

## An Anniversary Feast

Review of

*The Merton Annual*, Volume 31

Edited by Deborah Pope Kehoe and Joseph Quinn Raab

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This thirty-first volume of *The Merton Annual* coincides with the fiftieth anniversary of Thomas Merton's unexpected death in Thailand and is another valuable entry in the series. Following co-editor Deborah Pope Kehoe's informative overview, "The Dead Say Only One Word" (7-16), the articles explore Merton from a variety of angles, providing a satisfying and thought-provoking look at the man and his work. While each essay focuses on a different topic, all of these pieces demonstrate why Merton remains relevant today.

This volume contains several articles that focus on the last months of Merton's life in Asia and his death itself. In keeping with past editions, volume 31 begins with material by Merton himself. "Two Conferences on Prayer: India 1968" (17-40) provides a transcription of a pair of previously little-known presentations he gave to fellow religious in India while traveling on his much-anticipated trip to Asia. Merton roots his remarks for both of these talks in the context of that time, describing the ferment and cultural currents that the Church and clergy of America were navigating. Merton proclaims that despite all of these problems prayer is the lodestar for all Christians.

These talks from Merton are followed by a pair of homilies related to his death. First is the transcript of Fr. Daniel Walsh's moving remarks from Merton's funeral Mass (41-48), in which he reveals that Merton was contemplating his mortality on the eve of his trip to Asia and that they had discussed the possibility that Merton might not return. Walsh also highlights his old friend's almost unparalleled spiritual genius, as well as Merton's humanness. This is followed by Fr. Daniel Horan's "Seeds of Inspiration: The Life and Legacy of Thomas Merton (1915–1968)" (49-55), a homily delivered at Corpus Christi Church in New York City on the fiftieth anniversary of Merton's death. Horan also points to Merton's many gifts but emphasizes that his enduring relevance is his sheer humanity. Horan proclaims that Merton's constant pursuit of, and at times struggle with, his faith will resonate with younger generations who seek a more authentic exemplar.

In "Kanchenjunga – 'Yin-yang Palace of Opposites in Unity': Reflections on Thomas Merton's Experiences on the Mim Tea Estate Retreat" (75-85), Fiona Gardner delves into the concept of the coincidence of opposites, in which one overcomes dualism, and how Merton experienced it while in Asia. Gardner explores the history of this idea, and Merton's exposure

to it both in Western theology and philosophy as well as in Zen thought. With that foundation laid she is then able to explore his insights about a retreat he took on the Mim Tea Estate and his reflections on the mountain of Kanchenjunga shortly before his death. Gardner demonstrates how Merton's writing illustrates the overcoming of opposites and argues that this experience helped prepare him for a deeper and more profound mystical experience days later at Polonnaruwa.

### **Turning Toward the World**

There are also three insightful essays that consider Merton within the context of the social reform in the late 1960s. In "From the Mountain to the Cross: Revisiting 1968 through the Prophetic Words of King, Kennedy, Chavez and Merton" (56-66), Thomas Malewitz recounts significant events of 1968 and points to a spiritual kinship that can be found between Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Kennedy, Cesar Chavez and, of course, Thomas Merton. Malewitz explores how each responded to the tumult of that remarkable time, how they demonstrated their belief in the dignity and equality of all humanity, and how each serves as a prophetic witness today. Malewitz's essay is followed by "Crisis of Faith: Thomas Merton and the Death of Martin Luther King, Jr." (67-74), in which William Apel argues that the death of Dr. King had a significant impact on Merton. Apel believes it caused a short-lived crisis of faith, leading Merton to wonder if the Christian message of love was just an illusion. Apel supports that argument by pointing to correspondence with June Yungblut, a civil rights activist and personal friend of the King family, who helped rekindle Merton's belief in the Christian message of agapeic love.

One of the highlights of this volume comes from David Golemboski. In "The Familiar Perspectives of American History: Thomas Merton on Black and Indigenous Oppression in the United States" (113-27), he contextualizes one of Merton's lesser-known works, *Ishi Means Man*, with his other writings about racial justice. Golemboski makes a persuasive argument that the white ruling class has used three specific modes, or hegemonies of power, to oppress people of color for centuries. He shows how Merton recognized that even well-intentioned white people have approached racial equality from a position of ingrained racial superiority, assuming their experience to be normative, and that to be human is to be white. Golemboski also explores how the cycle of violence, directed against and committed by people of color has only continued to perpetuate the status quo.

### **Merton the Writer**

This volume includes two discussions that focus on Merton's epic poem *The Geography of Lograire*. First, in "Disrupting Disparities in a Mythic Place: Internal Engagement in the Country of Lograire" (86-95), Kathleen Baker shows how in this work Merton created an interior, virtual world in which one can avoid participating with the violent power elite of the time. This space is not an escape into fantasy; instead, it is a world that one is encouraged to enter and explore in order to devise solutions to problems in the real world. Malgorzata Poks also writes about *Lograire*, in "Dismantling the Rule of the Father: Towards the Kingdom of the Im/Possible in *The Geography of Lograire*" (96-112), in which she argues that the violence depicted in this work emanates from patriarchal rule. She also points to ways that Merton seems to challenge the reader to use the imagination to see the world as God does so that "A kingdom of love and justice can be made real" (111).

In addition, Marcela Raggio focuses on Merton's poetry and other writings of the 1960s in "Thomas Merton's Nostalgia" (128-45) to propose that Merton employs a kind of restorative nostalgia in which one can rebuild "the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. . . . Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past" (131). She argues that Merton's work during this time was in part an effort to reconfigure flawed social and religious institutions and practices that were in need of reform.

In "Writing in the Shadow of the Apocalyptic Cherub: Autobiographical Forms in *Day of a Stranger*" (158-65), Zachary Garrett focuses on the changes in Merton's autobiographical style, comparing *The Seven Storey Mountain* to later works. He argues that changes in the world, and Merton's place in it, affected his rhetorical style, and demonstrates how Merton moved from a historic autobiographical style to a more philosophical and poetic approach in which his writing "functions more like a biblical parable than an autobiographical text" (165).

### **Merton and Relating to Others**

This is preceded by "From 'Get out of My Way' to 'Shining like the Sun': Thomas Merton on Cities, Community and Solitude" (146-57), a personal essay in which Chad Thralls reflects on how Merton finds solitude while living in community and its implications for living in a large city today, like his own New York. He also points to ways that Merton can help us break down the confines of our own tribalism.

Finally, the concluding article in this volume is Michael N. McGregor's wonderful 2017 ITMS General Meeting plenary presentation, "Harpo and the Clown of God: The Seven-Storey Friendship of Thomas Merton and Robert Lax" (166-85). McGregor, author of *Pure Act: The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax*, describes the arc of the friendship between Merton and Lax, from their college days at Columbia, through their intimate and often wonderfully silly correspondence, until their last meeting at Gethsemani in June 1968.

### **Reviews**

These essays are followed by co-editor Joseph Raab's "A Prophet Is Never Passé: A Bibliographic Review of 2017" (186-200) and individual reviews of eight books (201-35), an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the latest Merton scholarship. Raab and his co-editor deserve our praise and gratitude for their expert editing of this volume. Scholars like these, along with those who contributed essays and reviews, help preserve and promote Merton's multifaceted work so that he can keep speaking to our troubled world.