

Portrait of the Monk as Artist

Review of

The Merton Annual, Volume 18

Edited by Victor A. Kramer

Louisville: Fons Vitae Press, 2005

401 pages / \$19.95 paper

Reviewed by **Deborah Kehoe**

In his introduction, Victor Kramer remarks that Volume 18 of *The Merton Annual* fortuitously yields a tribute to Merton as artist. Indeed, a cover-to-cover reading of these essays, personal reflections, bibliographic notes, and transcripts of letters and interviews leaves one with the distinct impression that “portrait of the monk as artist” was the intended theme. In fact, what is especially satisfying about this volume of the interdisciplinary journal centering on a figure well-known for his inclusive mind is the unified vision of Merton’s artistic identity which emerges from the diversity of discussion.

Here in addition to the engaging discourse about Merton the spiritual writer which one expects to find in *The Merton Annual* are articles about Merton the photographer, calligrapher, and student of sacred art and monastic architecture. Through the abundant incorporation of primary material, many of these essays resound with Merton’s inimitable voice graced with equal parts of profundity and wit, both capable of taking your breath away. See for example Roger Lipsey’s “Do I want a small painting? The Correspondence of Thomas Merton and Ad Reinhardt: An Introduction and Commentary.” Identified as a “supplement to [his] forthcoming book *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton*,” Lipsey’s article includes twenty items of correspondence, complete with illustrations, between Merton and Reinhardt. The author follows the letters with analysis of what each one signifies in terms of Merton’s sustained interest in art. Presenting the letters separate from the commentary allows the reader immediate contact with Merton’s vibrant appreciation for art, as well as the prodigious facility for wordplay which characterizes much of his personal communication with his college friends, one of whom was Reinhardt.

For the reader especially interested in Merton’s achievement in the art of poetry, this volume offers a wealth of stimulating discussion. And because I am that reader, I devote the remainder of this review to a survey of the works I find most memorable in Volume 18, four articles which illuminate Merton’s theories and practices as a poet, his relationships with other poets, and the central role poetry eventually assumed in his contemplative life.

Michael Griffith’s “Thomas Merton on William Blake: ‘To look through matter into eternity’” uses the long-standing kinship between the two poets, a connection well-documented by frequent references to Merton’s thesis on Blake, to focus on their shared belief in the spiritual origin and

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power of the creative imagination. Griffith's study progresses logically: it summarizes the seminal importance of Blake in Merton's life and thought; it then asserts how their common view of art as a means of transcendence ultimately helped Merton to resolve the conflict between his literary and monastic callings. The essay culminates in an analysis of three poems by Merton which Griffith finds remarkable for their "Blakean texture": "Evening" and "Grace's House," two of the poems, recreate the imaginative realm of childhood. This evocation of what Merton elsewhere refers to as "the real world" and a "world constructed by love" puts the soul in touch with Edenic innocence, a phenomenon of transformative contact which "reconstitutes" the True Self. Griffith's analysis of these poems effectively reiterates the central Blakean perception residing deep within Merton's poetic consciousness, the celebratory awareness that "everything that is, is holy."

"Encounter in a Secret Country: Thomas Merton and Jorge Carrera Andrade" by Malgorzata Poks, offers a less frequently represented view of Merton's poetry by exploring his translations of the Ecuadorian poet Carrera Andrade. Poks' essay underscores the importance of this poetic enterprise to which Merton applied in considerable measure his impressive linguistic talents. Poks holds, however, that the success of Merton's translations derives from a greater source than his multiple fluency alone: "he did not merely read literature, but *meditated* on it until the deep truths contained in it became part of him, *connatural* with him." Her essay refers extensively to specific translations and other writing by Merton on Carrera Andrade to demonstrate this deep connection between them, a relationship expressed through the metaphor of mutual citizenship in a secret and silent country. The eloquent analysis which makes up much of Poks' essay sheds bright light on Merton's belief in the transcendent and unitive potential of poetic endeavor when undertaken as spiritual as well as literary exercise.

The perspective on Merton as artist shifts again in Marilyn Sunderman's "Jewels Upon His Forehead: Spiritual Vision in the Poetry and Photography of Thomas Merton." Sunderman identifies four contexts in which Merton expresses his spiritual insights through poetry and eventually through the compatible medium of photography: Zen, nature, city-emptiness, and incarnation. Consisting mainly of direct quotation from the works rather than in-depth commentary on them, the essay, situated between more densely analytical treatments, provides balance in the volume. An additional distinguishing feature is Sunderman's lucid introduction to Merton's photography; her essay reproduces and remarks on the highlights of seven of his photographs – reduced in size, intended for general reference only, the photos nevertheless still invite prolonged meditation. In short, Sunderman's essay reads like a reverently rendered catalog, making it a gift of accessibility to the reader in search of a sampling of Merton's literary and visual spiritual art.

Ross Keating's "Wisdom, Sapiential Poetry, and Personalism: Exploring Some of Thomas Merton's Ideas for Values Education" is a fitting final point of discussion because it is, to my mind, the most integrative of the four essays on which I have chosen to focus in this review. The essay opens and closes with references to Neil Postman's radical call to educators to unite in an effort to *inspire* students rather than try merely to inform them. Throughout the essay, Keating argues spiritedly how this inspiration could be achieved by taking to heart Merton's teaching that although it may be wearing a confounding disguise, wisdom dwells in every person. Inspired language – "sapiential poetry, for example" – can penetrate life's distracting and ever-changing surface illusions to reveal the immutable, unifying truth within. Not a "how to" practical guide for teachers, Keating's essay is, rather, a vital reminder that all learners possess the potential for deep, expansive, and stabilizing

growth, and the language of art can empower and cultivate that growth.

It is beyond the scope of this review to acknowledge all of the contents of this generous edition to the extent which its offerings merit. However, a brief inventory is certainly in order. In addition to the five essays discussed here, one can find fifteen other articles including editions of two short essays by Merton on sacred art; a transcript of the Q&A session following a poetry reading by Ernesto Cardenal; several articles on monastic architecture, two of which focus on the Benedictine architect Frank Kacmarcik, and one contains a transcript of an interview with stained-glass artist Methodius Telnack; three articles comprising bibliographical notes, indices, and surveys; an article exploring the tensions present in Merton's personal reading journals, and another on monastic refectory reading practices; as well as an overview of the biographical details and life experiences most influential in Merton's spiritual and artistic development. Eight review essays highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of recent Merton-related publications round out Volume 18, which considered as a whole (a few Table of Contents page number inaccuracies notwithstanding) enhances with color and texture the ongoing conversation among enthusiasts concerning Merton the artistic monk. Suffice it to say, I cannot imagine any reader coming away from it complaining of intellectual, spiritual, or sensory deprivation.