

The Man in the Machine

Review of

The Merton Annual Volume 13 (2000)

Edited by George A. Kilcourse, Jr.

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“Thomas Merton never quite accepted a fixed medieval line between the sacred and the profane”
Amiya Chakravarty, “Preface” to *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*.

In his “Introduction: Spirituality as the Freedom to Channel Eros” editor George A. Kilcourse points out that “the current volume of *The Merton Annual* does not pretend to organize around a single theme, nor can one be forced upon it” (10). In the same essay, however, he does take up a theme found in two of the major contributions to this volume, the question of Merton and technology. Kilcourse suggests that the question is not “if” but “when” *The Merton Annual* will be published electronically on the Internet. One should not be surprised by this, for after all, the books and essays which Merton wrote were all published in print form by a whole host of machines using the most advanced technology available at the time. There were machines that manufactured paper and ink, machines that printed the ink on the paper, machines that bound the pages together into book form, machines that packed the books for shipping, and finally machines that rang up the sales in bookstores and mail order houses around the world. Merton never complained about this use of technology, for without it his work would have remained virtually unknown. A machine as defined by *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* is “a mechanically, electrically, or electronically operated device for performing a task,” and this most certainly includes the computer.

Merton, of course, is remembered as a man who had a somewhat ambiguous relationship with technology and in the popular mind he is even perceived as being opposed to technology. He never learned to drive, he complained when the electric power lines were first put in, and he rarely watched television. Yet he flew on airplanes, wrote using a typewriter, and carried on his affair with M. over the telephone. We can only speculate concerning how things would have gone with Merton had e-mail and cellular phones been available back then, but the point is that Merton was not at all averse to using technology when it aided him in performing a specific task at hand. The essays of Phillip M. Thompson, “The Restoration of Balance: Thomas Merton’s Technological Critique” (63-79) and John Wu, Jr., “Technological Perspectives: Thomas Merton and the One-Eyed Giant” (80-104) make the powerful point that while Merton may have been uncomfortable with technology, he was not at

all averse to its use. Machines were useful for performing tasks and thus enriching human life, but that was all that they could do. This and no more. Merton's views on technology were not so much concerned with the "this" as they were with the "no more." As both Thompson and Wu point out so well, Merton was convinced that while machines may ease the tasks of human life they do not define the nature and meaning of human life.

For Merton, the nature and meaning of human life were forged in the furnace of relationships between himself, other persons, and God. This issue of *The Merton Annual* is rich in the details provided concerning some of the persons who were formative influences upon Merton. Julie Leininger Pycior provides a close-up of the interrelationship between Merton, Dorothy Day and Baroness Catherine de Hueck Doherty in "We Are All Called to Be Saints: Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day and Friendship House" (27-62). All three were struggling with their sexuality and vocation, and while they dealt with these struggles in very different ways, the coming together of these three highly motivated persons was a gift to the Church and world. The photographs of Day and the Baroness as well as descriptions of Eddie Doherty's romance and eventual marriage to the Baroness provide a delightful personal touch. Francis X. Clooney's "In Memoriam: Mahanambata Brahmachari (25 December 1904-18 October 1999)" (123-26) is a brief but poignant tribute to another early influence upon Merton. It was Brahmachari who first awakened in Merton an interest in the spirituality of religions other than his own. Here too, a photograph puts a face on a man, who like Merton, was a spiritual writer and a monk. In an essay from the 1999 meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, Paul J. Spaeth in "The Road to Simplicity Followed by Merton's Friends: Ad Reinhardt and Robert Lax" (245-56) provides insight concerning two of Merton's fellow students at Columbia University. They too were "monks" in their own way – Reinhardt as an artist and Lax as a poet. Taken together, the essays of Pycior, Clooney, and Spaeth show the significance of these early influences upon Merton. They were, in a sense, Merton's family and made an indelible mark upon his life and work.

In an interview conducted by George A. Kilcourse, Jr. and edited by Paul Stokell, "Life through the Lens of Inner and Outer Freedom: An Interview with Jane Marie Richardson, SL" (127-43), we come to know two persons who did not so much influence Merton, as they were influenced by him, Sisters Mary Luke Tobin and Jane Marie Richardson. Through anecdotes and personal recollections the various facets of Merton's relationship with the Sisters of Loretto come to light. The dialogue between Kilcourse and Richardson concerning Merton's relationship with women (140-41) is itself worth the price of *The Merton Annual*, and it shows that Merton truly understood the meaning of freedom within the context of his monastic vocation. Webster's also defines a machine as "a combination of persons acting together for a common end along with the agencies they use." These persons who in various ways shared Merton's life and his concerns were a kind of machine, a machine acting together for the common end of spiritual enrichment and growth.

Still another definition of a machine is "an assemblage of parts that transmit or modify the application of power, force, or motion." Perhaps we are stretching the definition a bit by adding the word "ideas," but there can be no doubt that there is an assemblage of parts seeking to transmit and modify the ideas of one Thomas Merton. What is so striking about this is the vast range of these ideas. Roger Corless, who is no stranger to those involved in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, in "The Christian Exploration of Non-Christian Religions: Merton's Example and Where It Might Lead Us" (105-22), suggests a bold experiment, the setting up of a joint Buddhist-Christian monastery for the

realization of what he terms co-inherent consciousness. This is, by the way, a much better term than what Corless calls the “polyverse of symperichoretic multiple absolutes”!

The ideas of Merton are further transmitted and modified in a collection of papers from the 1999 meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, edited and introduced by Dorothy LeBeau in her essay “Introduction: To See the Beauty of their Hearts: The Contemplative Aesthetics of Thomas Merton” (165-70). Mitch Finley focuses upon religious education and catechesis in “The Joy of Being Catholic: The Relationship of the Conversion of Thomas Merton to the RCIA” (171-89) while Margaret Bridget Betz in “Merton’s Image of Elias, Wisdom, and the Inclusive God” (190-207) examines Merton’s art with special attention to the images of Elias and wisdom. Accompanying photographs, at least one of which may be a photocopy (by a machine no less!) serve to illustrate the author’s main points. Both Finley and Betz highlight the element of development and growth in Merton’s work. Lynn Szabo studies the idea of solitude in Merton’s poetry through her essay “The Sound of Sheer Silence: A Study in the Poetics of Thomas Merton” (208-21) and Dennis Patrick O’Hara presents a comparative study on ideas relating to ecology and the environment in “Thomas Merton and Thomas Berry: Reflections from a Parallel Universe” (222-34). In Szabo we hear the sound of silence; in O’Hara we hear a more vocal plea to save the environment so that we can hear that sound of silence. In “Ninevah to Calvary: Thomas Merton and a Spiritual Geography of the Bible” (235-44), William Apel compares the pilgrimage of Merton with that of Jonas while at the same time shedding light on Merton as a biblical scholar.

There are, of course, the regular features of *The Merton Annual*, and Volume 13 is no exception. Jonathan Montaldo edits a previously unpublished work by Merton entitled “Variant Drafts in a Manuscript of *The Sign of Jonas*” (16-26). Like all such previously unpublished drafts and undiscovered bits and pieces of the Merton corpus, it does shed some light on the development of Merton’s thought and on what he did not expressly wish to be published. One wonders how long it will be until, as in the case of C. S. Lewis, manuscripts of questionable authorship and origin began to make their appearance. One thing is certain, however, and that is that with the advent of the computer, on-screen editing, and the “delete” key, there most likely will be no previously unpublished drafts of future writers. So perhaps one should be a bit more indulgent and treasure these early works of Merton that keep turning up from time to time. If nothing else, they keep the Merton machine running smoothly, for Webster’s also defines machine as “*archaic*: a constructed thing whether material or immaterial,” and there can be no doubt that the literary legacy of Thomas Merton is still very much under construction.

The annual bibliographical review this year is contributed by Victor A. Kramer under the title “Connecting the Spiritual and the Cultural: Patterns Within Merton’s Writings. 1999 Bibliographic Review” (144-64). Kramer not only reviews books but also more obscure offerings such as a dissertation, a video, and selected journal articles. In addition to Kramer’s review essay, there are also reviews of nine books either directly or indirectly related to Merton and his work. Four of these books are reviewed both by Kramer and other reviewers. These books include *The Intimate Merton: His Life from his Journals*, a compilation from the seven volumes of Merton’s journals edited by Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo; *Thomas Merton & the Monastic Vision* by Lawrence S. Cunningham; *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story. A Complete Compendium*, edited by Rob Baker and Gray Henry; and *A Merton Vade Mecum: A Quick-Reference Bibliographic Handbook* by Patricia A. Burton. While one may question the wisdom of reviewing the same books twice in the same issue

of *The Merton Annual*, one cannot question the wisdom of the books reviewed. All four of these books are solid contributions to Merton studies and no academic library or serious Merton scholar will want to be without them.

The editor of *The Merton Annual*, Volume 13, George A. Kilcourse, Jr., and the editor of the 1999 International Merton Society Papers, Dorothy LeBeau, are to be commended for putting together yet another issue of this important resource for Merton studies. The machine, in all of its varied definitions, has worked well with the man in the machine – Thomas Merton – as its inspiration, and there is no doubt that it will continue to work just as well on into the future, even on the Internet.