

## A Redeemed World Perceived by Intellect and Imagination

Review of

*The Merton Annual*, Volume 27 (2014)

Edited by David Joseph Belcastro and Joseph Quinn Raab

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Reviewed by **John P. Collins**

In his insightful introduction to the latest volume of *The Merton Annual*, entitled “An International Centenary Celebration of Merton’s Vision of the World Redeemed by Christ” (7-14), editor David Belcastro explains that this special anniversary edition of the *Annual* is a collection of essays considering aspects of Czeslaw Milosz’s comment to his friend and correspondent Thomas Merton about readers’ desire to learn how the redeemed world appeared to the celebrated monk and author. Not all the essays are focused directly on the Merton-Milosz relationship but with careful attention readers can discern in each piece a connection, oblique at times, to the theme expressed in the introduction’s title.

“Christ Crucified: A Note on the Cover Image” by Roger Lipsey (15-21), considers the cruciform image created by Merton that is used as cover art for this volume. The essay provides a brief history of Merton’s artwork, from “brushed ink images on paper” (16) to his interest in printmaking encouraged by Kentucky printmaker Ulfert Wilke that led to the unusual image Merton created by inking the edges of an envelope in the shape of a cross.

The short essay by Milosz himself that follows, simply entitled “Merton” (22-24), was first read at the inaugural Polish Merton Conference in 2003 and subsequently translated into English from Polish by Anna Muranty. In his remarks, Milosz mentions his interest in Merton’s life, as revealed for example in his early poetry where he “presented New York as a Babylon of iniquity” (22). Milosz mentions the easy communication he had with Merton, attributing it to Merton’s bilingual skills and to his being well-read in both English and French. Especially perceptive is the observation by Milosz of Merton’s trip to Asia and how he remained a staunch Christian even while attempting to understand Tibetan Buddhism. Milosz states in the essay’s last sentence that he considered Merton, along with Simone Weil and Albert Camus, as “bright figures” amidst a twentieth-century world populated by “great criminals” (24).

Angela Alaimo O’Donnell’s creative essay “Poetry, Friendship and the Communion of Saints: Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz” (25-34) relates her discovery of and enthusiasm for the work of both poets and concludes with her own poem “The Conversation,” an imagined dialogue between Merton and Milosz during their brief meeting in San Francisco in October 1968.

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**John P. Collins** received the “Louie” award for service to the International Thomas Merton Society at the ITMS Fourteenth General Meeting in June 2015 in recognition of his decade as facilitator of the Shrewsbury, MA chapter of the ITMS, his ten years of monthly columns on Thomas Merton in the Worcester, MA *Catholic Free Press*, and his inauguration in 2013 of a chapter of the Merton Society at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution in Shirley, MA, which he has continued to lead since that time.

Paul Pearson has performed a great service for Merton scholars and readers by providing a transcription of the third of Merton's four conferences on James Joyce from 1968, given the title "Aesthetic and Contemplative Experience – James Joyce" (35-44). In his introductory note Pearson points out that Merton's commentary on Joyce's *Dubliners*, especially the final story, "The Dead," reveals his talent as a literary critic. Merton tells his audience: "The point of the story is that life is like this – life has this strange quality about it: that all of a sudden you are stopped by a situation which reveals to you that things are just absolutely utterly different from what you thought and you can't explain it" (39). The literary insights expressed by Merton in this lecture are reflective of the Milosz-Merton exchange of correspondence when they discussed the value of literary criticism as a means of expressing religious beliefs through fresh and new images.

An interview conducted by Detlev Cuntz entitled "A Conversation with Dr. Hildegard Goss-Mayr about Thomas Merton" (45-56) provides precious details on Goss-Mayr's discussions and correspondence with Merton on the issues of peace and nonviolence. At Goss-Mayr's request, Merton wrote the essay "Blessed are the Meek," his best-known "statement on the spirituality of non-violence" (46). In the interview, Goss-Mayr comments on Merton's spirituality of peacemaking grounded in his deep understanding of the Sermon on the Mount. Merton maintained that the Beatitudes were "a theological basis for nonviolence" (49) but cautioned against passivity and cowardice which could lead to inaction. Regarding their differing paths to non-violence, Goss-Mayr respected Merton's contemplative approach to the issue as a necessary complement to her own activism, stating: "I believe we need each other; one group has a more powerful charism of contemplation and the other of action" (51).

In "Rumours of Glory: Walking in the Dark Half-Light of Faith" (57-71), Christopher Pramuk uses the music of Bruce Cockburn as a point of entry to engage the fundamental question of this centenary volume: "For a human race marked and wounded by so many 'extremes,' what can it mean to live by 'a very vision of the world redeemed by Christ?'" (58). Pramuk points out the similarities and differences between Merton and Milosz in their search for an incarnated truth unavailable in abstractions. While both writers affirmed "the existential poverty of human condition" (61), Milosz's darker view focused on man's addiction to "self-love" and a "self-serving" nature (61) whereas Merton emphasized "the pure glory of God in us" (61) and "articulates a reality 'on the border of intellect and imagination'" (63).

In her essay "Internal Countries: Where the Self Redeemed by Christ Becomes the World Redeemed by Christ" (72-82), Fiona Gardner explores the dialogue between Merton and Milosz as it reveals their "connections and tensions" (73). Each poet's "internal country" contributed to their divergent viewpoints: Merton's grief upon learning of his mother's death is a psychological event juxtaposed to the more sociological and political events prevalent in Milosz's psyche represented by the history of Poland and Lithuania in the Nazi and Communist eras. Milosz challenges Merton to find truth and reality "on that border between the intellect and our imagination" (79). Indeed, these two Catholic writers were in harmony regarding their mutual concern for the decline of "the religious imagination" (80).

In "'Love Wins Because It Is Bad Business': The World Redeemed in Christ in *Eighteen Poems*" (83-98), Malgorzata Poks provides a refreshing interpretation of the cycle of Merton's love poems, maintaining that Merton's love for M did not separate him from God, but rather, enabled him to find a "sense of wholeness and sanity" (83). The central theme of the essay is that "to live in a world

redeemed by Christ,” lovers can rejoice in the majesty of God’s creation “made innocent and holy again” (84). The final parting between Merton and M is captured beautifully by Poks when she states: “Having survived their own harrowing of hell, they resurface with a renewed, although transformed, love for each other to live in the paradise bought back by their fidelity to each other” (98).

Milosz scholar Artur Rosman develops an in-depth portrayal of the poet primarily through two letters to Merton in his essay “‘How Could I not Think of This?’ – Milosz’s Thomistic Challenge to Merton” (99-106). In the first of these letters Milosz discusses the “vision of the world in Christ” (99) which has not been realized because of the decline of the religious imagination, specifically, the Catholic tradition. Rosman believes the challenge Milosz made to Merton was to reconstruct the vision. Rosman describes Milosz’s early life in Lithuania where he was influenced by “a Catholic sacramental imagination” (101) which later in his life degenerated into the darkness of despair. Milosz longs for a life that promises a salvation shaped by an “imaginative narrative.” Rosman presents Milosz’s prose-poem “*Esse*” as a “Thomistic trope” (105) which is descriptive of “the density Milosz senses in being” (106) and further explains that Milosz’s bleak worldview is despairing because there is a suspension of God as Being and eternal life enabling a “quasi-damnation” instead of the hope for salvation.

In his essay “Finding Christ in the East” (107-21), Michael Higgins cites Donald Grayston’s contention that Merton’s *New Seeds of Contemplation* was an integration of “Thomistic and Zen traditions” (108). He notes that theologian Herbert Richardson attached considerable importance to Merton’s trip to the East, during which Merton emulated the great Italian Jesuit missionary to China, Matteo Ricci, who adapted himself to the customs and attitudes of the Chinese. Merton likewise found a spiritual kinship with Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism and indeed found Christ outside of Christianity because as a Catholic, he was driven to recognize truth wherever he found it. His assertion that Christ can be apprehended outside of Christianity and that “authentic contemplation” is inherent in all religious traditions challenges traditional Christian thought.

Bonnie Thurston’s essay “‘An Entirely New Spiritual Reality’: Thomas Merton on Life in Christ” (122-32) serves as an apt companion piece to Rosman’s article. Thurston contends that the question about Merton’s understanding of a “world redeemed by Christ” is best answered by focusing on the phrase “in Christ” frequently found in Paul’s letters. She cites the section “Life in Christ” in *The New Man* as exemplifying this aspect of Pauline theology, and chapter 22 of *New Seeds of Contemplation* as an explication of the idea of being “in Christ,” drawn into the love and “circle of Christ’s influence” (130).

In his essay “Landscapes of Redemption: Thomas Merton’s Vision of the World from the Mount” (133-48), Fernando Beltrán Llavador looks to the Beatitudes as fulfilling the “vision of the world as ‘redeemed by Christ’” (133) and focuses particularly on Merton’s concern for “mercy, purity of heart and peacemaking” (134). He points to German theologian Eberhard Arnold’s book *Why We Live in Community*, which Merton referenced in a series of lectures to the Sisters of the Precious Blood in Alaska in 1968, just before his trip to Asia, and suggests that Merton was influenced by Arnold’s writings in his expression of “the power of love in contemplation and in community-building” (139).

The insightful article by Ross Labrie entitled “Merton on Art and Truth” (149-64) provides a clear understanding of the dialogue between Milosz and Merton about religious writing, linking both reason and imagination. Citing Merton’s interpretive study of William Faulkner’s short story “The Bear” and novel *The Wild Palms*, Labrie indicates that a key element of imagination was the

attainment of wisdom through a form of art that was an “accumulation” of intuitive truths. After considering Merton’s use of symbolism as “the essential *language* of art” (152), Labrie cites four of Merton’s 1960s books that responded to Milosz’s call for writing that linked reason and imagination to the search for truth: *Cables to the Ace*, *The Geography of Lograire*, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* and *Raids on the Unspeakable*. A key element in Labrie’s essay is the assertion that Merton was tenacious in his belief that art is important as a source of truth, a tenet expressed best in his poem “Wisdom,” in which he wrote: “I studied it and it taught me nothing. / I learned it and soon forgot everything else” (164).

In his article “Speaking Out for Those in Exile” (165-74), Glenn Loughrey explores the meaning of exile for Merton and Milosz and the subsequent impact of this theme on their dialogic correspondence. Loughrey reminds readers that Merton’s exile, of course, was his monastic vocation, which in the early years centered on a search for deep interior prayer. In later years Merton’s writings were insightful commentaries on “social justice, racism, war, materialism and non-violence” (165). The self-imposed exile by Milosz included leaving his native Poland and spending his remaining years primarily in France and America. Loughrey presents the reader with a clear understanding of the phrase “striving towards being” (the title of the collection of the Merton-Milosz correspondence) as the journey to one’s “true self.” Merton went into exile to find his true being in order to authentically engage with the world he left behind. So too, Milosz found his exile to foreign lands as a means to letting go of his “place in the world” thereby enabling his search for authentic self which is “the essence of exile” (173).

The thoroughly documented essay by Patrick F. O’Connell entitled “Redeeming the Time from Destruction” (175-200) prompted me to dust off my copy of Merton’s *Seeds of Destruction*. In the first part of the essay, O’Connell provides an interesting discussion about the difficulty Merton had in getting the book published in the mid-1960s, followed by a very detailed account of the process leading to the British version of the book, entitled *Redeeming the Time*, which included two essays from *Seeds*, “The Christian in World Crisis” and “The Christian in the Diaspora” along with a lengthy new essay entitled “The Church and the ‘Godless World,’” focused on the newly promulgated Vatican Council Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. O’Connell considers how the theme of redemption appears in the omitted, included and newly added essays of these overlapping volumes.

Joseph Raab introduces his “2013 Bibliographic Review Essay: The Grandeur of God in a Picture of Hell” (201-10) with a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem, “God’s Grandeur,” cleverly interweaving lines of the poem with Merton’s memorable opening paragraphs in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The first line in Hopkins’s poem celebrates the splendor of a world created by God but a world that has become “seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil” (202), a world that has become, in Merton’s words, “the picture of Hell” – a Merton phrase used by Pope Francis in his September 24, 2015 speech to the United States Congress. Raab strikes a hopeful chord as he introduces the reviews of Merton-related books, journals and media that conclude the volume. He states that Merton “found a richer and far more wondrous vision of the world redeemed – a vision of irrepressible hope and love – even for the world that we continue to make into a picture of hell” (202). Among the many reviews, one that particularly piqued my interest is the comprehensive review by Patrick O’Connell of the eight sets of remastered recordings of Merton conferences released in 2013 by Now You Know Media. After reading the review, I sent for two of the sets (both introduced by Michael Higgins):

*“All the Living and the Dead”*: *The Literature of James Joyce and Seeing the World in a Grain of Sand: Thomas Merton on Poetry*.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not mention the outstanding contribution to the Thomas Merton Centenary year made by co-editors David Belcastro and Joseph Raab, who deserve high praise for the many hours dedicated to preparing a volume with such a wide array of rich and varied essays, representing both international and American scholars. In addition, I recognize that there are many people behind the scenes that also contributed to the success of this special edition of *The Merton Annual*. Thanks to all!