

Cultivating a Garden of Friends

Review of

The Merton Annual Volume 35

Edited by Deborah Pope Kehoe and David Golemboski

Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2022

288 pages / \$19.95 paper

Reviewed by **Elizabeth Burkemper**

As Earth experiences record heat, as wars continue, as climate disasters unfold, the life and legacy of Thomas Merton continue to offer a refuge – a model of contemplative living for and into the world. Merton helped to transform “prayer into protest, contemplation into resistance” (77) and lived a life that was deeply celebratory of friendship and interrelationship nourished by the insights of mutual solitude. One of the latest iterations of Merton’s legacy is Volume 35 of *The Merton Annual*. This volume spans from archival pieces – such as a collection of letters from Jim Forest to Thomas Merton – to seven original essays adding to the great body of Merton scholarship, holding Merton’s contemporaries and contemporary admiring readers in communion. Borrowing from an excerpt of Sophronia Scott’s award-winning book *The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton*, co-editor David Golemboski titles his introduction to Volume 35 “A Society of ‘Soul Friends’” (7-13), touching upon the depth and sincerity of the friendships Merton cultivated in his lifetime and which his legacy continues to cultivate.

In a similar vein, Marcela Raggio’s insightful essay “‘Frogs in One Pond’: An Approach to Merton’s *Monks Pond*” (163-73) speaks of Merton “tend[ing] to his *garden* of friends through the years (especially after his Fourth and Walnut experience, when his epistolary outpouring grew exponentially)” (167). Merton’s “garden” blossomed such that in 1968, when he received so many poetry and prose contributions from friends for his little magazine *Monks Pond*, he mused that the “‘Pond is overflowing’ [MP 116]” (167). We might say the same of the abundant Mertonian wisdom and community embodied by Volume 35 of *The Merton Annual* – this 2022 collection shows that Merton’s garden is lush and green and overflowing, perhaps holding just the balm we need for our time.

The volume opens with “Letters to Tom (1961-1965)” (14-70), an extensive collection of largely unpublished letters written to Thomas Merton by peace activist Jim Forest from 1961 through 1965. We witness the young Forest, freshly a conscientious objector and convert to Catholicism, penning earnest letters to Merton in the early, trying days of the Catholic peace movement: “Let us pray for each other, that hope may not be chocked off by our blustering reality,” Forest implores in an

Elizabeth Burkemper, born and raised in Troy, Missouri, holds a B.A. in Peace Studies and Sustainability from the George Washington University and a Master of Arts in Religion and Ecology from Yale Divinity School. She is interested in snail mail, ecopoetry and practices of cultivating attentiveness and responsiveness to multispecies entanglements in everyday life. She lives and works in New Haven, Connecticut as an assistant for the Life Worth Living Program at the Yale Center for Faith & Culture. She is a former Daggy Scholar (2017) and currently serves on the ITMS Board of Directors.

August 1964 letter (45). It is clear that the two engage in vibrant dialogue about everything from the escalation of the Vietnam War and the Catholic Church's inaction on peace issues, to Forest's personal struggle to discern his vocation in the face of a turbulent world. And while Merton's now-famous February 1966 "Letter to a Young Activist" is widely quoted for urging Forest "Do not depend upon the hope of results," these earlier letters attest that Forest was already thinking in terms of acting without attachment to ends. In his March 30, 1964 letter to "Tom," Forest writes: "We do not know how successful it was for Our Lord to chase the money changers from the temple – the final effect of the act is not recorded. I do not think the action was prompted by a consideration as to whether it would succeed ultimately in abolishing the evil" (33). Following Jim Forest's death on January 13, 2022, the publication of these letters (edited and introduced by Patrick O'Connell) is an opportunity to remember Forest's lifelong voice for peace as well as to appreciate his and Merton's deeply spiritual and mutually life-giving friendship.

Volume 35 continues with a reprinted article from another of Merton's interlocutors: Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether and her lesser known 1973 article "Monks and Marxists: A Look at the Catholic Left" (71-84), again introduced by Patrick O'Connell. While Ruether described herself in their correspondence as "ruthless[ly] questioning . . . Merton's own integrity" (72) for persisting as a Catholic monk despite the Church's shortcomings, the article – published five years after Merton's death – considers Merton with generosity and appreciation. Ruether suggests the Catholic Worker movement and Merton's monastic spirituality to be "the twin roots from which the US Catholic Left took its immediate spiritual heritage" (77). Specifically, she writes: "In retreats at Gethsemane [*sic*], through his writings and voluminous correspondence, Merton helped to form a spirituality that transformed prayer into protest, contemplation into resistance to the powers and principalities of a murderous world" (77). The resurfacing of Ruether's rare article grants us meaningful insights beyond the oft-referenced correspondence between Ruether and Merton. While in letters she questioned the potency of his monastic station, this public article celebrates Merton's spirituality – that cultivated and shared by his contemplative, relationally oriented monasticism – for providing a meaningful grounding for the US Catholic Left.

The influence of Merton's contemplative voice is also spotlighted in John Main's previously unpublished "Letter from a Hermitage" (85-95), written from Merton's hermitage while the Benedictine contemplative was speaking at Gethsemani in November 1976. In the letter's introduction, Nicholas Scrimenti describes the letter as "unlike anything else in Main's published corpus" (87), for its prophetically diagnostic tone towards the spiritual and political challenges facing President-elect Jimmy Carter was a rare mode for Main. So inspired by his stay in the hermitage that he "*channel[ed]*" Merton's presence (86), as Scrimenti recognizes, Main critiques those public leaders who invoke God's name even as they spread lies – those who have yet to find "ultimate oneness" by "fully accepting one's own self in the necessary solitude of prayer" (94). Sadly Main never met or corresponded with Merton. However, Main embraced Merton's ongoing presence as a voice of and for contemplation – a presence felt both in the physical space of the hermitage and in Merton's literary legacy – and joined Merton's teeming garden of friends.

David Odorisio's interview with Brendan Collins, titled "From *Monastic Studies* to Monastic Renewal" (96-114), also explores Merton's contemplative voice through Collins' relationship with Merton and their conversations about monastic renewal in the 1960s. From 1962 to 1967, Brendan

Collins (formerly Fr. Bernard) edited the *Monastic Studies* journal, to and for which Merton was an enthusiastic contributor and supporter. (When *CrossCurrents*, a more prominent journal, wanted something Merton had written for *Monastic Studies*, Merton wrote to Collins: “I am getting tired of other people grabbing what I write for you” [106].) Their relationship began when Collins wrote to Merton thanking him “for his part in my vocation” (99), and is revealed to be so meaningful to Collins that Merton’s “death felt like the end of [his] own monastic life, and it was, as far as an institutional monastic life was concerned” (114). However, Merton’s voice stayed with Collins, initially reminding him of the “humanness” of the “inner search” undertaken in the monastic life (97), and ultimately helping him to discover “that the right contemplative life . . . was living it in the world with someone [he] loved” (114).

The volume then turns toward seven original essays traversing different facets of Merton’s literary output. First among them is Matthew Boedy’s “Merton, Kenosis and Rhetorical Invention” (115-27), which explores Merton’s engagement with the theological principle of *kenosis* in his writing. *Kenosis* is a form of self-forgetting or self-emptying, particularly disclosed in Jesus’ emptying himself on the cross (see Phil. 2:7). Boedy writes: “Merton saw kenosis connected to understanding the power we give to language and therefore creation of it” (117). In other words, kenotic experiences of becoming “no-thing” (118) – such as Merton’s experience at Fourth and Walnut – opened up the possibility for creative playfulness with language, especially in genres like poetry. Emptying himself helped move Merton towards “‘bring[ing] forth a few good words about’ reality” (121) that help to serve “crying human needs, both material and spiritual” (126) rather than adding to the noise of ego-drawn language.

Merton’s poetics is further toured in Patrick F. O’Connell’s “Apocalypse Now? Thomas Merton as Post-War Poet” (128-50) and Bret van den Brink’s “Compassion’s Sweet Poison: The Sources of Thomas Merton’s ‘Origen’” (151-62). O’Connell’s piece dives deep into the 363-line opening poetic sequence of *Figures for an Apocalypse* (published in 1947) as a grim though fleeting moment of “post-war apocalypticism” for Merton (149). In Merton’s use of vivid scriptural depictions of good and evil at this moment in time, the poem, O’Connell proposes, offers us great insight into Merton’s “early struggles to confront the actual and potential destructiveness of massive evil” in the mid-twentieth century (150). Van den Brink examines the 1965 poem “Origen” as Merton’s contribution to the vigorous debates on the legacy of early Christian theologian Origen of Alexandria. Specifically, Merton was “engaged in the rehabilitation of Origen in Catholic theology” (151), sourcing from (and placing himself in dialogic agreement with) theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar and Henri de Lubac. Van den Brink nevertheless sees Merton using the poem “to show Origen in all his ambiguity” (160), and Merton’s literary reach meant that his nuanced perspective on Origen was available for many via his poem.

Marcela Raggio’s “‘Frogs in One Pond’: An Approach to Thomas Merton’s *Monks Pond*” (163-73) pivots to Merton’s role as editor in publishing his own avant-garde poetry magazine *Monks Pond* in 1968. Raggio highlights that while *Monks Pond* is sometimes critiqued for being “a bit anarchistic” (64) or too enthusiastic (see 167), as Merton solicited and accepted an eclectic collection of poems and written pieces from his friends and friends of friends, it indeed has a program. *Monks Pond*, she demonstrates, is collective, transnational and illustrative of “intellectual networks in action” (164). This experimental project of Merton’s represents both a continuation and a deeper iteration

of his tending “to his *garden of friends*” (167), as heterogeneous and organically harmonious as a real green garden. Importantly, Raggio emphasizes that the experimental, full-to-bursting project of friends that is *Monks Pond* demonstrates that in Merton’s “embrace of the marginal, there is room for everyone” (173).

James G. R. Cronin’s “Disarming Discourse: Thomas Merton’s *Breakthrough to Peace*, October 1961–September 1962” (174-88) continues the volume’s conversation about Merton’s voice for peace. Cronin explores *Breakthrough to Peace: Twelve Views on the Threat of Thermonuclear Extermination* (published in 1962), explicitly introduced but anonymously edited by Merton due to Trappist censorship, as a significant node in Merton’s engagement with the Catholic peace movement.

The final two essays in this volume – Alicia Mendonça-Richards’ “The Relevance of *New Seeds of Contemplation* to Contemporary Pastoral Practitioners” (189-202) and Aaron K. Kerr’s “Earth Alive in the Third Space: Merton’s Contemplative Vision for a Prophetic Minority” (203-13) – bring Merton’s contemplative wisdom to bear on weighty issues of the present. Mendonça-Richards examines Merton’s *New Seeds* with an eye towards how it might guide contemporary pastoral and spiritual practices. How might *New Seeds*, as a revised project bearing “the fruits of Merton’s own journey from fleeing the world to loving it” (189), inform contemporary pastoral practitioners facing things like secularism, climate emergency and neoliberalism? At the center of her reflection, Mendonça-Richards emphasizes that Merton’s contemplative practice, his continual and earnest attempt “to come into contact with ‘the Real within all that is real’” (194) was what “enabled him to integrate all aspects of his humanity” (196). Merton’s model of contemplation, she writes, offers groundedness to those grappling with the world’s fragmentation and noise – pastoral practitioners and ordinary spiritual seekers alike. Similarly, Aaron K. Kerr meditates on Merton’s letter-writing practice as a contrarian act in the face of consumption patterns “that smother the reality of the soul” (204). To Kerr, Merton’s letters offer a “third space” beyond the traditional dualism of world affirmation and negation (209). That is, Merton’s practice of epistolary exchange represents and enacts a deep relationality and reciprocity – a genuine encounter between persons that stands in contrast to the transactional, extractive patterns of the consumer economy. If, Kerr suggests, we engage in practices of “contemplative sharing” like letter-writing as Merton so ardently did, might we become “more fully ourselves” in a way that the world needs now (213)?

Volume 35 comes to a close with co-editor Deborah Pope Kehoe’s thoughtful bibliographic review of books by or pertaining to Thomas Merton that were published in 2021 (214-30), which precedes 11 formal book reviews (231-74). Kehoe recognizes that the eclectic bibliographic output of 2021 nevertheless holds in common the wisdom of “Thomas Merton’s mature contemplative mind” (215). Cultivated and enriched by his contemplative practice during his lifetime, Merton’s voice remains ever-insightful about our concerns and responsibilities today.

This thirty-fifth volume of *The Merton Annual* provides the reminder from Mendonça-Richards that for Merton, “once we are awake to God’s invitation to love in every moment, we cannot but help reflect that love back into the world” (199-200). May reading this volume be an invitation (back) into Merton’s overflowing and lovingly tended garden of friends – an invitation into the ever-embracing love available every moment in the space of contemplation that persists through fire and rain.