

NEW & OLD FRIENDSHIPS

Review of

MONKS POND:

THOMAS MERTON'S "LITTLE MAGAZINE"

Edited with an Introduction by Robert E. Daggy

Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1989

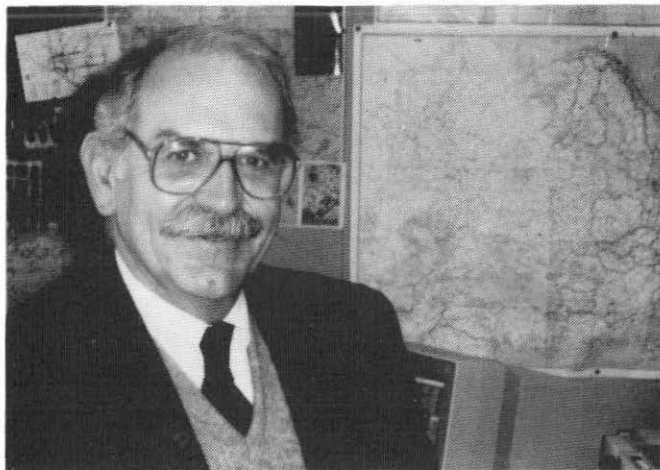
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Reviewed by **Arthur W. Biddle**

The fallout from the political and social explosions of the 1960s produced hundreds of off-beat, anti-establishment periodicals. Published in Berkeley basements and Cambridge garages, they challenged the limits of political dissent and artistic license. Down in Trappist, Kentucky, Thomas Merton ached to edit and publish his own underground magazine; after all, his writing had been appearing in any number of them lately. Finally, in December 1967 Merton sent letters to quite a few of his correspondents as well as to poets whose work he admired, inviting submissions from them and their friends. The openness of his vision is revealed in a letter to Margaret Randall de Mondragon, herself editor of a Mexican magazine, *El Corno Emplumado*: "Need poems, prose, anything so long as it doesn't get me burned by the monks. If it is something they don't figure out ok . . . about anything that makes life have meaning. Ideas. Visions, Or just what the sun shines like. Anyone you know who is interested. Tell." Word, indeed, did get around, and contributions came in from the well-known — Jack Kerouac, Mark Van Doren, Gary Snyder, Robert Lax, Czeslaw Milosz, Louis Zukofsky, Hayden Carruth, Wendell Berry, David Ignatow, and Nicanor Parra are some — and the unknown — like thirteen year old Chris Meatyard.

Merton must somehow have intuited what the rest of us learn only from painful experience — that editing a journal is the modern equivalent of rolling Sisyphus' boulder up the mountain. No sooner does the

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ARTHUR W. BIDDLE

editor get one issue off to the printer than it is time to begin work on another. So even as Merton launched his modest quarterly, he planned its demise after four, or at most six, numbers. The first two issues contained 64 and 48 pages, number three 98 pages. Number four reached 140 pages, presumably fulfilling all the acceptances he had promised — and his own intention to go out of business after four issues. Publication followed the seasons, spring through winter 1968. The spring issue was being printed on Brother Cassian's offset press in late January and February ("I don't think a monastic press should be confined to cheese and liturgy," wrote Merton to Wendell Berry). And when he left Gethsemani on his trip to Asia on September 10, the materials for the Winter number had been selected, but he delegated the typing and production supervision to his newly-installed secretary, Brother Patrick Hart.

This present book contains facsimiles of the four numbers of *Monks Pond*, complete with photographs and art work, but reduced slightly in page size. In a remarkably thorough introductory essay, Robert E. Daggy provides the history and context of Merton's project, drawing heavily on letters in the archives at the Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College.

Unlike many underground magazines *Monks Pond* purposely lacked a sharp agenda. Editor Merton wrote: "The contents of this first number indicate the nature and character of a possible program. The other issues will be like this, only different." The reader who follows the run of *Monks Pond* will find several recurring themes, all reflecting the breadth of Merton's interests.

First is the continuous loyalty of old friendships established thirty years earlier at Columbia University and nurtured in the interval primarily through correspondence. *Monks Pond No. 1* contains a piece called "ART - AS - ART" by classmate Ad Reinhardt, a successful abstract painter who had died the previous August. Like Merton, Reinhardt was moving in his life and work in the direction of pure contemplation. The object of the development of abstract art, he states, is to make that art "purer and emptier, more absolute and more exclusive, — non-objective, non-representational, non-figurative, non-imagist, non-expressionist, non-subjective." Called the "black monk" of abstract art, Reinhardt thought of himself as a "quietist." Like a monk he seeks freedom through ritual: "Only a standardized, prescribed form can be imageless, only a stereotyped image can be formless, only a formulaized art can be formulaless." Another Columbia classmate, Robert Lax, contributed concrete and anti-poems. Lax's wit and wisdom are familiar to readers of *A Catch of Anti-Letters*, part of the correspondence of these old friends. One poem consists of four triangular strips cut from an article on Chaucer's *Troilus and Cressida* and arranged starburst style. Meaning is not what we thought it is, he seems to be saying. A third friend from Columbia, mentor of them all, Mark Van Doren, reflects with graceful ease on a visit to Merton's hermitage: "I must have heard the bells, but more as air, as spicey wood, / Than bronze."

As several pieces in *The Merton Annual 2* make clear, Merton became extremely interested in writers from Central and South America, even translating from the Spanish and the Portuguese. In *Monks Pond* he published a selection of poems by Nicanor Parra and Enrique Lihn (Chile), Otto Rene Castillo (Guatemala), and Carlos Drummond de Andrade (Brazil). Undoubtedly his early years spent in France and England made it impossible for him ever to limit his horizons to the United States. It's not surprising, then, to find other contributions from French, English, Polish, Finnish, German, Chinese and Iranian writers, as well as translations of African proverbs and myths. *Monks Pond* must have been one of the most international magazines of its day.

Just as he looked beyond his adopted homeland for books and ideas, he sought beyond his adopted Roman Catholic faith for spiritual wisdom. Increasingly in the 1960s that meant a

turning to the East. Reza Arasteh explains how the process of self-liberation in Sufism represents a turning from the phenomenal self toward the cosmic self, the unconscious image of the universe: "The phenomenal self has separated us from our origin, that of union of all life." But it was in Zen Buddhism that Merton found the greatest promise for his own development. Early in 1968 he wrote an introduction to a translation of the work of the Buddhist patriarch Shen Hui (see *The Merton Annual 1*); in *Monks Pond* he published ten of Shen Hui's dialogues in a translation by Wei-wu-wei. As he was planning his trip to Asia in the fall of that year, he also accepted an article treating Zen master Pai-Chang and a translations of a discourse by the Master of Nan-ch'uan.

Of Merton's own work there's quite a variety, although he hardly dominates. Not surprisingly, he includes excerpts from his major poem-in-progress, *The Geography of Lograire*. The Spring issue contains the material that is titled "North. IV. Kane Relief Expedition" in *The Collected Poems*. Fall has the Prologue, while most of the material in Winter was to be embedded in "North. I. Queens Tunnel." Then there is a prose piece entitled "The Conquest of France: Speech and Testimonials, 1941," a hilarious macaronic satire of a German propaganda broadcast in occupied France. The novel from which this was taken, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, was rejected by publishers in 1941. Although Doubleday offered a contract early in 1968, the novel didn't appear until the summer after his death. Merton's photographs appear throughout; especially striking is a sequence of trees alive and dead that shows his fascination with form and texture.

Of course there's lots more — 350 pages in all — some of it eminently forgettable. Biographer Michael Mott complains that Merton included "the work of poets who were friends and of friends who claimed to be poets" (*The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 503). Robert Daggy suggests it be viewed as "a literary forum rather than a formal literary magazine." Finally, though, what makes *Monks Pond* worth reading today is that it is a bit like a time capsule — open to discover the incredible range of Merton's interests in the last year of his life.

FOR MERTON

by **Marc Irish**

Prophetic pilgrim
twenty years departed,
but not forgotten.

Your guiding light
still illumines the path
of fellow wayfarers.

Too familiar headlines
would not surprise
but only sadden.

Solace can be found
only by seeking
oneness with Christ.