

Windows on Merton and His World

Review of
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An appropriate title for this eleventh volume of *The Merton Annual* might be “Windows 98: Looking into Thomas Merton’s Labyrinthine Ways.” In its previously unpublished Merton work, its eight articles, interview, bibliographical survey and seven reviews, readers are brought to a deepened awareness of Merton’s multifaceted identity. Editor George A. Kilcourse, Jr. prepares readers for this multi-layered investigation by noting 1998 as a year when the lights of many windows converged to help us understand a little more about this man whom Robert Inchausti, cited by Kilcourse, calls “Merton-as-the-Apostle, or Radical” (9). A major source of this light is time/history and the human need for commemorations: 1998 marked the sixtieth anniversary of Merton’s baptism at Corpus Christi Church in New York City, the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the fortieth anniversary of his “epiphany” at Fourth and Walnut Streets, and of course the thirtieth anniversary of his death. Each year listed in Kilcourse’s introduction is a window through which beams of light reveal Merton’s radical apostleship.

Paul Pearson’s Foreword to “The Black Sheep,” a fictionalized autobiographical story written by Merton at Oakham School, stands the reader at a good angle to benefit from the light Merton shed on himself in his early years. Significant to the telling of this tale were the insights of Frank Merton Trier of “Fairlawn,” West Horsley, Surrey, one of Tom Merton’s younger cousins and keeper of the “rather beat-up looking, school-boy notebooks” (14) containing Merton’s earliest fictional works: “The Five Emeralds,” “The Haunted Castle,” “Ravenswell,” and “The Black Sheep.”

Following Pearson’s informative introduction on the rediscovery of the stories is “The Black Sheep” itself, the earliest extant example of Merton’s literary self-examination. It reveals a questing adolescent who wanted deeply to belong, to be “one of the guys.” He particularly wanted his father’s favor and approval, to share with his father the secrets only a father and son can share. After all the examinations were successfully passed, after the rugby matches and the hero worship, Campbell/Merton wanted to belong and be affirmed. At this age (16 or 17) Merton struggles with the great challenge of adolescence: “he hates the sight of his face in the looking glass” (32). The light is at times harsh, the insights priceless.

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The first three articles in *Annual 11* were initially delivered at three major Merton events. A. M. Allchin's "Our Lives, a Powerful Pentecost: Merton's Meeting with Russian Christianity," a lecture originally presented to mark the opening of the new Merton Center at Bellarmine College in October 1997, weans the readers away, as Merton so often did, from the light of windows that look only west. Mystics may travel in all directions, but Allchin's steady scholarship is a window on the opportunity and wealth Merton understood and experienced in reading the "Russian theologians in Paris" (33), particularly Paul Evdokimov and Vladimir Lossky, whose *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* had a major influence on Merton. Allchin emphasizes the real value of Merton's work with the Paris Orthodox theologians, many of whom were lay people, as making readers aware of traditions both East and West within Christianity. To look at the world from one perspective is only to half-open the windows on our world.

What do we see when we look through barred windows? Daniel Berrigan's "What, Then, Must We Do?" the keynote address of an April 1998 conference on Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton at Rivier College in Nashua, New Hampshire, tells readers: witness strongly to the signs of truth and beauty within the "culture of death"; bravely face the darkness, love it and embrace it. Marked by his own perspective from both sides of prison walls, Berrigan looks to Merton and Day as people who "went to the root of things." In a presentation that includes reminiscence, analysis, and reading and discussion of his own poetry, Berrigan affirms that we have little to fear and much to do, since prophets and apostles like Dorothy Day and Tom Merton guide us.

On June 13, 1997 James W. Douglass delivered the keynote address to the International Thomas Merton Society General Meeting at Spring Hill College, Mobile, Alabama. The text of that address, "Compassion and the Unspeakable," proves to be a stained glass window opening onto the secular city. Citing examples from the lives and deaths of leaders in the struggle for human rights, James Douglass focuses the lights of compassion from the turbulent period of the 1960s right up to the present, drawing on Mumia Abu-Jamal, John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as Merton. The challenge presented to readers as they look through this window is not "Do we have political power?" Rather, the question is "Do we have the strength and compassion to rally our human spirits to create a just society for all people? Are we insects crawling around as the victims of political spin-doctors, or are we spiders creating webs of unity, justice and compassion who believe we make a difference?" The glass on this window has been colored holy with the blood of those who believe in the power of the spiders in the secular city.

Two articles in Volume Eleven are personal testimonies of how Merton himself opened windows for others. In "'Thomas Merton, My Brother': The Impact of Thomas Merton on My Life and Thought," Baptist minister and scholar E. Glenn Hinson shows how his friendship with Merton led to a deepened ecumenical understanding: "through the gift of Thomas Merton we are all able to own the whole tradition of Christian spirituality as our own tradition" (96). Hinson himself provides evidence of this convergence with his insights on connections between the medieval contemplative heritage and his own Baptist tradition.

Victor Kramer's interview with Chrysognonus Waddell, OCSO, entitled "Truly seeking God in Christ," took place on 23 July 1980 and appears here for the first time. Its insights center on Merton and the liturgy as well as on Merton's "in-house," day-to-day, monastic personality. It reveals Thomas Merton's somewhat ambivalent relationship with liturgical movements and changes within Gethsemani and the American Catholic Church during the immediate post-conciliar period. Accord-

ing to Waddell, “When it came to interiorizing the text and really celebrating the liturgy in depth, I don’t think there is anyone who could compare with Fr. Louis” (149). But Merton’s conservative side came through in his response to liturgical changes: “He always celebrated the office in Latin . . . he never allowed a dialogue Mass in the novitiate . . . he was irritated at the idea of homilies at Mass . . . Fr. Louis was predisposed to assume that in questions touching on things such as liturgical renewal, the rebuilding of the church, the election of an abbot, etc., the Community would make poor decisions based on superficial motives poorly reasoned” (150-151, 153). Waddell also comments on many other interests which formed Merton towards the end of his life, and on his complex personality: “I think Fr. Louis was all the time seeking God truly . . . the most important thing about him is himself . . . Fr. Louis’ main villain was Fr. Louis” (163, 172-73). Though we look through the same window every day, we may not always see what we’ve seen the day before.

Like Hinson’s article, the remaining four essays in this volume were originally presented at the ITMS Fifth General Meeting in Mobile. In “Solidarity and the Reshaping of Spirituality,” William Reiser, SJ discusses “solidarity” as a way to compassionate action: “the only upper limit of realized solidarity is the divine mystery . . . Solidarity generates distinctive forms of asceticism and self-emptying together with distinctive modes of imaging and experiencing God” (98). Thomas Merton became a model for the meaning of “solidarity” when, standing at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville, Kentucky, he realized “There are no strangers” (108).

Thomas Merton’s journals are, according to Christopher Burnham, windows by which “we see Merton’s full strength as a writer.” Burnham applies the rhetorical concept of “ethos,” “a constructed self which serves an argumentative purpose” (see 113) to Merton’s autobiography and to the premonastic journals of *Run to the Mountain*, and concludes that “the early journals contain the whole of Merton, both stylistically and thematically, but in a microcosm . . . provid[ing] us with considerable insight [into] a more interesting character than he presents himself to be in *The Seven Storey Mountain*” (119). Burnham sees the many journalistic “selves” of Thomas Merton as necessary steps he took to gain the autonomy so essential to mature adult living.

Ross Labrie, in “Merton and Timé,” argues for the essential role played by the faculties of memory and imagination in redeeming time as a reflection of “the goodness of the created world and its creator” (121). Labrie explains that Merton began to understand time as the work of memory and imagination when he read Henri Bergson’s *Duration and Simultaneity*. According to Labrie, Merton understood the faculty of memory as crucial to “rescuing the otherwise lost fragments of experience and of time” (123). Labrie argues: “One of Merton’s great gifts as a writer lay in his ability to perceive intuitively the distress and alienation felt by the human soul under the onslaught of technological culture” (125-26). Merton’s evolving notion of time, encountered in what he read and wrote, speaks to us today of time as “requir[ing] a fine balance between the concrete and the abstract, the still and the moving” (132). As we read Merton, we read the concept of time as biblical, as “*kairos*,” filled with the “fullness, decisiveness, and the instantaneity of the eternal” (133). We can meet God as we look through Merton’s window on time, his literary works and essays.

Robert Faricy, SJ seeks to clear the looking glass once and for all: Thomas Merton’s spirituality, he argues, belongs to the intellectual rather than the affective school; hence, our look at Merton here is “Merton and Mysticism of the Mind.” Provocative and challenging, this essay is a call to reconsider Merton’s preferences in his approach to prayer before we are swept off our feet by an emotionalism that isn’t true to Merton’s spirit. Merton worked with and read people with disciplined

minds, in both the Christian and non-Christian traditions, when he developed spiritually: Meister Eckhart, D. T. Suzuki, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. According to Faricy, "Merton's mysticism . . . is intellectualist, apophatic, and represents an important current not only in Christian contemplation but also in the contemplation of some non-Christian currents such as Zen" (146-47). This window is clear and clean.

Finally, Victor Kramer, in "Non-Public Writing in Journal and Correspondence: A Core Radiating Outward. 1997 Bibliographic Review," discusses the approaching completion of the publication of Merton's journals, points to the need for a concordance of Merton's works, and reflects on the voice heard in these "private" writings: "As Merton's productivity in all kinds of writing sped up during his prolific final years, my suspicion is that every single item produced (and he knew an archive was waiting) was simultaneously honest, earnest, private, while also strangely destined for the public" (177). Kramer goes on to survey significant writing on Merton and Merton-related concerns from 1997, including books by Ross Labrie (*The Catholic Imagination in American Literature*), Francis Kline (*Lovers of the Place: Monasticism Loose in the Church*), and Michael Downey (*Understanding Christian Spirituality*, and *Trappist: Living in the Land of Desire*); and articles by Gregory Ryan ("Kindred Spirits: Boris Pasternak and Thomas Merton"), Walt Chura ("The Seeds of Thomas Merton: On Staying Put and Changing Your Life"), and John E. King ("Finding the Thomas Merton Bibliographies: Identifying the Source Documents").

The reviews that conclude this eleventh volume of *The Merton Annual* provide glimpses through more windows on Merton and his world. Michael Johmann and Paul Quenon, OCSO review *Dancing in the Waters of Life* and *Learning to Love*, volumes five and six of the Merton journals, respectively. Bradford Stull reviews David D. Cooper's edition of *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*. David Mark Kocka reviews William Shannon's "*Something of a Rebel*": *Thomas Merton, his Life and Works. An Introduction*. Ross Labrie reviews two books on Merton's friend and correspondent, the novelist Walker Percy: Patrick H. Samway's *Walker Percy: A Life* and John F. Desmond's *At the Crossroads: Ethical and Religious Themes in the Writings of Walker Percy*. Finally Dennis Patrick O'Hara reviews Larry Rasmussen's *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, a book with no direct connection with Merton but one which discusses an issue that would certainly have engaged Merton's attention and passion were he alive today.

Thus taken together, the contents of this first volume of a new series of *Annuals*, issued by a new publisher but with a similar format to previous volumes, provide the reader with fascinating and enlightening perspectives, allowing us to look both through the windows admitting light on Thomas Merton's personality, his friendships and his interests, and back out into the world Merton looked on with love and challenged with his insight and his wisdom.