

Five Ways of Looking at a Monk: A Bibliographic Review of 2016

Deborah Pope Kehoe

Introduction

I do not know which to prefer
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after¹

As I mull over the question of how best to organize this volume's annual survey of Merton-related publications, I am reminded of a plenary session at the 2003 ITMS General Meeting in Vancouver, British Columbia, in which James Finley reflected on the famous monk who was once his spiritual director. "Merton is a walking Rorschach test," Finley mused. "Knock on the door of his hermitage, and *you* open it." This metaphor captures a core feature of Thomas Merton's enduring appeal: his infectious celebration of life's essential oneness, so often tragically obscured by notions of separateness. Merton's work offers a vision expansive enough to transcend apparent or projected differences, and his voice resonates with readers and listeners who, for convenience, could be called a diverse audience. Finley's witty insight, befitting a contemplative psychologist, is an apt entrée into this survey of books and articles written by academics, enthusiasts, activists, theologians, social scientists, monastics and pilgrims in the dramatic year that was 2016.

2016 – The Year of Divine Mercy – shared the calendar with an election season of bewildering audacity. Pope Francis' Jubilee-Year exhortation to the world to open wide the doors of compassion for all of suffering creation was voiced in the same year in which vapid sloganeering rife with nativist implications promoted delusional thinking and sowed seeds of destruction. The insidious influence of extreme wealth debased the democratic process and heightened existing political and social divisions among people. The Year of Divine Mercy officially concluded in the same month in which a new U.S.

1. Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982) 92-95.

President was named. The politics of exclusion and self-interest ascended to power, and protest movements took to the streets, tides of resistance that would over the next year build into tense and even lethal interaction with counter-movements. In the midst of such a charged and challenging year, books and articles appeared, each providing reminders via the voice of Thomas Merton that within the quiet depths of the soul, beyond the reach of anything vile or cruel, God's mercy abides; undefiled and infinite, it calls humanity to a different kind of daring: one that surrenders the pursuits of the false self and affirms the shared sanctity of all life.

Not surprisingly, the Merton-associated writing of 2016 treats various dimensions of Merton's monastic identity. The question "What kind of monk was Merton?" is, as David Belcastro has illustrated, a question that does not yield a simple answer.² Merton's monasticism has many facets, aspects that might on the surface appear incompatible or contradictory. But like Wallace Stevens, whose Zen-like musings evoke the shifting perceptions of our common existence, one can observe Merton from a variety of viable vantage points. Considered all together, the multiple views reveal a comprehensive portrait of Thomas Merton, one in which his myriad responsibilities, talents, concerns and passions are integrated. The books and articles discussed in this essay contribute significantly to that portrait.

Within the Walls

These men, hidden in the anonymity of their choir and their white cowls, are doing for their land what no army, no congress, no president could ever do as such: they are winning for it the grace and the protection and the friendship of God.³

A generous portion of the year's writing about Merton focuses on his relationship with his fellow monks, including significant figures from the history of the Cistercians, as well as the authorities and novices with whom he interacted personally. Readers with even a cursory understanding of the rules of monasticism know that Merton was compelled to submit his will to that of his superiors. But the challenges he occasionally underwent and overcame in maintaining that obedience make for an engaging and revealing chapter in the story of

2. See David Belcastro, "Praying the Questions: Merton of Times Square, Last of the Urban Hermits," *The Merton Annual* 20 (2007) 123-50.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 325.

Merton's cloistered life.

In 2015, Roger Lipsey delivered a thorough analysis of the complex dynamics between Merton and his abbot, James Fox.⁴ The year 2016 brought forth another book focusing on Dom Fox, F. Dean Lucas's *Merton's Abbot: The Life and Times of Dom James Fox*.⁵ Unlike Lipsey, Lucas eschews sustained examination of the sometimes tense relationship to render a primarily informative account of Dom James Fox's abbatial tenure in a compilation of letters, journals, photos and interviews Lucas conducted with men who knew Dom Fox. For extended commentary on Lucas' book, see the review by Paul Quenon in the reviews section of this issue of *The Merton Annual*.

Because Merton was a publishing writer, another aspect of his obedience involved cooperating with the censors of his order – albeit in some instances less straightforwardly than in others. Two journal articles address heretofore obscure examples of Merton's encounters with Trappist censorship. In "Thomas Merton's Censored Struggle with Suicide," Mark Meade, Merton Center assistant director and archivist, traces patterns of references to suicide in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.⁶ Meade notes which references were marked for deletion and which were allowed to remain – and why. Meade rounds out this study of textual variants and patterns of editing by establishing that he does not intend to suggest that Merton was at risk of ending his own life. Yet he reminds readers that Merton sustained deep emotional wounds early in life and that he was sensitive to the feelings of post-modern alienation but also fervently believed that faith can turn such despair into "a miracle of hope."⁷ A captivating account of an unlikely, yet remarkably complicated, experience involving Merton and the censors is Patrick F. O'Connell's "Thomas Merton's *Silence in Heaven* and *The Silent Life*: The Evolution of a Contested Text."⁸ The article charts the rough road Merton navigated in publishing his 1957 overview of monasticism *The Silent Life*. The difficulty arose from the authorities' astute perception that Merton preferred the eremitic to the

4. Roger Lipsey, *Make Peace before the Sun Goes Down: The Long Encounter of Thomas Merton and His Abbot, James Fox* (Boston: Shambhala, 2015).

5. F. Dean Lucas, *Merton's Abbot: The Life and Times of Dom Jim Fox* (Lexington, KY: Frederick D. Lucas, 2016).

6. Mark C. Meade, "Thomas Merton's Censored Struggle with Suicide," *The Merton Journal* 23.2 (Advent 2016) 3-16.

7. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 205; subsequent references will be cited as "CGB" parenthetically in the text.

8. Patrick F. O'Connell, "Thomas Merton's *Silence in Heaven* and *The Silent Life*: The Evolution of a Contested Text," *American Benedictine Review* 67.3 (Sept 2016) 266-93.

cenobitic life, a conclusion based on his disproportionate treatment in *The Silent Life* of the graces of solitude. O’Connell elaborates on how Merton shrewdly preserved his affirmative account of the hermit life while satisfying the censors’ concern that the depiction of communal life not be slighted: rather than reducing the attention devoted to the eremitic life, Merton expanded his discourse on the cenobitic. O’Connell aptly remarks that this experience provides a “fascinating and instructive perspective on the vicissitudes of being a Trappist author writing about the monastic life in the years immediately preceding the Second Vatican Council” (267), years that were evidently marked by hyper-vigilance regarding projected images of the varieties of enclosed religious life.

Another snapshot of Merton’s relationship with the senior monks of his order is found in the article “Dom Vital at Gethsemani – August 1966,” published for the first time, with explanatory notes by Patrick F. O’Connell, in the Summer 2016 issue of *The Merton Seasonal* in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Dom Vital Klinski’s death.⁹ The article contains Merton’s tribute to the Polish-born former abbot, who was once the young monk’s confessor and counselor, whom Merton upheld as an embodiment of “loving fidelity to his monastic vocation” (8).

During his time at Gethsemani, Merton also assumed roles of authority within the community, such as master of novices from 1955-1965. Thus his voluminous output as a writer also contains a body of work originally intended for the more selective audience of his students. Fortunately, recordings of the conferences he led as novice master are available to the public today. And thanks to the Cistercian Publications’ series *Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, meticulously edited by Patrick F. O’Connell, Merton’s extensive conference lecture notes are also accessible. 2016 saw the publication of the eighth volume in this series, *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology*.¹⁰ As is true of the previous seven volumes, number eight contains copiously footnoted texts of the classes and confirms the depth and complexity of Merton’s intellectual and spiritual grasp of his subject matter, which, in this installment, centers primarily on the theology of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. For more thorough commentary

9. Thomas Merton, “Dom Vital at Gethsemani – August 1966,” *The Merton Seasonal* 41.2 (Summer 2016) 3-9.

10. Thomas Merton, *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 8, edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2016).

on this publication, see the review by John Allard in this issue of *The Merton Annual*.

In Touch with the Times

The present contains all there is. It is holy ground. . . . The communion of saints is a great and inspiring assemblage, but it has only one possible hall of meeting, and that is, the present.¹¹

Among the fascinating features of the Thomas Merton story is his sudden discovery of his intense love for humanity (that famous epiphany inspired by his being among what President Clinton called “the walkin’-around folks of the world”). Many of the 2016 publications concern Merton’s vigorous engagement with the world beyond the monastic enclosure. Covering a broad spectrum, these studies show Merton’s insights into “the fierce urgency of now” when exploring the root causes and remedies for social injustice.

One brief item revealing Merton in tune with the times is “I’ll Say a Mass for Brian Epstein’: The Ethics of Letter Writing in Thomas Merton’s *The Road to Joy*.”¹² Author Anthony Purvis offers excerpts from Merton’s collected letters to old and new friends as illustrations of the monk’s “communion through communication,” outlets for his genuine interest in the lives of his correspondents, including very young people, such as Suzanne Butorovich, from whom Merton learned of the death of Beatles’ manager Brian Epstein.

Similar to Purvis’ essay in that it also focuses on Merton’s epistolary exuberance and his expansive range of letter-writing associates is Michael McGregor’s “Decoding the Anti-Letters: A Whirling Dance of Wisdom and Wit.”¹³ In this instance, the other correspondent is Merton’s lifelong friend Robert Lax. McGregor, author of the excellent 2015 biography of Lax,¹⁴ focuses on the playful unique language with which the two friends supported one another and wrote freely about the sometimes sensitive circumstances of their lives. McGregor selectively analyzes witty passages from the letters, culminating in Merton’s nod to Dante in a seize-the-day call: “Let all the glad abandon

11. Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: Free Press, 1967) 4.

12. Anthony Purvis, “‘I’ll Say a Mass for Brian Epstein’: The Ethics of Letter Writing in Thomas Merton’s *The Road to Joy*,” *The Merton Journal* 23.1 (Eastertide 2016) 40-51.

13. Michael McGregor, “Decoding the Anti-Letters: A Whirling Dance of Wisdom and Wit,” *The Merton Journal* 23.1 (Eastertide 2016) 3-14.

14. Michael McGregor, *Pure Act: The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

vain hopes and laugh until silly” (13).

In *Thomas Merton and the Counterculture: A Golden String*,¹⁵ Ron Dart places Merton in the hip literary scene of the 1950s and '60s. Dart identifies Merton as a guiding member of the Beat generation, one of a flock of “wild birds” whose simpatico relationship derives from their shared rebellious thinking, unconventional poetics and spiritual quest. While this promising work sags considerably under the weight of problematic editing, Dart’s purpose to show the vitality of Merton’s contemporary poetic voice is quite valid. In this issue’s reviews sections, readers can find a more thorough discussion of Dart’s book.

Two prominent scholars, Albert Raboteau and Jim Forest, produced striking analyses of Merton’s responses to the weighty and tempestuous issues of the mid-twentieth century. Raboteau includes Merton as one of seven religious radicals committed to creating a more just and merciful society in the twentieth-century.¹⁶ Focusing largely on “Letters to a White Liberal,”¹⁷ Raboteau reiterates Merton’s acknowledgement of the failures of white America to fully understand that racial justice depends upon the majority’s ability to identify authentically with the oppressed minorities in society. Raboteau extols Merton’s radical understanding that identifying with the victims of racism is not a sentimental gesture but a commitment that “requires action and self-sacrifice, a true emptying of the self in imitation of Christ” (137).

Superbly authoritative is Jim Forest’s 2017 ITMS “Louie” award-winning book *The Root of War Is Fear: Thomas Merton’s Advice to Peacemakers*.¹⁸ Forest, co-founder of the Catholic Peace Fellowship and friend and correspondent of Merton, as well as one of Merton’s major biographers,¹⁹ provides a participant’s account of Merton’s leadership and legacy to those seeking peaceful ways of reckoning on a global, local and individual level with the forces of violence in the world. Forest relates that his original idea for this study came to

15. Ron Dart, ed., *Thomas Merton and the Counterculture: A Golden String* (Abbotsford, BC: St. Macrina Press, 2016).

16. Albert Raboteau, “Thomas Merton: Contemplation in a World of Action,” *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016) 119-39.

17. Thomas Merton, “Letters to a White Liberal,” Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 3-71; Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 154-88.

18. Jim Forest, *The Root of War Is Fear: Thomas Merton’s Advice to Peacemakers* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016).

19. Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).

mind in the months following Merton's 1968 death but did not reach full fruition until the fall of 2015, remarkably about the same time Pope Francis delivered his congressional address acknowledging Merton as an inspiring spiritual figure. Forest quotes generously from Merton's writing so that Merton's voice joins Forest's throughout the book, arranged into chapters with evocative titles pinpointing pivotal moments in the author's relationship with Merton and mapping out the backdrop of the long story of Merton's commitment to being a channel of Christ's peace. This story moves from World War II to the Cold War to the Vietnam War and the racial strife of the 1960s, historical atrocities united by the common element of fear, perceived threats that can lead to violence and can be overcome only by choosing the stance of innocence. Quoting from Merton's essay "Blessed Are the Meek," Forest records Merton's contemplative recognition that "The hope of the Christian [for a non-violent world] must be, like the hope of a child, pure and full of trust" (174).²⁰ In the reviews section of this volume of *The Merton Annual*, Maria Surat, also a Catholic Fellowship member and staffperson, offers extended commentary on Forest's book.

For the Ages

Try telling yourself
you are not accountable
to the life of your tribe
the breath of your planet²¹

Typical of many of Merton's words, the quotations with which Raboteau and Forest punctuate their studies of Merton's social activism resonate with applicable poignancy. Indeed, in divisive days such as these, when the dance of death seems endless, and notions of supremacy embolden aggression or inspire resolute, sometimes violent, resistance (as well as in a time when discordant notes within the Roman Catholic Church regarding stances on immigration and geopolitics are being sounded²²), Merton's counsel that humility and faith are essential to a Christian approach to life strikes one as particularly pertinent.

20. See Thomas Merton, "Blessed Are the Meek," in *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 27.

21. Adrienne Rich, "North American Time," *Collected Poems 1950-2012* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016) 594.

22. See Jason Horowitz, "A Vatican Shot across the Bow," *The New York Times* (3 August 2017) A12.

Another effective vehicle for conveying Merton's voice for our times is Joel Rippinger's *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* article "Damasus Winzen and Thomas Merton: Pathfinders, Companions, and Prophets in American Monasticism."²³ Rippinger traces the common and divergent paths of two monks: Merton, a hermit who achieved celebrity, and Winzen, a contented cenobite, whose obscurity makes it likely that only "the inner circle of monastic seekers" (374) will recognize his name. (Although not germane to Rippinger's thesis but to the organizing principle of this review essay, it is notable that Merton fits into *both* categories.) Rippinger emphasizes that both monks were devoted to contemplative prayer as the way to wisdom, a practice that contemporary society would do well to embrace.

Also focusing on Merton's prayer life as well as his radiantly imperfect humanity is Michael Plekon's book *Uncommon Prayer: Prayer in Everyday Experience*,²⁴ in which the author examines the many ways that people who are "searching for God understand prayer" (3). In the chapter "The Prayer of a Hermit," he draws upon Merton's essay "Day of a Stranger" to illustrate – appropriately enough in the historical present tense – how Merton the hermit "doesn't just recite prayers . . . he discovers, rather, that all of [his daily existence in the hermitage] is prayer" (58). When Plekon remarks that Merton sounds "as if he is writing in our time . . . now, when we are tired of hate" (56), he effectively captures that immediacy of Merton's voice, very familiar to many of his constant readers.

Also recognizing the current relevance of Merton's prayer life, Barry K. Morris devotes two chapters to Merton in *Hopeful Realism in Urban Ministry: Critical Explorations and Constructive Affirmations of Hoping Justice Prayerfully*,²⁵ where Morris cites Merton as a key spiritual guide for those engaged in the challenges of street ministry. In essence, Morris confirms Merton's assertions of the necessity of contemplative prayer in effective social justice activism: "He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deep-

23. Joel Rippinger, OSB, "Damasus Winzen and Thomas Merton: Pathfinders, Companions, and Prophets in American Monasticism," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 51.3 (2016) 373-83.

24. Michael Plekon, "The Prayer of a Hermit: Thomas Merton," *Uncommon Prayer: Prayer in Everyday Experience* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016) 45-66.

25. Barry K. Morris, "Prayer via Merton and Urban Ministry Intimations" and "Merton and the New Monasticism: Check and Balance" in *Hopeful Realism in Urban Ministry: Critical Explorations and Constructive Affirmations of Hoping Justice Prayerfully* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016) 83-99 and 141-49.

ening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others.”²⁶

Comparably, Ephrem Arcement argues in pellucid prose that the monastic values of prayer, humility, community and love would be a therapeutic influence in today’s world beset by “waywardness and confusion.”²⁷ Especially compelling is Arcement’s articulation of Merton’s prophetic vision that a profit-driven culture imprisons its members and that technology debilitates the contemplative mind, two insights filled with renewed meaning for this era in which aggressive marketing of rapidly proliferating technological developments continues to alter the concepts of presence and connection.

With subject matter similar to Arcement’s, yet pursued more ambitiously, Aaron K. Kerr sets out in “Borgmann on Merton: Exploring the Possibility of Contemplation in a Technological Age”²⁸ to study the “relationship between contemporary technology and the possibility of contemplation today” by using as a point of departure an article by Albert Borgmann.²⁹ Kerr concludes that Merton and Borgmann (a specialist in the philosophy of society and culture with emphasis on the role of technology) facilitate a vital merging of the voices of faith and reason.

Jeffrey M. Shaw also touches on Merton’s concerns for modern society’s effect on humanity. Shaw (already having written on Merton and Jacques Ellul concerning technology³⁰) continues his discussion of their relationship in “Two Views of Propaganda” in *Jacques Ellul on Violence, Resistance, and War*.³¹ Here, Shaw points out the belief common to Merton and Ellul that propaganda is a pernicious psychological assault via politics and technology, but only Merton, in Shaw’s

26. See Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 164 (subsequent references will be cited as “CWA” parenthetically in the text), quoted in Morris, *Hopeful Realism* 91.

27. Ephrem Arcement, OSB, “Thomas Merton, Saint Bernard, and the Prophetic Dimension of Monasticism in the Early Twenty-First Century,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 51.4 (2016) 449-62.

28. Aaron K. Kerr, “Borgmann on Merton: Exploring the Possibility of Contemplation in a Technological Age,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought & Culture* 19:1 (Winter 2016) 57-78.

29. See Albert Borgmann, “Contemplation in a Technological Era: Learning from Thomas Merton,” *The Merton Annual* 24 (2011) 54-66.

30. See Jeffrey M. Shaw, *Illusions of Freedom: Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on Technology and the Human Condition* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014).

31. Jeffrey M. Shaw, “Two Views of Propaganda,” *Jacques Ellul on Violence, Resistance, and War*, ed. Jeffrey M. Shaw and Timothy J. Demy (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016) 105-12.

view, offers any optimism in the face of such a vexing phenomenon – a note that in part echoes the current call from political resistance groups to peacefully denounce institutional affronts to human dignity – by declaring the soul-renewing benefits of asceticism.

Christine Valters Paintner agrees that the typical contemporary lifestyle can afflict the human soul; and like other writers noted here, she turns to Merton for insights that she shares in “Thomas Merton: The Monk” in *Illuminating the Way: Embracing the Wisdom of Monks and Mystics*.³² Paintner quotes from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* the words that inspired her to inaugurate, along with her husband, a virtual creative and contemplative community called the Holy Disorder of Dancing Monks: “The rush and pressure of modern life are a form . . . of its innate violence” (CGB 73). Paintner attributes to Merton her understanding of contemplation as a form of resistance against the debilitating effects of compulsive busyness.

Joining the company of such Merton scholars as Monica Weis and Kathleen Deignan, Daniel Horan addresses Merton’s environmental conscience, a topic keenly apropos of current controversies, in “All Life Is on Our Side: Thomas Merton’s Model of ‘Ecological Conversion’ in the Age of Pope Francis.”³³ Horan identifies Merton as an example of one who responded to Pope John XXIII’s call in *Mater et Magistra* to read his times in the light of the Gospel. Further, because Merton evolved in his recognition of the interconnectedness of all created life, Horan concludes that Merton models for today’s world a way to answer the call of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’* to care for our common home, an answer grounded in the Gospel value of ministering to the tribulations of others, including those of nature. In these days, when even key policy-makers obstinately persist in denying humanity’s influence on climate change despite mounting scientific evidence, such a model is sorely needed.

Less deeply probing but worthy publications also recognize the contemporary resonance of Merton’s vision and voice. In *Thomas Merton: A Life Inspired*,³⁴ Wyatt North provides an admittedly derivative treatment of Merton’s life and works for an audience possibly neither

32. Christine Valters Paintner, “Thomas Merton: The Monk,” *Illuminating the Way: Embracing the Wisdom of Monks and Mystics* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2016) 176-90.

33. Daniel Horan, OFM, “All Life Is on Our Side: Thomas Merton’s Model of ‘Ecological Conversion’ in the Age of Pope Francis,” *The Merton Journal* 23.2 (Advent 2016) 20-29.

34. Wyatt North, *Thomas Merton: A Life Inspired* (Wyatt North Publishing, 2016).

familiar nor receptive to Merton but nevertheless, as North asserts, in need of his paradoxical wisdom. Comparably, Linhxuan Wu's *The Paradise Man: According to Thomas Merton*³⁵ does not present itself as an academic study, but rather as organized reflections (using Merton's words) on Paradise as an interior state of being.

In a similar vein, the concise article by Emily Esfahani Smith, "Fetters and Freedom: On Thomas Merton's Vision of Transcendence through Faith,"³⁶ gives a barebones overview of Merton's inspiring conversion story gleaned from a few high-profile biographical sources. The article's lyrical coherence is, however, somewhat undercut by its questionable concluding statement: "Merton's celebrity has faded in recent years, but his articulate serenity persists, a quiet, cooling oasis of spiritual possibility" (47).

With a Widening Embrace

Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.³⁷

Many of the authors in this overview situate Merton in inclusive theological or spiritual contexts. Some contexts are those with which Merton himself identifies in his own writing, while other connections are inferred or projected onto Merton by those reading him through the lenses of their particular areas of interest.

Preeminent scholars Monica Weis and Christopher Pramuk discuss Merton in relation to other theological domains. In *Thomas Merton and the Celts: A New World Opening Up*,³⁸ Weis applies her knowledge of Merton's mystical connection with the natural world in analyzing the absorbing interest in Celtic monasticism that Merton developed in the final four years of his life. In a 1964 journal entry, Merton describes this phenomenon as a "new world that has waited until this time to open up."³⁹ In her work, which she is careful to present as a starting point from which further examinations may emerge, Weis shows

35. Linhxuan Wu, *The Paradise Man: According to Thomas Merton* (Xlibris, 2016).

36. Emily Esfahani Smith, "Fetters and Freedom: On Thomas Merton's Vision of Transcendence through Faith," *The New Criterion* 35.2 (Oct. 2016) 45-47.

37. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974) 8.

38. Monica Weis, SSJ, *Thomas Merton and the Celts: A New World Opening Up* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).

39. 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) 107.

that Merton's late-blooming affinity for the Celts represents another feature of his contemplative integration of the multiplicity of Christ's mystical body. See the reviews section of this *Merton Annual* volume for June-Ann Greeley's discussion of Weis' book.

In "Theodicy and the Feminine Divine: Thomas Merton's 'Hagia Sophia' in Dialogue with Western Theology,"⁴⁰ in his customary erudite and poetic style, Christopher Pramuk returns to the subject of his acclaimed book *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*.⁴¹ In this article, Pramuk explores how sophiology, a mystical tradition conventionally marginalized by the predominantly rational approach of Western theologians, offers a source of healing to today's struggling world. Based largely upon Merton's prose-poem "Hagia Sophia," which evocatively celebrates the power of the feminine divine, Pramuk places Merton in a group of sensitive and creative minds who, Pramuk suggests, could, by their engagement in Wisdom theology, "be giving voice to our own deepest intuition that something essential, beautiful, and true has been lost in the life story of God" (76).

Kenneth Bragan too considers the expansiveness of Merton's experience of the divine, but in a psychological context, in *The Rising Importance of Thomas Merton's Spiritual Legacy*.⁴² He asserts that Merton has the potential to foster growth among today's seekers who do not necessarily believe in a supernatural dimension. Bragan reasons that in light of recent discoveries of a "natural spiritual doorway" in the human brain, in addition to his "believed" mysticism, Merton's "lived" mystical experiences have the power to attract those who might otherwise reject a Christ-centered spirituality. With her joint expertise in Merton studies and psychology, Fiona Gardner evaluates the merits of Bragan's argument in the reviews section of this issue of *The Merton Annual*.

In the densely packed *Finding All Things in God: Pansacramentalism and Doing Theology Interreligiously*,⁴³ Hans Gustafson, too, explores what he sees as Merton's mediating embodiment of often

40. Christopher Pramuk, "Theodicy and the Feminine Divine: Thomas Merton's 'Hagia Sophia' in Dialogue with Western Theology," *Theological Studies* 77.1 (2016) 48-76.

41. See Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).

42. Kenneth Bragan, *The Rising Importance of Thomas Merton's Spiritual Legacy* (Strategic Book Publishing, 2016).

43. Hans Gustafson, "Thomas Merton: Sacramental Spirituality and Place," *Finding All Things in God: Pansacramentalism and Doing Theology Interreligiously*. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016) 131-52.

contentious differences between the systematically theological and the individually spiritual. Gustafson illustrates his views by citing Merton's gift for seeing religious meaning in the seemingly insignificant experiences of daily life and his sensitivity to the relationship between place and the Self, as found in the words: "As we go about the world, everything we meet and everything we see and hear and touch, far from defiling, purifies us and plants in us something more of contemplation and of heaven."⁴⁴

Contemporary theologian Matthew Fox also finds a congenial breadth in Merton's view of God. In *A Way to God: Thomas Merton's Creation Spirituality Journey*,⁴⁵ Fox avows that Merton was a kindred believer in an "original blessings" perspective of creation. Fox's book is largely a personal narrative of his own path to the nature-based theology with which he is now closely associated, whereas Merton's presence in the study is curiously secondary, a feature that, among others, prompted Monica Weis to write that Fox "is superimposing his own system of Creation Spirituality on Thomas Merton, rather than acknowledging Merton's gradual evolution of thought toward what Esther de Waal insists is not 'Creation Spirituality,' but a creation-filled spirituality."⁴⁶ In the reviews section, Gray Matthews offers further commentary on Fox's book.

A creative tribute to Merton's compelling theological openness is Erik Reece's *Utopia Drive: A Road Trip through America's Most Radical Idea* in which Reece writes a quasi-travelogue of his visits to "utopian communities" across America in late 2015, a self-assigned pilgrimage to places of alternative lifestyles, a road trip that he decided to take during our country's "great political, economic, social, and environmental crises."⁴⁷ In the section called "Monk's Pond," Reece relates how a stringent religious upbringing led him to turn away from Western traditions toward those of the East. As he narrates his experience of reading Merton's journals while sitting on the ground as close to the pond as he could get (he was not an "official" visitor at the abbey), he reflects on what he perceives to be their shared appreciation

44. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 25.

45. Matthew Fox, *A Way to God: Thomas Merton's Creation Spirituality Journey* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2016).

46. Monica Weis, SSJ, "Taking Merton for a Ride," review of *A Way to God: Thomas Merton's Creation Spirituality Journey*, *The Merton Seasonal* (Fall 2016) 42.

47. Erik Reece, "Monk's Pond (Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani Monastery: Bardstown, Kentucky)," *Utopia Drive: A Road Trip through America's Most Radical Idea* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016) 64-75.

for Zen Buddhism – thus illustrating Jim Finley’s aforementioned summation of the mirroring power of Merton’s writing.

Finally, Kirsty Clark’s “The Poetry of Self: Thomas Merton and the Re-articulation of the Theological Project”⁴⁸ discusses the common ground underlying theology and poetry. In brief, Clark holds that the most authentic theological mind is a poetic mind and that Merton “is the theologian *par excellence* of this understanding” (55).

Toward Unity

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I’ll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
doesn’t make any sense.⁴⁹

In many of the publications under review, one can hear variations of Merton’s ecumenist message pointing the way to reconciliation through mutual recognition of the spiritual truths that bind people of varied religious beliefs. One example is Susanne Jennings’ article, “Thomas Merton’s Dialogue with Jewish and Islamic Figures.”⁵⁰ With academic objectivity, Jennings, who has considerable experience in interfaith work, focuses on Merton’s relationships with eminent leaders and practitioners of the Islamic and Jewish faiths: primarily Louis Massignon, Abdul Aziz, Zalman Schachter Shalomi and Abraham Joshua Heschel. Jennings astutely notes that while these relationships were conducted principally through letters, the spiritual connections expressed among the correspondents transcended the language they used to convey them, expressions that were, like T. S. Eliot’s description of prayer, “more / Than an order of words.”⁵¹

Yet, with ample references to those words (and to other writings by Merton), Jennings points out the nuances and complexities of these

48. Kirsty Clark, “The Poetry of Self: Thomas Merton and the Re-articulation of the Theological Project,” *The Merton Journal* 23.1 (Eastertide 2016) 54-56.

49. Maulana Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, “A Great Wagon” *The Essential Rumi*, New Expanded Edition, trans. Coleman Barks (New York: HarperCollins, 2004) 36.

50. Susanne Jennings, “Thomas Merton’s Dialogue with Jewish and Islamic Figures,” *Doctrine and Life* 66.8 (October 2016) 36-49; I am grateful to Ellice Yeager, Reference Librarian at Northeast Mississippi Community College, for help in obtaining this periodical article.

51. T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” *Four Quartets* in *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1971) 139 (ll. 46-47).

respectful but honest exchanges. By quoting Merton directly, her analysis effectively negates the notion that in his opening up to other religions, Merton embraced a meaningless syncretism: “Whatever I seek in other traditions is only the truth of Christ expressed in other terms, rejecting all that is *really* contrary to His Truth.”⁵² Jennings concludes that Merton’s practice of ecumenical dialogue in the 1960s provides our current age of interreligious suspicions and threats with a timeless model of understanding among the Abrahamic faiths.

Similarly, Pierre-François de Bethune’s *Welcoming Other Religions: A New Dimension of the Christian Faith*, a slender book focusing on the experiences of Christians who learned new facets of Christianity by reverently exploring the teachings of other religious traditions, contains another portrait of Merton’s ecumenical vision. The author credits Merton with making “a crucial contribution to the opening of the Christian tradition to Asian spirituality” and acknowledges with awe that Merton maintained his vow of stability while “intellectually and spiritually he travelled far.”⁵³

2016 also saw the publication of *Merton and the Protestant Tradition*,⁵⁴ the most recent volume in the Fons Vitae Thomas Merton Series, devoted to exploring Merton’s associations with other religions. This two-part work edited by William Paulsell first surveys prominent Protestant theologians, ministers and beliefs, and discusses Merton’s responses to their ideas and any personal interactions he had with them. The second part consists of personal essays by Protestant authors who share how their experiences with Merton shaped their individual faith journeys. When one considers the rigidity of Merton’s views of Protestantism expressed in the earliest days of his monastic vocation, this collection is particularly revealing of the extent of Merton’s spiritual evolution. By quoting the following passage from Merton (*CGB* 12), Paulsell highlights that extensive growth: “If we want to bring together what is divided, we can not do so by imposing one division upon the other or absorbing one division into the other. . . . We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ”(9). For a thorough discussion of the features of this

52. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 358-59.

53. Pierre-François de Bethune, “Thomas Merton (1915-1968),” *Welcoming Other Religions: A New Dimension of the Christian Faith* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016) 18-19.

54. William Oliver Paulsell, ed., *Merton & the Protestant Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2016).

book, see Ryan Scruggs' essay in the reviews section of this volume of *The Merton Annual*.

Rounding out this roll call of works resounding with Merton's belief in Christian unity is Sonia Petisco's *Thomas Merton's Poetics of Self-Dissolution*,⁵⁵ a collection of previously published articles on Merton's poetics. The author passionately announces that her intention is "to accompany [Merton] in this endless path towards real communion with the divine beyond the limits of our own constrained subjectivities" (21). Understanding that, for Merton, poetry and contemplation were compatibly transcendent experiences, Petisco makes a credible choice to track his mystical progress beyond false divisions by examining the movement of his poetics. In the reviews section, Patrick O'Connell analyzes and evaluates this additional tribute to Merton's unifying legacy.

Sonia Petisco's collection of articles is but one representative of the year's contributions by international writers to the expanding body of Merton scholarship. One of her collaborators in *Thomas Merton's Poetics of Self-Dissolution*, Fernando Beltrán Llavador, also published two articles on Merton in 2016 – in Spanish, and therefore beyond the capability of this monolingual editor to summarize.⁵⁶

Conclusion

It is out of this nothingness that we are called into freedom. (*CWA* 333)

As this annual bibliographic review comes to a close, the time is late October. In addition to the predictable outpouring of seasonal movies, the world's media outlets currently offer a steady flow of non-fictional horror stories, tales of the murderous innocence of nature and the unconscionable behavior of human beings, particularly the culpable negligence of those in power. In such times, when the darkness threatens to extinguish the light of hope, Merton's contemplative example becomes especially beneficial to many. The authors whose works are acknowledged in this survey have enhanced that timely boon by pointing out from their individual angles and degrees of proximity to Merton, the message that remains constant throughout his many-storied journey, one that reminds a dejected world of the inexhaustible

55. Sonia Petisco, *Thomas Merton's Poetics of Self-Dissolution* (Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de Valencia, 2016).

56. Fernando Beltrán Llavador, "Las Viejas Respuestas No Bastan: Introducción a la Figura de Thomas Merton a los 100 Años de su Nacimiento" and "El Horizonte de la Redención: Thomas Merton y la Senda de las Bienaventuranzas," *Cistercium* 266 (2016) 131-66, 206-29.

creative energy of divine love and of the mystical efficacy of prayer, which is our first step toward freedom.