

A Rich and Generous Collection

Review of

The Merton Annual, Volume 5 (1992)

Edited by

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Readers may wonder if they, or we, have missed something—the 1992 volume of *The Merton Annual* being reviewed six years later? After a long delay, this last of the initial series of *Annual* volumes has finally appeared, providing what can only be described as a generous collection.

Most delightful in this collection are two literary pieces—one by Robert Lax and the other a previously unpublished fragment of Merton's early novel *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*. Lax's verse memoir, "Remembering Merton and New York," is a litany of places the two frequented—everywhere from "a drugstore / (Tilson's) / on the corner / of 116th & / B'way / 'the girl / place'" to "Café Society / Downtown: / Billie Holliday, / Lena Horne, / Zero Mostel, / comedian & M. C. / Edmund Hall, / clarinet / (played at / Famous Door, / too)" (39, 41–42). One senses the landscape that Lax had of New York City was the map of where he and Merton went. The poem turns in a unique description of the quixotic Merton: these are lines from a friend who greatly admired and loved him. No one but Lax, I imagine, could have seen and delighted in so much. His relating it to us—in the joys of simple pleasures and of insightful observations—is itself an experience of the joy Lax felt.

The surviving segment of Merton's early novel is an especially important work. While many readers of the early journals grow weary of "the contempt of the world" Merton rambles on about, this literary work establishes an entirely different kind of connection to Merton's experiences before leaving New York City. The writing itself is nothing that would be eye-catching; superimposing what we know of the life of Merton onto the protagonist is what makes this manuscript so valuable. There he communicates mundane events (waiting for a girlfriend in a bar, an encounter with a street beggar) filled with the poignancy of his own emptiness fused with the tension of the oncoming war. What Merton felt in that environment, exacerbated by the war, is captured in this piece. To read the early journals alone would mislead—this fictionalized portrait captures the sickness, the pressure, and even the sadness of this time in his life.

This volume is not without other endearing delights too: Benjamin Clark, OCSO, shares the following incident from his time in Gethsemani when Merton was reader in the refectory: "What I found exceptionally enjoyable was the way he once read a book that dripped with what he called 'that

greasy, sticky stuff that some people call unction'; he read it in his most unctuous tone of voice, sounded almost like a mother telling her tot a bed-time story. Fortunately he was only a substitute reader that day, otherwise I'm sure some of the more straight-laced brethren would have complained about it" (150).

The most thought-provoking article in this volume is a comparison of the last journals of Merton and Anaïs Nin by J. S. Porter. He claims that these two writers can be credited with "the longest, most continuous record of what it is to be [for Merton, a man and for Nin, a woman] in the twentieth century" (280). Readers will enjoy Porter's consideration of the place of journals in their lives, the creation of identity through writing, the transposing of journal for family, the marvelously eclectic *mīx* of stuff that comprises their last journals and how that choice bespeaks the twentieth-century person. In their final journals, claims Porter, Merton and Nin achieve the "talk that leads to intimacy," ironically found only through the development of self that meant more "the less mine it became" (294). Erlinda Paguio's article, "Blazing in the Spark of God: Thomas Merton's References to Meister Eckhart," also deserves mention here as an article that hits the spiritual mark: both Porter and Paguio blend their academic discussions with excellent understanding and explanation of the spiritual complexities of which they write.

Other generous scholarly offerings include John Albert's study of Merton and Augustine, A. M. Allchin's presentation of Merton and the Fathers of the early Eastern Church, Michael W. Higgins' discussion of Merton and Cardinal Newman, Paul M. Pearson's comparison of Celtic monks' journeys and Merton's use of the pilgrim metaphor, and Chrysogonus Waddell's analysis of Merton's commitment to St. Bernard. Each of these articles offers a well-detailed study of the Merton corpus alongside particular figures of comparison. Each of them is a necessary consideration, especially that of Waddell.

Also marked by generosity are the sharings by Merton's fellow-monks Benjamin Clark and Frederic Collins. Their essays provide insight into the daily life at Gethsemani, where, as Collins relates, Merton was often seen as rocking the boat. "[Monks] would indicate their displeasure with Merton more with phrases like 'Well,' they'd say, 'that's just Uncle Louie. He's an artist. And he's a writer and he's over there in the woods, and that's just him'" (174). John Wu also is generous in sharing and editing the correspondence between his father and Merton. He writes that "the true and lasting value of the Wu-Merton friendship, as in all eternal friendships, I think, lay in this: despite their differences, they had already traveled spiritual millenniums to reach their respective stations at the time of their meeting and had finally met in the only place where differences no longer matter much, at 'the eternal place that is no place' (Wu, 11/24/65), at a point we might call the peripheral center" (315). He also writes that Wu's friendship with Merton "served as a crucial ballast in keeping my father both intellectually and spiritually on an even keel during the sixties" (330).

For those readers who browse for what seems an eternity trying to select Merton tapes from what seems an endless production from Credence Cassettes, Victor A. Kramer has provided a review of the Third Release of Lectures; his overview of eighteen cassettes provides a paragraph on the contents of each along with its order number. Eight other reviews (somewhat dated, of course, but still useful) round out the volume. Taken together, the contents of Volume 5 of *The Merton Annual* are rich in their offerings, and prove to have been well worth waiting for.