

Thomas Merton and the “Pessimism” of Jacques Ellul

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Because Thomas Merton’s voracious reading habits nurtured his own thought and written work, reviewing his responses to those he read helps illuminate his worldview. In this case, a review of his comments on Jacques Ellul, the French Protestant sociologist and lay theologian, provides at least three avenues for reflection on this encounter and the insight it offers on Merton’s stance toward how society and faith intersect. First, though Merton’s initial enthusiasm upon reading Ellul suggests he strongly embraced Ellul’s work, greater ambivalence emerged from Merton’s later responses; second, consideration of Merton’s limited exposure to Ellul’s full career and incomplete knowledge of his theological themes help illuminate reasons for that ambivalence; and third, expressions by Merton that independently resonated with Ellul suggest greater affinity than he perhaps realized.

Merton’s Ambivalence toward Ellul

The dominance of *technique* as the essential trait of post-World-War-II human experience provides a common thread through most of Ellul’s work. Though influenced by Marx, Ellul looked to technique rather than forces of production or class struggle as his key to understanding modern society. He associated technique with “technology,” but extended it well beyond the mechanical processes and devices the term evokes. Ellul’s technique is a reflexive social process, a mindset that permeates our globalized society and determines our individual and social behaviors. Though perhaps most perfectly manifest in modern technology and its development, technique also drives our political, legal, religious and other social apparatuses. Efficiency, productivity and quantified effectiveness comprise its central priorities. Autonomous and self-perpetuating, this rational and methodical process seeks the “one best way” toward efficiency based on measurable outputs as it subordinates all other measures of meaning and purpose.

Merton’s growing ambivalence emerged through his comments on the three Ellul books he read – all within little more than a year that spanned late 1964 through 1965 – as well as his response to 1968 discussions about a special issue of the journal *Katallagete* dedicated to Ellul. The three books included *The Technological Society* and the original French editions of *Propaganda* and *The Political Illusion*. He first read *The Technological*

Society,¹ Ellul's initial elaboration of his theories on technique, to prepare for a November 1964 retreat with peace activists. Merton described it² as "great," "provocative," "prophetic," "sound," "logical," "full of firecrackers."³ Over the next two months he filled three reading notebook pages with quotations from the book,⁴ included several citations from it in his outlines for retreat material (see Oyer 62-65), published a positive book review,⁵ described it in correspondence as "entirely convincing" with "the stamp of prophecy,"⁶ and recommended it to an advisor for the work of the Second Vatican Council.⁷

But after that, although Merton continued to rely on certain of Ellul's concepts in his critique of technology, his open and explicit endorsement of *The Technological Society* grew silent. This trend became especially noticeable on three occasions. First, as he reworked recent journal entries into *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*⁸ during 1965, he mentions technology several times, including two extended reflections.⁹ He filled the first of these reflections with Ellul's logic but omits any explicit mention of Ellul (CGB 62-64), whereas in the second he explicitly cites Lewis Mumford on the topic (CGB 201-202). Then, Ellul is again not named

1. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964); originally published as *La Technique ou l'Enjeu du Siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1954).

2. For detailed analyses of Merton's reaction to this work, see also: Gene L. Davenport, "Jacques Ellul and Thomas Merton on Technique," *Ellul Forum* 7 (1991) 10-12; Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014) 59-65 (subsequent references will be cited as "Oyer" parenthetically in the text); Phillip M. Thompson, "Jacques Ellul's Influence on the Cultural Critique of Thomas Merton," *Ellul Forum* 25 (2005) 10-16.

3. 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) 159, 161, 163; subsequent references will be cited as "DWL" parenthetically in the text.

4. Merton Notebook, 1964-1965, #3; Thomas Merton Papers, Special Collection Research Center, Syracuse University Library, Syracuse, NY.

5. *Commonweal* 81 (4 December 1964) 358.

6. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 109 [12/28/1964 letter to Hervé Chaigne]; subsequent references will be cited as "WF" parenthetically in the text.

7. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 384 [12/26/1964 letter to Bernard Haring]; subsequent references will be cited as "HGL" parenthetically in the text.

8. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966); subsequent references will be cited as "CGB" parenthetically in the text.

9. Aside from the two extended reflections, most technology references are either brief and cursory or tied to specific applications, such as war or business.

in Merton's low-flying, late-1965 essay "The Angel and the Machine,"¹⁰ though Ellul's themes likewise surface. Here he explores how machines now serve the role once played by angels, i.e., that which offers help on "the frontiers of our own freedom and our own capacity" when "we reach our natural limits." Merton asserted, for example, that in our "Technological civilization" humanity "dwells surrounded by angels of chromium and steel [s]afe in the world of technique that surrounds [it]." These modern angels "stand between us and nature," and keep us "isolated from the rest of material creation They live by spirits of men who have relinquished more and more to the machine" (4). Again, strong resonance with *Technological Society* concepts are presented without reference to Ellul. But the most telling example of Merton's ambivalence surfaces in a conference on technology with his novices in June 1966.¹¹ The first page-and-a-half of his preparatory notes¹² rely mostly on Ellul,¹³ and though he read aloud an Ellul quotation to his novices, he attributed it simply to "an author"¹⁴ and never mentioned Ellul, while naming Lewis Mumford as "*the man*" for further reading

10. Thomas Merton, "The Angel and the Machine," *The Merton Seasonal* 22.1 (Spring 1997) 3-6; originally published in German in *Seckauer Hefte* [Styria, Austria] 29 (1966) 73-79 and in English in *Season* 5 (Summer 1967) 5-11; the typed manuscript with numerous handwritten alterations, dated "November 1965," is in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center [TMC] at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.

11. Published as an appendix in Paul Dekar, *Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011) 205-13; subsequent references will be cited as "Dekar" parenthetically in the text.

12. Seven typed pages plus cover sheet labeled "Technology," in "Collected Essays," the 24-volume bound set of published and unpublished materials assembled at the Abbey of Gethsemani and available both there and at the Thomas Merton Center: 6:52-59. The page following Ellul content includes quotations from Jean Daniélou and Louis Massignon plus Merton's reflections on insecticides, the "Faustian attitude of modern man," and certain "ethical" and "moral" considerations. The last four-and-a-half pages consist of material from Admiral H. G. Rickover's November 1964 lecture on "A Humanistic Technology," sections from the Vatican II "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (December 1965), and reflections on Church and world published by French Bishops (February 1966).

13. Several comments in the first page-and-a-half paraphrase and appear in the same order as his 1964 *Technological Society* reading notes (Merton Notebook #3, Syracuse University). These include phrases on technology as an end rather than means, its correlation to population growth, moral judgment as taboo, social mobility that displaces individuals from traditional relationships, production and consumption driven more by productive capability than true consumer needs, and technique in policing operations, among others.

14. Dekar 208. The quoted portion reads: "It is the translation into action of Man's concern" (Ellul, *Technological Society* 43).

without actually quoting him (see Dekar 207).

Merton read his second Ellul book, *Propagandes*, in July 1965.¹⁵ The French book's title is plural, reflecting Ellul's belief in varying forms of propaganda. Among others, these included "agitation propaganda," which facilitates rebellion and revolution, and "integration propaganda," which facilitates socially valued behavior and therefore helps incorporate technique into human experience. Ellul also asserts that modern integration propaganda consists more of "half truth" and "truth out of context" than lies and falsehood. Consequently education becomes a requirement for, rather than an antidote to, integration propaganda, and modern intellectuals therefore become more rather than less vulnerable to it.¹⁶

Despite eagerness to obtain this book, upon reading it Merton expressed less enthusiasm and recorded no reading notes on it. His personal copy, however, is filled with marks of emphasis and underlining,¹⁷ and three related journal entries applied *Propagandes'* ideas to contemporary ecclesial and monastic failings. One entry, for example, lamented the "insecurities and superficial needs" found in modern Church and monastic life, and suggested that "In Ellul's *Propagandes* there are good reasons why. What is happening is not unity in the spirit so much as 'propaganda for integration,' and the participation of which all are so proud tends to be really a concerted and determined complicity in mutual persuasion – a kind of liberal triumphalism making itself come true" (*DWL* 270-71). A subsequent entry alludes to *Propagandes*, commenting how sometimes within monasticism words smother reality, and our broader U.S. society "that pretends to be Christian is in fact rejecting the word of God, enabled to do so by the all-pervading suffocating noise of its own propaganda, able to make itself believe whatever it wants" (*DWL* 272). Merton's final *Propagandes* reference applies Ellul's comments on "Mass-man" to monasticism by noting how a solitary person immersed in mass media simply becomes "a Mass-man in thinking oneself a hermit," adding that even within the cloister an alienated monk may become trapped in an "awful and empty solitude that has little meaning" (*DWL* 274).

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, however, *Propagandes* fares better than *The Technological Society* had. Of its eight pages on propa-

15. Jacques Ellul, *Propagandes* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1962); published in translation as *Propaganda* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965). Receipt of the book is recorded in Merton's unpublished 27 June 1965 letter to Hervé Chaigne [TMC archives]. Regarding Merton's interest in language, see for example, Robert E. Daggy, "Thomas Merton's Critique of Language," *The Merton Seasonal* 27:1 (Spring 2002) 11-15.

16. See Ellul, *Propaganda* v-vi.

17. Merton's personal copy of *Propagandes* is located in the TMC archives.

ganda (CGB 214-21), over half paraphrase Ellul and twice mention him. Rather than draw from his journal reflections on monasticism, though, this section focuses mostly on propaganda in society at large. He notes how Ellul shows that "factual and correct information" can function the same as "completely false and irrational propaganda" (CGB 215), as well as how our inundation with statistics and facts permits no time for assessment and requires deference to experts. He expands on the latter with a direct Ellul quotation: "Thus rational propaganda gives birth to an irrational situation" and reflects "an interior possession of the individual by a social power, which corresponds to his surrender of self-possession" (CGB 216). Merton also shares Ellul themes that propaganda sustains illusions of freedom and individuality despite our absorption into mass society (CGB 217) and that those excluded from dominant society and its mainstream media remain least susceptible to integration propaganda but most vulnerable to agitation propaganda that prompts social upheaval (CGB 217-18).

Merton engaged his third Ellul book, *L'Illusion Politique*,¹⁸ in early December 1965. This text explores technique's role in modern politics through a process of "politization," which lies "in the tendency to treat all social problems . . . according to patterns . . . found in the political world."¹⁹ As technique, however, those patterns operate on their own terms, and even in democracies humans have little real influence over them, despite illusions that we do. Our ballots decide who sits atop of the pyramid of state, but do nothing to control the apparatus pulsing beneath; our faith that all problems have political solutions leads us to ignore or repress the real and productive social tensions driven by core values and convictions. Ellul seeks to "demythologize" politics and return it to a proper, limited role, which will permit those tensions to work themselves out within society rather than rely on efforts to control them from the top. This would require us to discard common prejudices, such as the notion that "technology is neutral and can be controlled, moral progress follows material progress, [and] work is virtue."²⁰

Merton's first reflections on this book include an affirming journal entry that notes, "It is some comfort to find someone who agrees with my position. I must be resolutely non-political, provided I remain ready to speak out when it is needed." He adds, "[Ellul] is basically right in attacking the modern superstition that 'what has no political value has no

18. *L'Illusion Politique* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1965); published in translation as *The Political Illusion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966).

19. Ellul, *Political Illusion* 8.

20. Ellul, *Political Illusion* vii-xi.

value at all' – 'A man who does not read the newspapers is not a man.' And," Merton paraphrased, "to be apolitical is to be excommunicated as a sorcerer. That the deepest communion of man with man is in political dedication" (*DWL* 322).

Merton also inserted a *L'Illusion Politique* quotation into a separate notebook alongside some of his 1965 year-end "personal notes" that were "written during argument with pacifists of . . . Fellowship of Reconciliation, etc., after Roger Laporte [*sic*] burned himself to death outside the U.N."²¹ (*DWL* 341). After this act of anti-war protest by a self-identified Catholic Worker, Merton temporarily withdrew as a Catholic Peace Fellowship sponsor, which in turn prompted criticism from friends he described as "bitter." He felt this move was "dictated by the needs of my life. I can't be a militant in the peace movement and a hermit at the same time" (*DWL* 341). He shared his "Need for distance, for the development of a new unexplored consciousness, which has nothing directly to do with the strategies of active movements and the proving of an activist conscience," because "[m]y need for genuine interior freedom is now urgent." The Ellul quotation he inserted here – in French and prefaced as "Jacques Ellul on the 'contemporary' political man" – reads: "To obey the present moment appears to be freedom itself. Taking sides abruptly in the latest quarrel is defined as the political vocation of the freest citizen. What astonishing confusion, not to see to what extent obeying the moment and reacting to the latest events are the most radical possible negations of freedom" (*DWL* 342). This quotation also reinforces a comment on "Creative Protest," made a page earlier, which advocates a spirit of "response" rather than simply "reaction" (*DWL* 341).

These three readings spanned a year of major transition for Merton in which he both moved into the deeper solitude of hermit life and wrestled with accelerating anti-war activism.²² Ellul's writing spoke to questions these changes elicited and helped Merton negotiate social realities that informed both his own religious vocation and broad societal experience. Yet despite appreciation, Merton also found Ellul insufficient, and – in addition to his later public silence on Ellul and *The Technological Society* – he sometimes privately voiced ambivalence. His third journal entry

21. For more context on Merton's entries as he recorded them than is available in published form, see "Working Notebook #17" [TMC archives].

22. They are bracketed by both the peacemakers retreat and his first overnight hermitage stays on one end (fall 1964), and LaPorte's self-immolation and the end of Novice Master duties to start his permanent hermitage residence on the other (late summer/fall 1965). Merton also continued his ongoing reflections on monastic reform during this time.

on *The Technological Society* bluntly states, "I think Ellul is perhaps too pessimistic." And though adding "not *unreasonably* so," he went on to question Ellul's claims that none could avoid "continual technological development and expansion," and he especially cringed at implications that "There will be no place for the solitary! No man will be able to disengage himself from society!" (*DWL* 163). In his notes for the 1966 novice conference, Merton added "debatable" after citing the Ellul statement, "everything that is not technique is being eliminated . . . without decisive intervention by man."²³ Then, despite finding personal comfort in *L'Illusion Politique*, Merton also stated: "I think this book too may turn out insufficient and naïve (philosophically weak perhaps. I am not far into it)" (*DWL* 322). And in June 1967 he declined to write an article on Ellul, saying: "I have read parts of Propaganda and the Polit. Illusion in French and I don't find them suggestive enough for an article, but of course someone ought to review them. I don't think I will tackle that."²⁴

Merton's final opportunity to engage Ellul's work emerged in early 1968 when James Holloway, editor of *Katallagete*,²⁵ asked Merton's opinion about devoting an issue to Ellul. Merton simply responded, "I think an issue on Ellul is a good idea, but what about also Marcuse in the same one?"²⁶ In a July letter to Ellul, Holloway spent several sentences plugging Merton as a potential special issue contributor, describing him as "a regular contributor to *Katallagete* . . . who reads your works in French long before they are translated into English [and who] has supported my efforts to have an issue devoted to your work." He also described Merton as "very influential here not only (and not even especially) among Catholics, but Protestants and non-church young folk as well," and asking "I wonder if you know of his writings?"²⁷ Ellul's reply failed to answer

23. "Technology" 53.

24. Unpublished 27 June 1967 letter to Roger Barnard [TMC archives].

25. The journal of the Committee of Southern Churchmen. Merton's first letter to Holloway is dated 3 October 1965 [TMC archives]. Holloway visited Merton on several occasions, and Merton provided five articles to *Katallagete* before his death: "Events and Pseudo-Events: Letter to a Southern Churchman" (Summer 1966) 10-17; "The Church in the World Crisis" (Summer 1967) 30-36; "Godless Christianity?" (Winter 1967-68) 15-21; "The Hot Summer of Sixty-Seven" (Special Supplement: Winter 1967-68) 28-34; "Who is Nat Turner?" (Spring 1968) 20-23.

26. Unpublished 29 March 1968 letter to Holloway [TMC archives]; Merton references an earlier letter from Holloway that is no longer extant.

27. Unpublished 1 July 1968 Holloway letter to Ellul [Holloway Correspondence, TMC archives].

this question, however.²⁸ That August²⁹ Merton asked Holloway for a copy of Ellul's newly translated *A Critique of the New Commonplaces*,³⁰ which suggests that Ellul's critique of language interested him most. But Holloway could not obtain the book, and commented, "I had you down in the special issue for 'Ellul, Mysticism and Monasticism,' – wanting you to react to Ellul's thesis on Tech Society, Propaganda and Pol. Illusion."³¹ There's no record Merton accepted that task, but by then Merton was out West searching for more secluded hermitage options, and by year's end he had died.³²

Had Merton lived to write on Ellul for *Katallagete*, we might better understand his emerging ambivalence. But the clues he does leave suggest that the pessimistic determinism of those three books, coupled with critical responses by others, played a role. Published American reviews of *The Technological Society* were largely negative, as Merton conceded to the French Franciscan Hervé Chaigne in April 1965: "[Ellul] has been much discussed. His book was not liked in America (naturally)." He acknowledged his own ambivalence: "I know Ellul is a pessimist (I suppose that fits with a certain Calvinism about the modern world)," but then asserted its value, saying, "I think there is a definite importance in his rather dark views. They are not to be neglected, for he sees an aspect of technology that others cannot or will not recognize: it does, in spite of its good elements, become the focus of grave spiritual sicknesses" (*WF* 109). Regarding two later Ellul books,³³ he writes: "I can tell by the titles that they are negative, but perhaps they might have some interesting intuitions nevertheless" (*WF* 110). Though American reviewers mostly chafed at Ellul's implied challenge to the virtues of American pragmatism and to the benevolence of an expanding technological dominance, Merton's comments seemed more concerned with what he saw as Ellul's lack of hope for human agency or escape from technique's momentum.

28. Unpublished 24 July 1968 Ellul letter to Holloway (James Y. Holloway/Katallagete Collection MUM00249, b3 Jacques Ellul Corresp., folder 1 [1967-1982], J. D. Williams Library Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi).

29. Unpublished 30 August 1968 letter to Holloway [TMC archives].

30. Jacques Ellul, *A Critique of the New Commonplaces* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968).

31. Unpublished 31 August 1968 letter to Merton [TMC archives].

32. *Katallagete's* Ellul issue, published in early 1970, contained no Merton essay, but reproduced five Merton prints.

33. The books were *L'illusion Politique* and *Fausse Présence au Monde Moderne* (Paris: Les Bergers et Les Mages, 1963), published in English as *False Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury, 1972). There is no evidence Merton ever received the latter book.

After first noting Ellul's pessimism, Merton had added, "but one must still have hope" (*DWL* 163).

Comments from his own allies also undoubtedly influenced Merton. For example, in early 1965 Chaigne had commented that "Mr. Ellul is perhaps a little pessimistic about the present world. He has just published two other books . . . which are of high quality but which fall into a rather radical pessimism."³⁴ Then in 1967 Roger Barnard, editor of the British *Peace News*, wrote to Merton that "Ellul's work is important (though personally I felt that at times in *The Technological Society* he was merely gilding despair with the rhetoric of grandiloquence)."³⁵ Taken together, one senses that a combination of what Merton saw as an incomplete, one-sided and extreme "pessimism" coupled with a negative consensus among both secular American reviewers and at least two of his European colleagues greatly tempered Merton's initial, exuberant embrace of Ellul. This was despite continued admiration for aspects of what he read, even to the point of incorporating them into his own worldview and expressing them publicly, though without attribution. Perhaps Merton also suspected that explicitly invoking such a controversial source might detract from the underlying force of concepts he expressed.

Merton's Limited Access to Ellul and His View of Hope

Merton's encounter with just three of Ellul's books, however, merely offered him a limited snapshot of Ellul's work. For one thing, he read them early in Ellul's career. At Merton's death, Ellul had published only 16 of his 46 books, with just six then translated into English, and he would eventually publish two additional volumes devoted solely to the study of technology and its social influence.³⁶ Further, Merton seemed not to fully recognize that Ellul's pessimism was largely a tactic to highlight our situation's starkness in hopes that this might awaken us to our modern dilemma. Ellul believed that once we become aware of this dilemma, we must pursue our own *specific* solutions; promoting *formulas* to overcome technique are futile, since they would simply become co-opted by and subsumed into it.³⁷ Nor did Merton apparently know of Ellul's strategy

34. Unpublished 16 January 1965 letter to Merton [TMC archives].

35. Unpublished 23 June 1967 letter to Merton [TMC archives].

36. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System* (New York: Continuum, 1980), first published in French in 1977; Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), first published in French in 1988.

37. See *The Technological Society* xxxii-xxxiii; and Lawrence J. Terlizze, *Hope in the Thought of Jacques Ellul* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005) xii, xiv, 80, 239; subsequent references will be cited as "Terlizze" parenthetically in the text.

to write parallel works in separate sociological and theological genres.³⁸ So besides not having read any of Ellul's theological works nor his fully developed thoughts on technology, Merton could not have realized that the three books he read lacked a sense of theological hope *by design* rather than through its absence from Ellul's thought. In particular, these circumstances especially prevented Merton from encountering Ellul's writing explicitly on Christian hope.

Ellul interpreted social processes through a prism of dialectical tension, where competing impulses collide and work themselves out. His best-recognized dialectic paradigm relies on tension between a pessimistic determinism, or "necessity," and human freedom.³⁹ In *Hope in the Thought of Jacques Ellul*, however, Lawrence J. Terlizzese suggests a second Ellul dialectic, that of abandonment and hope, most clearly articulated in Ellul's 1972 book, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*.⁴⁰ For Ellul, humanity's embrace of technique prompted an era of God's abandonment, or silence, in social affairs as God left humanity to its own devices. In the face of this silence, Ellul asserted that hope must demand that God respond to the evils now concretely manifested within modern social structures. This challenge to our technique-dominated system cannot be deferred to some coming time; it must transform the present. As Terlizzese explains: "Only hope allows us to think outside the framework of technique and offer a challenge to the system." "Human powers of achievement are never the object of hope." "Once technique ceases to preoccupy humanity's hopes, it may be returned to the utilitarian means used to improve humanity's relation to nature" (Terlizzese 67, 173-74).

Ellul offered three foundations for hope in our time. First is a posture of "active waiting" that "rescues action from [pragmatic] activism" and "testifies to the arrival of the kingdom of God." Our patient actions "*may* find expression in political movements and social activism, but do not *necessarily* do so" such that "the kingdom becomes realized and present in the Christian life." Rather than passive withdrawal that rejects the world, such waiting relativizes it. This posture of waiting prompts severe

38. The Gethemani Abbey library contains the 1967 edition of *The Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), a republication of the original 1948 English translation with an added introduction by William Stringfellow. On its early pages the book contains markings in a style similar to Merton's in *Propagandes* but the only two written notations are not Merton's, making it unlikely the markings were his.

39. See for example Jeffrey M. Shaw, *Illusions of Freedom: Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on Technology and the Human Condition* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014) 40-48; Terlizzese xi-xiv, 55-58.

40. Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (New York: Seabury, 1973); see Terlizzese xiii, 124-75.

criticism, because waiting is "useless to technique" in a society "devoted . . . to action, pragmatism, efficiency, political action, and triumphalism" (Terlizzese 179, 181-83 [emphasis added]).

Ellul's second foundation of modern hope is prayer, not to obtain results from God, but as a dialogue seeking to "hear the particular will of God for our circumstances" and obey it. Hopeful prayer prompts believers to declare a prophetic Word from God to current circumstances (Terlizzese 186, 193). "Christian realism" comprises Ellul's third foundation of hope. It reflects neither radical pessimism nor optimism, but "hopeful pessimism" that is "contextual" and "penetrates the surface of events to the inner workings of . . . power." Rather than despair that the present order cannot be changed and we must simply succumb to fate, hopeful pessimism "analyzes the actual conditions of society, and then hope challenges them" as it "takes its cue from the kingdom" and not from apparent "political necessities" (Terlizzese 199, 203, 209).

Had Merton access to this broadened perspective on Ellul's hope, his ambivalence may have softened, since Ellul's hopeful pessimism seems compatible with Merton's own often pessimistic outlook and skepticism of frantic activism. After his 1964 peacemakers retreat, filled with Ellul's ideas on technique, for example, Merton told a friend, "I think we all came away convinced that there is no hope to be placed in human or technological or political expedients, but that our hope is first and last in God and in the mystery of His will to save man" (*HGL* 335).

Merton's "Climate of Mercy" and Other Echoes of Ellul's Analysis

The likelihood of softened ambivalence toward Ellul's work becomes even clearer when taking a step back to consider some of their complementary outlooks.⁴¹ For example, as expressed in Ellul's appeal to hope above, his theological critique of technique's dominant role drew from his vision for God's Kingdom as present in Christ's followers within human history.⁴² Merton held a similar view, as this journal entry illustrates: "Above all our confusions, our violence, our sin, God established His kingdom no matter what 'the world' may do about it. . . . The message of Christians is not that the kingdom 'might come, that peace might be established, but that the kingdom *is* come. . . ." ⁴³ Neither Merton nor

41. For a systematic comparison of Ellul and Merton, see Shaw, *Illusions of Freedom*.

42. One of Ellul's earliest books, *Présence au Monde Modern: Problèmes de la Civilisation Post-Chrétienne* (Geneva: Roulet, 1948), provided the outlines of much of his later work. It was first published in English as *The Presence of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1951). See also note 38 above.

43. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4:*

Ellul based their social critique in some personal or idiosyncratically unique revelation. Though their views on eschatological details may have differed, they both relied on a biblically grounded vision of God's kingdom to envision how human society *should* function in a free and loving relationship with their Creator and to identify destructive social forces that blocked that vision.

Merton's response to other writers who assessed modern, technologized social forces also demonstrated his natural sympathy with Ellul's critique. When reading Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*⁴⁴ in 1960, for example, he highlighted its implication that "Being has been replaced by *process*. The process is everything. Modern man sees only how to fit without friction into productive process and in this he finds 'happiness'" (*TTW* 11). Unlike his later responses to Ellul, Merton found encouragement from Arendt's work that this force and its resulting human alienation might be mitigated through contemplation. Similarly, when reading Werner Heisenberg's *Physics and Philosophy*⁴⁵ in 1963, Merton seized upon comments about "the impact of technical and scientific knowledge" as (here quoting Heisenberg) a "process [that] *has gone far beyond any control through human forces. . . . a biological process on the largest scale* whereby the structures active in the human organism encroach on larger parts of matter and transform it into a state suited for the increasing human population." For Merton, however, "far from reducing morality to determinism," this awareness "gives morality the only dimension in which it can really cope with our situation." In a statement virtually identical to Ellul's stated objective, Merton adds, "One must first recognize reality, before he can deal with it" (*TTW* 324-25). Such complementary readings suggest Merton's receptivity to ideas that echo Ellul's descriptions of autonomous social processes which shape human activity.

Finally, Merton's essay on "The Climate of Mercy," written in April 1964,⁴⁶ offers an especially powerful expression of his harmony with Ellul's call for a "Christian realism" that "penetrates the surface of events to the inner workings of power." Here Merton portrays God's mercy

1960-1963, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 188; subsequent references will be cited as "*TTW*" parenthetically in the text.

44. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

45. Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy* (New York: Harper, 1958).

46. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 203-19 (subsequent references will be cited as "*L&L*" parenthetically in the text); first published in *The Cord* 15 (April 1965) 89-96; dated manuscript with corrections [TMC archives].

not simply as an abstract, personal transaction, but one with great social significance that offers a strategy for breaking the hold of realities that might determine human responses. Accepting *God's* gift of mercy to us prompts *our* mercy to others and reflects a truth "at work in the freedom of the sons of God . . . the truth that makes us free" (*L&L* 204). Consider, for example, these "Climate of Mercy" passages:

The true "Law" of our day is the law of wealth and material power [which elicits our] trust in the laws of the market. . . . [T]he very survival of humanity, appears mortgaged and *closed* by this demonic legalism, this blasphemous caricature of "order." Can the power of evangelical mercy possibly break through this iron ring of satanic determinism? We must believe that it can, or else we are not fully Christians. But our optimism must not be utopian and sentimental. . . . Today it is not enough for a few individuals to be kind, to understand, and to pardon. . . . particularly if it seems to absolve everyone else from serious responsibility in social life. . . . [W]e are obliged as Christians to seek some way of giving the mercy and compassion of Christ a social, even a political, dimension. The eschatological function of mercy . . . is to prepare the Christian transformation of the world, and to usher in the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom . . . demands to be typified and prepared by such forms of heroic social witness that make Christian mercy plain and evident in the world. . . . Christian mercy must discover . . . a power strong enough to initiate the transformation of the world into a realm of understanding, unity, and relative peace. (*L&L* 217-19)

Here in Merton's deployment of a mercy that is truly "useless to technique" we hear profound overlap with Ellul's Christian realism that relies on hope in time of abandonment. Mercy is not efficient. Mercy is not productive. Mercy does not seek "the one best way" toward pragmatic effectiveness. Genuine mercy cannot be reduced to a formula. Merton's call to mercy therefore invokes a powerful force to disrupt the logic of our times.

There are other, more authoritarian ways to disrupt technique, like deploying "agitation propaganda" to build walls that stem migration or elevate national interest above human interest. Or we can double down and invest harder in tools of technique that rely on deference to military solutions, denial of our dependence on nature, and firmer allegiance to the "law of wealth and power." But neither response opens space to welcome God's kingdom among us or place technique in its proper, limited role. Instead, both Ellul and Merton invite a response which points toward

that alternative kingdom of God and a hope in God's mercy that we then actively extend toward others trapped in the illusions of technique and its brutal aftermath.