

Words, the Word, and the World

Review of
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I've neglected my Merton studies for a few years now, which surprises me. When I was in the midst of my Merton fervor, I didn't think the fires would ever die down. But the exigencies of life pull you into unexpected realms and you just have to accept some things. So I was most pleased to accept an invitation to review the 2006 *Merton Annual*. Unfortunately, I found the quality of the essays uneven, and some editorial decisions also seemed questionable.

I like the fact that the first entry (after the Editor's Introduction) is a 1963 letter from Merton to a Father Thomas Francis Smith, a fellow Cistercian, and that his first words are so direct, concise, and unapologetic: "Probably you are overdoing the Jesus Prayer a bit" (13). Boom! Now it seems to me that the reader needs some context before reading this letter. That context is given in Fr. Smith's commentary right after the letter (15-16). Why not give most of Fr. Smith's explanation before the letter and then his response to the letter after it? In any case, Merton identifies a key problem that all of us, not just Fr. Smith, must be aware of. Merton points out that methods to reach a contemplative state, methods like the Jesus Prayer, are ultimately expendable, and we must not overemphasize the method at the expense of the goal. Merton wrote, "[A]ll sources fail, except God himself. And He is after all the most accessible" (14). (God is most accessible? The ultimate Other?!). He says something else a bit mysterious but maybe prophetic: "We get tired of means once in a while, and that is perhaps because we are nearer to the end than we realize" (14). The end of what?

What I sense in some of these essays is that their writers have relied too much on method (such as comparisons with other writers or religious figures; the use of certain concepts to see Merton in a different light) and then he or she has lost perspective on what is more important – Merton himself, or his insights . . . or God.

Though he might not have so intended, Gray Matthews's excellent bibliographical essay (369-96) speaks to this point. The last work he reviews is Ruth Merton's *Tom's Book*. He prints Ruth's beautiful little poem "To Make a Tiny House" (390), which he then links to Merton's poem, "Grace's House." The upshot, says Matthews, is that (paraphrasing Meister Eckhart), "If you're looking for ways to Grace's House [i.e., God], that's just what you'll find – ways – and not Grace's house" (392). Matthews applies this to Merton: "Thomas Merton realized how to live without orientations" (392). And maybe students of Merton should, too.

An important key that helps students of Merton explore the House (Abbey?) of Merton is provided in Monica Weis's astute essay about Merton and Rachel Carson (128-41). If we want to identify and examine Merton's orientation, or his way of understanding himself (and hence God and creation), we should see that "Merton's love for the world" was first "coupled with a fascination for words" and his "commitment to the Word" (134). Now I think that chronologically, Merton was first fascinated

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with words, and then the Word, and then finally the World (certainly in his pre-conversion days he was “worldly,” but he never seemed to relish his worldly pleasures). I would propose that we students of Merton follow the same procedure. We should first be fascinated with words (not with concepts to examine these words). And I believe Christians can profit greatly when they examine their words, because we have faith in the “Word” made Flesh. I’m not saying Merton’s love of words began within this perspective, but our love can. And this means, as I’ve lately come to call for, that we have to re-examine our understanding of language. (Perhaps, too, we are just beginning to understand the power of literacy, and Merton can greatly help us in this regard.)

I’m not sure Merton read Ernst Cassirer or Susanne Langer, but they taught that verbal (spoken) language is the first of several symbolic systems created by the human mind to bring order to the species’ psychical experiences and to communicate one’s interior experience. Over time, as the human species named objects in its experiences, some words were given double duty, being applied to explain something unfamiliar. Thus the creation of metaphor, and the beginning of miscommunication, because certain words can conjure up very different images in people’s minds. For example, what image arises in your mind when you see the word “tool,” as in “language is a cultural-cognitive tool”? My students often envision hammers, saws, power tools. I guess there’s a band named Tool. Very few if any say that their first image was of garden tools (which was my first image). Then I ask them to reflect on the implications of those tools, such as where they are used and for what. So for example, hammer, saw, etc. are often used to, say, build a house. And they are noisy. A garden tool is used to turn over the earth, and they are usually quiet. It seems then that we can use language to build intellectual edifices (which can be noisy), but sometimes we should just sit quietly and turn over the earth of our basic metaphors, reflecting on how healthy they are.

My point is that after we write an essay, we should examine (among other things) our metaphors, especially in our key paragraphs. What are the key words in those passages, and will those words conjure up in the reader’s mind the images that I intend? Now *that’s* revision! That’s having a Mertonian fascination with words. And for those of us who believe that the Word became Flesh (and was executed and proclaimed risen), we can invest our language with the incarnated Word if we examine our metaphors and our writing style (style was another problem I had with some of these essays). Interestingly, James Finley offered advice on style in his interview with Glenn Crider (355-68). He said he wants to forgo writing with “long sentences” that “do not make [meaning] as immediately accessible to a lot of people.” Instead, he wants to write sentences like Merton and Joseph Pieper. Their “shorter [sentences create a] more accessible style that helps access that same depth of life” (366).

Monica Weis’s essay provides a model for those who want to write essays that compare Merton with others. The key is to find a person Merton had contact with or whom Merton had read. Merton wrote to Carson after he read *Silent Spring*. If such a linkage isn’t found, then the criteria for comparison, it seems to me, become arbitrary and not very illuminating, which I felt was the case with a few essays.

It seems to me that the analyses of some of the contributors in the *Annual* are one step away from Breakthrough – maybe the “end” Merton was referring to – the end of walking the path to Grace’s House – and that if they would do a metaphorical analysis of key terms in their draft, their thinking and writing would convey that Total Breakthrough (or as I like to now say, “Total Opening”). For example, Michael Sobocinski writes: “The genesis of mind is itself entirely dependent upon the provision of meaningful experience and occurs only within the context of relationships with other human minds” (107). But what element bonds these experiences and relationships (facilitated by people), so that meaning and self-worth and trust are easily conveyed? Language. Note Sobocinski’s use of the term “genesis.” He means by that word, the beginning. What other allusions does the word “genesis”

conjure up? The rock band? OK. Also, the first book of the Bible. And how was the “formless earth” given form? through the creative spoken word of God: “Let there be light!” And as I tried to describe above, language is the genesis of the human mind, and language organizes and develops understanding (maybe even “brain structure and chemistry”— that would add a new dimension to our faith in the Word made Flesh!).

I can't touch on all the good essays in this whale of a book. Patrick O'Connell provides another clinic in literary interpretation of Merton's pre-monastic poems that dealt with war (178-233). Lucien Miller's enlightening essay on the Merton-Wu correspondence describes the kind of humane exchange possible between committed believers from different religious traditions (142-61). I thought Bob Lax comes away more insightful than Merton in James Harford's essay on Lax, Merton and Rice (234-54). Harford offers a couple Lax poems whose minimalism allows the Lax humor and probity to leap off the page.

I thought all the reviews were interesting in some way, if only for describing the contents of the work and its import. Among the books reviewed I might try to locate those of James Harpur (a story-form history of the Christian mystical tradition) and Thomas Casey (a worldly and profound analysis of Western culture).