1. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 70; subsequent references will be cited as "RU" parenthetically in the text.
2. For all of the statistics, see Laurence C. Smith, *The World in 2050: Four Forces Shaping Civilization's Northern Future* (New York: Dutton, 2010) 29-50.
3. See Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 234-35 (subsequent references will be cited as "CGB" 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) 244 [9/6/62] (subsequent references will be cited as "TTW" parenthetically in the text).
4. Dennis Q. McNerny, "Thomas Merton and the Tradition of American Critical Romanticism," in Patrick Hart, ed., *The Message of Thomas Merton* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981) 184; McNerny is one of very few scholars who take on Merton's relationship to the city. Merton, according to McNerny, took a wholly negative view towards the city.
5. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 224.
6. 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) 109; subsequent references will be cited as "DWL" parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 90-92, 135-48, 225-28, 19-21; subsequent references will be cited as "CP" parenthetically in the text.
8. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 7-8; CP 309-10.
9. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 52; subsequent references will be cited as "L&L" parenthetically in the text.
10. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) 108-109.
11. See for example Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998); Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001); Dennis

- Q. McNerny, “Thomas Merton and the Tradition of American Critical Romanticism.”
12. Louis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961).
 13. John Zerzan, *Twilight of the Machines* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2009) 41. Biblically, of course, the first city, “Enoch,” was created by the murderer, Cain. For an extended treatment of the Bible’s view of the city, see Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, trans. Dennis Pardee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).
 14. Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter H. Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 51-52; subsequent references will be cited as “PAJ” parenthetically in the text.
 15. See Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 19-20: “Yet look at the deserts today. What are they? The birthplace of a new and terrible creation, the testing-ground of the power by which man seeks to un-create what God has blessed. . . . He can build [in the desert] his fantastic, protected cities of withdrawal and experimentation and vice. The glittering towns that spring up overnight in the desert are no longer images of the City of God, coming down from heaven to enlighten the world with the vision of peace. . . . They are brilliant and sordid smiles of the devil upon the face of the wilderness, cities of secrecy where each man spies on his brother, cities through whose veins money runs like artificial blood, and from whose womb will come the last and greatest instrument of destruction.”
 16. See Marshall Sahlín’s seminal anthropological work, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972).
 17. See Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 107-108.
 18. For a wonderful treatment of a recent discovery of cave paintings dating back 32,000 years ago, see Werner Herzog’s 2011 documentary, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*.
 19. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) 163-64.
 20. See Merton’s superb essay, “The Sacred City” (PAJ 71-94). Merton’s critique of technology has been amply detailed elsewhere. See, for example, Phillip M. Thompson, “The Restoration of Balance: Thomas Merton’s Technological Critique,” *The Merton Annual* 13 (2000) 63-79, and John Wu Jr., “Technological Perspectives: Thomas Merton and the One-Eyed Giant,” *The Merton Annual* 13 (2000) 80-104. *The Merton Annual* 24 (2011) is devoted to this theme; see the review later in this issue.
 21. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 208; subsequent references will be cited as “LL” parenthetically in the text.
 22. Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Rosemary Radford Ruether*, ed. Mary Tardiff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995) 20; subsequent references will be cited as “AHW” parenthetically in the text.
 23. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1977) 150. Merton’s thoughts on the future geographical location of monks and monastic communities is part of a broader discussion, too large for this essay. But suffice to say here, Merton didn’t believe that monks should solely be located in the wilderness. For instance, in a July 1967 conversation with Walker Percy, Merton conjectured that the future of monasticism might actually be found in cities, say a few monks living in a house in Louisville. The type of monasticism Merton briefly describes to Percy evokes the witness of Charles de Foucauld and his followers, The Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus, both of whom Merton deeply admired. They see, not unlike Merton, the city as a desert; see Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003) 396. Three years earlier, he noted in his journal that “the best [monastic] formula is still, I think, the small farm-community like Erlach” (DWL 99 [4/21/64]).
 24. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 75 (February 16, 1968 letter to Barbara Hubbard).
 25. For an important discussion of this phenomenon, see Robert Wolf, *The Triumph of Technique: The Industrialization of Agriculture and the Destruction of Rural America* (Waukon, IA: Ruskin Press, 2004).
 26. Probably the starkest example is present-day Detroit. In an excellent article published in the July 2007 *Harper’s* (65-73), Rebecca Solnit has dubbed Detroit “America’s first post-urban city.” Once one of the largest metropolises in the U.S., Detroit now finds itself “so depopulated that some stretches resemble outlying farmland and others are altogether wild.” Capuchin monks, in an example that Merton would certainly have approved, have created a lush, three-acre garden which grows organic produce for a local soup kitchen. Other Neolithic-like enclaves of agrarianism are thriving as well.