

Preface

AS I SCANNED THE front page of the *New York Times* one day, I noticed that the lead article was “Growing Up Digital, Wired for Distraction.” This article on the “screen generation” detailed how many students could not complete tasks requiring a sustained focus. One bright student who was required to read Kurt Vonnegut’s “Cat’s Cradle” for school admitted to preferring the “immediate gratification” of YouTube to such reading. On YouTube, the student argued, “You can get a whole story in six minutes.”¹ Perhaps, but could you adequately probe the “whole story,” exploring the depth and nuance of a sophisticated piece of literature in six minutes? This story is backed by a growing body of social and scientific research that indicates that we are becoming a nation of superficial and distracted consumers of instant messages and images. This growing tendency cannot bode well for religious or other deep commitments that require a sustained level of reflection and contemplation.

There are many other technological issues that make the problems from our mass communications seem like child’s play. We have been living on the edge of a nuclear apocalypse for more than a half-century. More countries are trying to join the nuclear club every year. How long can we have such weapons without using them? If we do not destroy humanity by weapons of mass destruction, we may eliminate our species through biotechnology as we transform ourselves into post-humans. Such biotechnological wizardry was not very long ago the purview of only science fiction writers. Not any more. We are already beginning the process of changing how we are born and when we will die. The gift of children is transforming into a production process where we will be able to select physical and mental qualities. And on the other end of human

1. Richtel, “Growing Up Digital,” A 1.

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life, there is a search for radical life extension and ultimately eternal life. As we view the current technological horizon, one has to wonder how we will avoid destroying all human life, making ourselves passive recipients of shallow messages and pleasures, or adopting the dangerous eugenic fantasy of transforming our species into transhumans?

In an age confronting such startling possibilities, the monk and spiritual writer, Thomas Merton (1915–1968), is a resource offering an important critique and healing resources for our technology-saturated culture. There were many prompts for his musings on technology. It could be a book given by a friend like *The Technological Society* by the French Protestant theologian, Jacques Ellul. Sometimes, it was a random event. One day he was sitting in the woods on a tree stump and observed a black widow spider and thought he should kill it so that another brother would not sit on the stump and be bitten. He observed that it was odd how human beings in the modern age always expected a technological intervention to solve every problem.

It is strange to be so very close to something that can kill you, and not be defended by some kind of invention. As if, wherever there was a problem in life, some machine would have to get there before you to negotiate it. As if we could not deal with the serious things of life except through the intermediary of these angels, our inventions. As if life were nothing, death were nothing. As if the whole of reality were in the inventions that stand between us and the world: inventions which have become our world.²

After this brief observation, he moved onto another topic. From this example, you can sense both Merton's keen ability for spontaneous reflection and the methodological challenge in writing on Merton and technology. He provided no extended analysis on technology in a single book or article. The closest he came to a systematic analysis were some notes on technology and several tape-recorded lectures on technology to his charges as novice master. Despite these methodological challenges, it is possible to piece together his insights into a coherent and multifaceted analysis of technology. Having outlined his insights in my first chapter, I will then apply this critique to specific technological issues—nuclear weapons, modern communication technologies, and transhumanism.

2. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 24 (hereafter CGB).