

Polished Contributions from Polish Conference

Review of

Studia Mertonia 1

I Konferencja Mertonowska w Polsce y Bibliografia Mertonowska

Edited by Krzysztof Bielawski

Kraków: Wydawnictwo Homini, 2002

77 pages

and

Studia Mertonia 2

Collected Papers of the First Merton Conference in Poland, Lublin, Oct. 24-27, 2002

Edited by Krzysztof Bielawski

Kraków: Wydawnictwo Homini, 2003

221 pages (English) + 237 pages (Polish)

Reviewed by **Christine M. Bochen**

Shortly after Pope John Paul II's death, Jim Forest recounted a meeting he and Argentinian human rights leader and Nobel Prize Winner, Adolfo Perez Esquivel, had with Pope John Paul in 1980 (*Commonweal*, 22 April 2005). Forest and Perez Esquivel presented the Pope with a copy of Forest's biography of Thomas Merton. The Pope asked Forest if he had known Merton. "Yes, I responded, he had been my spiritual father the last seven years of his life. John Paul said he too was a great admirer of Merton's writings. A close friend, the publisher of his own writings in Poland, was also the publisher of many of Merton's books in Polish. He had read them all, he said, and still had them in his library." This story illustrates just one facet of a long-standing "Merton connection" in Poland. In *Studia Mertonia 1* and 2, we find ample evidence of the depth and breadth of that connection. The two volumes document the First Merton Conference in Poland, held in Lublin, October 24-27, 2002.

As Krzysztof Bielawski explains in the "Editor's Foreword" to *Studia Mertonia 1*, this first volume is "an invitation" to advance Merton studies in Poland. In addition to the Conference Program and the biographies of presenters, Volume 1 includes: some excerpts from *The Other Side of the Mountain*; a reminiscence by Jim Forest who writes that Merton "shaped the life of people" and that is why he is "significant"; an excerpt from a letter of Merton to Jim Forest, then a young activist, with a brief introductory statement and commentary by Forest; a reprint of the first notice about Merton, originally published in *Znak* in 1949, which makes note of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *Seeds of Contemplation*, and *Elected Silence*; a Merton Bibliography, which lists books by Merton published in Poland, the first of which was *No Man Is an Island*, as well as publications about Merton, published in *Znak* from 1949 to 1997, additional publications and a brief list of reference sources such as English bibliographies, Mott's biography and *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*. There are English translations of the "Editor's Foreword," the Conference Program, a fragment of Jim Forest's letter and the titles of Merton's books as they appear.

Studia Mertonia 2, the collected papers of the First Merton Conference in Poland, published in

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a dual-language volume in Polish and English, is a handsome book. A word of special appreciation is due to the editor, Krzysztof Bielawski, and to the translators: Anna Muranty, P. Kazmierczak, A. Pogodzinska, and A. Wojtasik for their translations into English and to M. Cielecka and A. Muranty for their translations into Polish.

Studia Mertonia 2 opens with a brief introduction by Archbishop Josef Zycinski entitled “Merton and Ecology of Human Spirit,” which sets the theme of the conference and extends Merton’s own invitation to enjoy a “communion of spirit.” The first essay, “The Crisis of Scientific-Technical Civilisation [*sic*] and the World of Spiritual Values in the Reflections of Thomas Merton,” also by Archbishop Zycinski, reflects, in the context of modern and post-modern thought, on Merton’s recognition of the multidimensional character of the human person. Zycinski observes that the utopian dreams which marked the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have been dashed by the stark realities of Auschwitz and Kolyma and the optimism of the Enlightenment has been replaced by a crisis of meaning and values. Merton, he observes, found meaning not in the new world of the Enlightenment but in the inner world of the spirit. In contemplation, he discovered “the invisible, transcendent dimension of everyday life.” Contemplation, Zycinski explains, brings forth harmony and an “ecology” of the mind – which flows from “the freedom of the heart” – dispelling the illusions that flatten and deaden our appreciation of the human spirit.

Several of the contributors knew Merton personally. Two are Cistercian monks. In “A Witness to Life,” Brother Patrick Hart, OCSO draws on personal recollections of Thomas Merton. Brother Patrick, who entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1951, while Merton was Master of Students, and who served as Merton’s secretary, articulates Merton’s vision for monastic renewal – a vision inspired by Merton’s grounding in the writings of the Cistercian Fathers; a vision which honored the centrality of contemplation, solitude, and freedom in the monastic life; a vision that called for “inner transformation,” compassion for “the anguish of the world, and openness to dialogue with the world.” In this vision, Brother Hart writes, the monk becomes “a witness to life.” In “Thomas Merton and Centering Prayer,” Father M. Basil Pennington, OCSO draws on Merton’s writings on contemplation – beginning with Merton’s description of his own way of prayer in a letter to Pakistani Sufi Abdul Aziz, in order to delineate the nature and practice of centering prayer, the essence of which is, in Abbot Pennington’s words, “To be in faith and love to God in the center of our being.”

Czeslaw Milosz’s “Merton” is a reminiscence of the friendship between the two writers – grown mainly through an exchange of letters, although the two met twice – once at Gethsemani and once in California as Merton was on his way to Asia. Milosz recalls Merton’s interest in *Post-war Polish Poetry*, an anthology which Milosz sent to Merton and which Merton liked and recommended to Doubleday for publication. Milosz concludes by naming Merton, alongside Simone Weil and Albert Camus, as one of those “few bright figures” of the twentieth century “whose creative thought may tip the scales of victory of good over evil.” The relationship between the two writers is the subject of Elzbieta Kislak’s paper, “Merton and Milosz in the Face of Totalitarianisms.” Kislak draws on her reading of the exchange of letters between Merton and Milosz, a relationship that began when Merton wrote to Milosz after reading *The Captive Mind*. She offers an analysis of Merton’s reading of the book against the background of his understanding of totalitarianism and conformism as beyond “the borders of Nazism and Communism,” and of Milosz’s incisive critique of Merton’s view of the world, nature and human nature. Both their kinship and their divergent views surface in Kislak’s essay.

Paul Pearson, Director and Archivist of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, offers a portrait of “Thomas Merton, Archivist,” who “for most of his life . . . was his own archivist. . . long before his first books were ever published.” That explains how we have stories Merton wrote as a child, fragments of novels written during university years, and notes and poems and journals

from the Bonaventure years. At Gethsemani, Merton preserved his manuscripts, notes, and, in later years, letters. Pearson describes Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr's role preserving Merton's papers and tells how the Literary Trust and Merton Room at Bellarmine came to be – reminding readers that Merton himself was motivated to preserve his work by the conviction, which he expressed in 1967 when he wrote: "I will last . . . I will be a person studied and commented on."

Taking his cue from Merton's informal talk at Calcutta, delivered in October 1968, just weeks before Merton died, Maciej Bielawski reflects on "Merton's Margin," delineating the socio-historical, existential and theological dimensions of Merton's marginality and exploring the paradoxical character of the monk who "lived on the margin of the world and on the margin of God," living "in between and on the border." The title of Stanislaw Obirek's "Second Round of Merton's Beer or Mysticism Incarnate" offers an earthy and spirited metaphor with which to call attention to another side of Merton: his engagement with the world – which Obirek highlights by reflecting on two threads that emerge in Merton's journals: "his thirst for God" and the "tension in his relations with the institution of the Church," reflected in his struggles with his monastic superiors and the hierarchical Church. Krzysztof Bielawski explores yet another dimension of the Merton story in "'Midsummer Diary' and Merton's Experience of Love" as he aims to do justice to Merton's relationship with M., the student nurse with whom Merton fell in love in the spring of 1966. Appreciative of Merton's openness about the relationship and the significance of this experience of love in his life, Bielawski concludes that "whatever the case might be, his meeting with M. became for him a turning point on the way to getting to know himself, to fulfillment."

Waclaw Hryniewicz reflects on "Thomas Merton and Juliana [*sic*] of Norwich: Mysticism and Universalism of Salvation," plumbing the basic intuition that "there is something divine, pure and unblemished in human beings." The mystic, Hryniewicz observes, is "a rich and touchable icon of God, which cannot be lost." Hryniewicz proposes that mysticism, as exemplified by Merton and Juliana, exhibits "a soteriological universality of hope" at odds with the fundamentalism, integrism and sectarianism characteristic of many in our times. "Mystics," Hryniewicz writes, "are on the side of mercy. . . . Theirs is a religion of forgiveness and reconciliation."

A concern with Merton's inner experience is evident in several papers. In "Thomas Merton's Contemplative Vision," Theresa H. Sandok reflects on Merton's "ontological awakening," to which he came as he discovered, through his reading of Étienne Gilson, the Catholic concept of God's being, expressed in the term *aseitas*. Merton learned that God's nature is simply to be. Merton's ontological awareness, reflected in his awareness that all our language about God is analogical, played "a crucial role" in his spiritual development. Sandok observes that "Merton valued ontology as means for illuminating what he called 'metaphysical experience.' He was not interested, he said, in 'abstract metaphysical systems.'" Merton's ontological awareness positioned him for serious inter-religious dialogue. Emphasizing that contemplation cannot be taught and that it must be experienced, Sandok cautions that the experience, while open to everyone, requires solitude. It is in solitude that we discover we are "already one" with others. Jan Bereza's "Thomas Merton's Theology of Self" revisits Merton's paradigm of "false" and "true" selves, showing how Merton's ideas of false self are grounded in his reading of St. John of the Cross and St. Thomas Aquinas and how his vision of the true self is linked to his knowledge of God. Noting that everything that Merton wrote had "a subjective dimension," Bereza concludes that Merton realized, as we all must, that "you cannot discover your true self without a radical inner transformation, as well as the change of your attitude toward God, people and the world." In "Meditative Experience in the Poetry of Thomas Merton," Zofia Zarebianka suggests that the key to Merton's poetry is his spirituality, his inner experience, his "meditative awareness." At the root of Merton's poetry is "the need to verbalize the sphere of spiritual experiences." And so his poetry is "a witness to spiritual life, an attempt to record

and understand his own development.” This, Zarebianka illustrates as she analyzes a selection of Merton poems. Merton’s was a Cistercian spirituality as Konrad Malys makes clear in “Thomas Merton Reads Bernard,” an essay based on a reading of articles which Merton wrote on St. Bernard between 1948 and 1954. In particular, Malys addresses the distinction between “the image of God in man” and “the likeness to God in him”; humility “as a way to truth”; intellectual simplicity; and the simplicity of the will.

Illustrated with twenty-eight examples of Merton’s visual art (in addition to one of Owen Merton’s paintings and a drawing from Victor Hammer), Katarzyna Bruzda’s “Thomas Merton – an Artist” considers what Merton has to say about his own art and discusses the development of his art. The essay is divided into four parts – sorted according to time, theme and artistic medium: “Riot and optimism. Caricature and early sketches,” “Reality and dream. Female portraits,” “Unspeakable and real. Photography,” and “Solitude and compassion. Calligraphy.” As Bruzda sees it, “Merton’s artistic way” witnesses to “his quest and spiritual journey in time and space.”

In a final paper, Paul M. Pearson offers an overview of the “Merton Societies.” Among these, he includes the Merton Legacy Trust, early commemorations of Merton at Columbia and Vancouver, “the first official society” founded in Belgium in 1986, the International Thomas Merton Society founded in 1987, and the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland founded in 1993. He notes that less formal groups are in existence in Spain, Brazil, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, where the Vancouver chapter of ITMS has become the Merton Society of Canada. Pearson also names the Thomas Merton Foundation, set up in 1995, and describes its goals. He concludes by offering some models for organizing a Polish Merton Society. The Statutes or By-Laws of the Polish Merton Society follow Pearson’s essay in the Polish text only.

This impressive collection of papers makes for enjoyable, informative and thought-provoking reading. The picture of Merton and the insight into his work that emerges in these papers deepens our understanding of Merton and our appreciation of “the ecology of the human spirit.” Although English readers of Merton will be familiar with a number of the participants – Brother Patrick Hart, the late Abbot Basil Pennington, Paul Pearson, Theresa Sandok – and perhaps with the work of the late Czeslaw Milosz, they will be pleased, as I was, to be introduced to the work of Polish Merton scholars. Perhaps other readers will be moved to reflect, as I was, on how Merton speaks to readers across boundaries of geography and be grateful, as I am, to encounter the work of the Polish writers and thinkers cited here. I eagerly look forward to the next volume of *Studia Mertoniana*.