

## Form and Function in Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Destruction*

By David Golemboski

In their introduction to the 2008 edited volume *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters*,<sup>1</sup> William Shannon and Christine Bochen write that for Thomas Merton, letter writing was “an extension of his monastic vocation.”<sup>1</sup> Merton himself referred to his correspondence as an “apostolate of friendship.”<sup>2</sup> For Merton’s readers, his letters to admirers, contemporary luminaries, world leaders and other kindred spirits represent a rich source of insight into Merton’s life and thought. And this source is not only rich but expansive: the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville alone holds over 15,000 pieces, addressed to over 2,100 distinct correspondents. Today, many of Merton’s letters are published in a number of fine edited volumes,<sup>3</sup> and many more remain in the various archives holding Merton’s papers.

The first time Merton’s personal correspondence appeared in published form was in his 1964 book *Seeds of Destruction*.<sup>4</sup> Like many of Merton’s monographs, the book is principally a collection of essays, presented in three parts. The first part contains two essays that address race dynamics in 1960s America. The second part contains three essays about Christianity and social justice – a meditation on the papal encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris*, a reflection on Karl Rahner’s conception of the Christian “diaspora,” and a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi. The third and final part of the book, however, deviates from this format. Titled “Letters in a Time of Crisis,” this section consists of thirty-five of Merton’s personal letters, presented without introduction or interpretive commentary. An earlier essay in the book bears the title “Letters to a White Liberal,” though the piece is in actuality a series of short essays, not actual letters to any particular “white liberal.” The “Letters in a Time of Crisis,” however, are authentic snippets of Merton’s personal correspondence.

These letters are closely related to the famous collection of Merton’s correspondence known as the *Cold War Letters* – 111 letters written between October 1961 and October 1962 which were originally distributed in mimeographed form in order to subvert the directive from Merton’s Trappist superiors that he no longer publish on issues of war and peace. These letters offer Merton’s insights on the social and geopolitical situation of the years in which they were written, and they were finally published in one comprehensive volume in 2007.<sup>5</sup> In early manuscripts of *Seeds of Destruction*, the section that was ultimately called “Letters in a Time of Crisis” was titled “Cold War Letters.”<sup>6</sup>

Two-thirds of the letters that appear in *Seeds* are among those included in the formal set of Cold War Letters.

Still, twelve of the letters in *Seeds of Destruction* are not from the *Cold War Letters* collection, and those that are Cold War Letters have been significantly edited. The “Letters in a Time of Crisis” also stand apart as a collection by virtue of the fact that the individual letters do not relate to one another in any obvious



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way. Whereas the Cold War Letters hang together as a collection by virtue of their common focus on issues of war and peace in the nuclear age, the letters in *Seeds of Destruction* appear to have little in common other than that they are all letters. No apparent theme relates them. Some of them reflect on Merton's current reading, or on his admiration for particular religious figures; in one he offers a recent convert advice on life in the Catholic Church; in others he explicitly addresses important moral issues of the day. The recipients of the letters span a remarkable range, from unknown to celebrity, from Christian to Jewish to Muslim, from American to Cuban to Japanese, from religious novice to renowned theologians, and so on. A sampling of addressees includes Dorothy Day, Catherine de Hueck Doherty, Brazilian journalist Alceu Amoroso Lima, "a Chinese Priest in California," then-mayor of Hiroshima Shinzo Hamai, and the author James Baldwin, among numerous others.

A reader of *Seeds of Destruction* is struck not only by the diverse ground covered by these letters, but also by their seeming opacity to an outside observer. While some do convey a clear message or insight that bears clear significance to a third party, others contain comments so particular to the original context of the letter that it is difficult to discern a meaning for the reader. Some of the letters are clearly mere "snapshots" of longer conversations, and no contextualizing information is supplied. For example, in a letter "To a Rabbi," Merton opens with some housekeeping comments: "Many things: first I sent the books to Joe at the Kibbutz. I want to know a lot more about this Kibbutz" (*SD* 272). Or, in a letter "To a Cuban Poet," Merton discusses the poetry that they apparently shared in previous correspondence: "In this silence and in this presence I have been reading your poems, and those of F. and E. and O. And I have not been able to find those of R. He should send me more, and all of you please send me new poems" (*SD* 326). These lines are perfectly ordinary elements of a personal letter, but it is not clear what the reader is supposed to gain from them. When it came time for publication, lines such as those above could easily have been excised (and many of the letters are in fact edited from their original form), but Merton chose to leave them in. One letter in particular stands out for its total incomprehensibility to the reader. Letter #8 is a note to the poet Robert Lax, a long-time friend of Merton. Merton's letter to him consists of a few quirky non-sentences where wordplay appears to trump coherence. Here is the letter in all its silliness:

TO ROBERT LAX

I have before me your exceedingly ribald Christmas card in many foreign languages  
inciting to joy.

Here without feet running in the sand or on the burning deck beneath the whips  
here amid the wolves we meditate on *joyeux noel*.

Here with the ship of state already half submerged and with waters up to our beard  
standing nobly on the tottering captain's bridge,

We Santa Claus salute you. (*SD* 264)<sup>7</sup>

A reader confronted by this letter may reasonably ask: what motivated Merton to include a note of this sort – whimsical to the point of nonsense, and not apparently edifying – in *Seeds of Destruction*? More broadly, given that a number of the "Letters in a Time of Crisis" do not bear obvious significance for the reader, what is their purpose in the book? One explanation might be that Merton simply needed to fill pages, but this is patently not the case: Merton never had trouble writing enough. Or, it might be that the letters were a last-minute addition, inserted in place of some other material that

had to be removed. But this is not the case either – the letters are present in early versions of the manuscript, and they remained in place even while other essays were swapped in and out.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, *Seeds of Destruction* is not the only place in which Merton compiles materials of various kinds. Most of his prose books are collections of essays, journal reflections, and other writings. *Faith and Violence*,<sup>9</sup> for example, is structurally quite similar to *Seeds of Destruction*, consisting of disparate essays grouped loosely together by theme. There, as in other settings where he draws together previously unrelated texts, Merton does not explain his reasons for including each piece. Yet, the letters in *Seeds of Destruction* stand out for being particularly devoid of obvious purpose. That said, while the letters are hit-and-miss with respect to whether they are individually edifying, when they are taken as a whole, the collection serves a more profound purpose. That purpose, I want to suggest, is nothing less than a transformation of the pedagogical dynamic of the book. The key to this transformation is that by composing the third section of *Seeds of Destruction* with personal letters, Merton subverts the presumptions of the book format and the expectations it ordinarily engenders. Parts I and II of *Seeds of Destruction* deliver something along the lines that the reader expects – namely, essays of theological reflection and social commentary. But Part III deviates from this line by presenting a selection of mini-texts that the reader would not anticipate in this context. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer spoke to the potential of texts to surprise readers when he wrote that “Every experience worthy of the name thwarts an expectation.”<sup>10</sup> *Seeds of Destruction* without a doubt thwarts an expectation, so we may ask: what kind of experience does it offer? In the paragraphs that follow, I want to suggest that the “Letters in a Time of Crisis” undermine the master-pupil paradigm that is presumed of a book like *Seeds of Destruction*, and in doing so they make a substantive point about the nature of monastic spirituality.

First, the letters remind the reader of the person who lies behind the authorial persona. The letters put Merton’s humanity on display, and portray him as a person in relation to others, instead of only the “man behind the curtain” of his texts. This is a simple function of the dynamic intrinsic to personal correspondence. William Shannon has written that “In reading letters, one meets persons in their full humanness . . . Merton’s letters (as well as his journals) were the only bit of writing that did not have to be submitted to the censors; hence, he could be his own uninhibited self. . . . Letters have a relational character and a particularity about them.”<sup>11</sup>

Readers today have access to this uninhibited Merton by means of extensive published letters and journals, but prior to *Seeds of Destruction*, Merton’s readership had not glimpsed the monk on this intimate level. By publishing these “Letters in a Time of Crisis,” Merton provokes his reader to look beyond the pretense of authorship and the aura of spiritual authority he had acquired by that point, and rather to consider him simply on the level of his humanity. A focus on the fundamental humanity of the monk, and on the basic commonality between those living in the monastery and those living “in the world,” is evident throughout Merton’s writings. In particular, one may recall Merton’s elation at being reminded of his membership in the human race following his 1958 epiphany experience at Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he wrote, “The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.” He refers to “the illusion that by making vows we become a different species of being,” and proclaims ““Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other men, that I am only a man among others.””<sup>12</sup> The letters in *Seeds of Destruction* open a crack in Merton’s public persona and urge the reader to encounter him as “a man among others.”

Second, the letters complicate the dynamic of teaching and learning that operates in the production and consumption of a text. Consider for a moment the conventional dynamic that might be assumed to characterize a book like *Seeds*. By 1964, Merton had been a best-selling author for over fifteen years, and the world knew him well as a spiritual master. Blurbs on the back of my copy of *Seeds of Destruction* hail Merton as “a spiritual writer of unique significance” who “speaks with clear authority” (*Times Literary Supplement*), and suggest that Merton has “found a reality most of us have missed” (Canon J. E. Fison). These perspectives on Merton’s latest work indicate Merton’s stature by 1964. He is taken even by literary and spiritual elites to possess expertise in or mastery of the spiritual life that eludes his audience. Thus, readers approach the master by way of the text, seeking a dispensation of his wisdom. This, indeed, is the pedagogical dynamic typical of any published work, and to some extent the letters are simply another vehicle for transmitting Merton’s insights to the reader. Yet there is something else going on. The letters also indicate the sincerity of Merton’s dialogues with others, and portray him in these conversations as not only a teacher, but also a pupil. We see that Merton is interested in the books that his correspondents are reading, and he is eager to consume the materials they send him. Moreover, he is moved by their lives and nourished by their influence on him. For example, in one letter Merton expresses his admiration of the efforts by the Mayor of Hiroshima in “giving witness for peace and sanity,” writing that, “You are giving us the example. May we follow” (*SD* 296). For Merton, the monastery is not the seat of wisdom from which he instructs his readers in virtue. On the contrary, the monastic walls are porous boundaries through which Merton himself is formed in conversation with the “masters” of the outside world.

Third, by portraying the contemplative experience as one that transgresses the bounds of the monastery, Merton reiterates his conviction that the contemplative life does not consist in flight from the world. Rather, for Merton, contemplation is intrinsically bound to engagement with the world. It is not simply personal idiosyncrasy that leads Merton to be interested in the events of the world beyond the monastery walls, but it is rather the social dimension of his contemplative vocation. The “Letters in a Time of Crisis” bear this out by Merton’s explicit commentary on social issues – war, racism, and so on – but also by their very form. They are artifacts of a monk who recognizes, as Merton writes in the introduction to *Seeds of Destruction*, that “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” (*SD* xiii). The articulation of this point, and the manner in which he lived it out, arguably constitutes Merton’s greatest legacy for contemporary spirituality. *Seeds of Destruction* exemplifies this legacy in numerous ways, and the letters are among them. By including these pieces of correspondence, Merton refutes the conception of a monk who deals with the world at arm’s length, producing manuscripts to mail off into the void of publication. Where a reader might expect to find another essay transmitted from hermitage to page unsullied by the follies of the modern world, Merton instead puts himself on display as an eager and impassioned participant in the conversations of his day. His concern for the world is not abstract or insincere, but rather personal and profound.

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The effect of the “Letters in a Time of Crisis” is particularly evident when considered in comparison to instances of the reverse dynamic: non-epistolary texts that bear some superficial features of the epistolary form. For example, Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham

Jail” is not so much a letter as a manifesto. The letter does identify recipients, and it closes with King’s signature, yet the text does not read as a snippet of conversation, but instead as a message directed from author to a general audience. Think also of the scores of books published under titles beginning with “Letters to a Young . . .” (“Poet,” “Teacher,” “Contrarian” complete some of the better-known examples). In general, these books are not actually collections of correspondence. The “Letters to” format serves as a device that permits the author to convey his or her views or insights on a topic. These books demonstrate a dynamic opposite to that of Merton’s *Seeds of Destruction*. In Merton’s text, the reader anticipates essays and instead finds letters; in these other texts, the reader is promised letters, and instead receives essays, memoir, opinion, and so on. Consequently, the structure of these “Letters to” books achieves the reverse of what *Seeds of Destruction* does. They suggest that the reader will glimpse the author beyond the veil of publication, but in fact deliver no such intimate view. They suggest a context of dialogue, but in fact reaffirm the asymmetry of authority between author and reader by presenting only the author’s take on a subject.<sup>13</sup>

1. Thomas Merton, *A Life in Letters: The Essential Collection*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: Harper One, 2008) xi.
2. Quoted in Shannon and Bochen’s “Introduction” to *Life in Letters* xii.
3. See the five volumes of collected letters from which *Life in Letters* was drawn: Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985); Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989); Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990); Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993); Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994). See also the various volumes including both sides of a correspondence: Thomas Merton and Edward Deming Andrews, *A Meeting of Angels: The Correspondence of Thomas Merton with Edward Deming & Faith Andrews*, ed. Paul M. Pearson (Frankfort, KY: Broadstone Books, 2008); Thomas Merton and Jonathan Greene, *On the Banks of Monks Pond: The Thomas Merton/Jonathan Greene Correspondence* (Frankfort, KY: Broadstone Books, 2004); Thomas Merton and James Laughlin, *Selected Letters*, ed. David D. Cooper (New York: Norton, 1997); Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax*, ed. Arthur W. Biddle (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001); Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq, *Survival or Prophecy? The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002); 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); 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); Thomas Merton and D. T. Suzuki, *Encounter*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (Monterey, KY: Larkspur Press, 1988).
4. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964); subsequent references will be cited as “SD” parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006); subsequent references will be cited as “CWL” parenthetically in the text.
6. I thank Mark Meade of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University for this point.
7. This note is actually the beginning to a longer letter, printed in full as Cold War Letter #16 (CWL 40-42).
8. The essay “The Christian in World Crisis” is the result of Merton’s efforts to include some of the material originally intended for publication in *Peace and the Post-Christian Era*. The three essays he had initially included in the manuscript were rejected by his censors. For more on this, see Patricia Burton’s Introduction to Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) xlii-xlvii.

9. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).
10. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Elements of a Theory of Hermeneutic Experience," in *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975) 350.
11. William H. Shannon, "Letters," in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 255.
12. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 140-41. The "Letters in a Time of Crisis" in Merton's *Seeds of Destruction* achieve the reverse effect. Merton's text upends the expectations that attach to the book format, and by doing so it places Merton's humanity on display, shows him learning and growing in conversation, and affirms engagement beyond the monastery as a necessary ingredient of the contemplative life. In a time of crisis, these letters evince the very themes that were essential to Merton's understanding of the monastic vocation, and they do so not merely by their content, but by their mere (unexpected) presence in what is otherwise a book of essays.
13. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a meeting of the College English Association, March 31, 2012, in Richmond, Virginia. I thank the attendees and my fellow panelists at that session for their helpful comments.