"Easter Fugue" out of a "Great Spiritual Silence": 1993 in Merton Scholarship and Publication

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Publications in this year leading up to the December 10, 1993, twenty-fifth anniversary of Thomas Merton's death are best described as revisionist. We enjoy the poet and literary figure of Merton in a fourth volume of his selected letters (this one to writers) and in a fellow poet's "memory vision" tracing a decade of both friendship and apprenticeship. This pair of books affords an antidote to the sometimes claustrophobic effect in presentations of the cloistered, univocal monk-Merton. We need a simultaneously binocular appreciation of both the poet and monk to perceive the true depth of his lived monastic charism expressed through his literary gifts.

The uneven selection of Merton books for this year will undoubtedly be mirrored and multiplied in the avalanche of 1994 publications that have been spilling from the twenty-fifth anniversary symposia, conferences, and remembrances. However, other authors launched 1993 journal articles challenging the lingua franca of the Merton scholarly establishment and its image makers. Such signs prompt that we are indeed maturing into a more scholarly appraisal of Merton's strengths and lacunae, as well as of the weaknesses in earlier scholars' uncritical enthusiasms and oversights.

With the publication of more Merton letters and the first-person reminiscence (alias "memory vision"), new questions occur. How are the letters to be weighed as autobiography? What real distinctions demarcate the genre of letters from journals? Or from some journal-like entries in the "working notebooks"? With the publication of seven volumes of Merton journals now projected, these and related questions deserve attention. Not only do we wrestle with these Merton sources, but the first-person-narrated reminiscences of friends of Merton will undoubtedly multiply. Where do we draw the line between a recollected matter of fact and an interpretation? What to do in the event of conflicting reports of facts, let alone the inevitable clash of interpretations? In the midst of such musings, I remind myself that Michael Mott's *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* only grows more authoritative as a meticulously researched and reliable Baedeker to the essential Merton. Mott's biography deserves a wider reading public as both introduction and source of interpretation. Despite more recent quasi-biographical efforts, Mott's highly readable and probing effort remains without peer. The pairing of Anne Carr's concise preface with Lawrence S. Cunningham's well-organized introduction to *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* complements Mott's volume by refining the monastic identity and vocation. But those essays emanate from a very different project. More of this conversation later, but now for a survey of 1993 Mertoniana.

Books

Thomas Merton. *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers.* Selected and edited by Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1993). xiv + 314 pages. Hardcover $27.95.

Toward the end of *The Courage for Truth* we find a magnificently candid series of epistles addressed to an unlikely correspondent for a Cistercian monk: the controversial and provocative Henry Miller. Their mutual respect engendered some of the most unguarded Merton letters. His free voice and often irreverent tone characterize the bulk of this fourth and best collection yet in the projected five-volume series of Merton's selected correspondence.

Two passages, one to Henry Miller and a second to poet Louis Zukofsky, set the poles for this collection. When Merton judges the failures of today's religion as "the greatest orgy of idolatry the world has ever known," he frankly confesses in the August 1962 letter to Miller that even as a priest he ought "to be able to give Christ's answer. But unfortunately . . . it is no longer a matter of answers. It is a time perhaps of great spiritual silence." Merton writes to Zukofsky nearly five years later that his own poetry has recovered the paradise

vision that he lauds in the musicologist's own poetry. And we move from the great spiritual silence to Merton's description of Zukofsky's work "'A' 7" as "a most marvelous Easter fugue":

> . . . You are in fact sacred music but as it should be, not just Church music. With the kind of secularity that is in Bach. And the compassion. The great Lenten compassion and sense of rising from the dead that must happen, that happens, that art is all about. The victory over death. This is the real witness to the world and you are the one who is saying it most clearly. . . . I really get the breath knocked out of me completely by some of those "A's." The way in "A" 7 the perspectives fuse in and out of each other and the dead and the alive interchange and come into focus, and the echoes of the psalms in scorn of idols, the dead wood, the dead and living horses, oh my. Such praise.

The Courage for Truth records Merton's own fugue spoken out of the great silence. In these pages he celebrates the poet's freedom to scorn the orgy of religious "idolatry" by fusing death and life in poignant, even intimate letters to fellow writers, most of them poets and many of those poets from Latin America. Two years after the letter to Henry Miller he quips about the novelist's remarking a striking resemblance to himself in a photo Merton had sent; Miller also thought the monk's companion in the photo, poet Miguel Grinberg, resembled an ex-convict. Merton replied: "In a world of furnaces and DP's it would be hideously immoral for someone, especially a priest, to be well, totally sane, perfectly content with everything, knowing which end is up. . . . Yes, I have got some good hellburns all over me."

Since so many of these Merton correspondents were later contacts from Latin America, readers will savor the liberated monk of the 1960s in these relaxed paragraphs. To his former novice, Nicaraguan Ernesto Cardenal, he confesses that he feels more a part of the scene in Spanish American poetry than in North America "where I am a bramble among the flowers." This kinship with Latin America ripples in concentric circles throughout these letters. Perhaps the collection of letters addressed to Cardenal is the most valuable because in them Merton's identities as contemplative, poet, social critic, and Churchperson all converge. At times he speaks as the spiritual director; or the fellow poet; or the social visionary forseeing the unity of the Americas, which he then lamented as "the rootless culture . . ., a sort

of cancerous orchid transplanted from somewhere else." So he recommends to the Nicaraguan priest the task of "spiritual reconciliation . . .[,] a redemptive and healing work that begins with *hearing*. We already begin to heal those to whom we listen." He can speak candidly to Cardenal about his own aborted efforts to leave Gethsemani, and eventually he redefines his monastic identity in his letters to this liberation theologian because their friendship is multifaceted and anchored in poets' souls.

In a lengthy May 16, 1960, letter to the Polish poet, former diplomat, and writer Czeslaw Milosz, Merton remarks about a manuscript, "I do not say it represents much but it is my own authentic voice of the moment. . . ." Thus he unwittingly names his own metier. Less than a year later he writes again, resonating with Milosz's metaphor of the "spellbound dance of paralytics" to describe our obsession with a "fog" of concepts, knowledge, and techniques to address "illusory answers to illusory problems." He points to the "poison" of our evading the expression of what is most important to us.

But there is nothing evasive about Merton in this fourth volume of letters. He speaks throughout of the reality of the post-Christian world. In 1961 he writes to Brazilian scholar and teacher Alceu Amoroso Lima about Christianity "vanishing into an age of shadows and uncertainty." He chides his own monastery as a deceptive greenhouse: "And grains of error planted innocently in a well-kept greenhouse become giant poisonous trees." Death and life wrestle in Merton's fugue as he concludes to Lima with an unmistakably mature faith: "Our faith can no longer serve merely as a happiness pill. It has to be the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. And this it will be, for all of us who so desire."

Readers of this fine selection of letters edited by Christine M. Bochen of Nazareth College will find far more than might be expected in a volume quietly subtitled "Letters to Writers." Merton struggles openly with the "authentic voice of the moment" on issues ranging from monasticism to his ongoing struggle for his identity as a true self. The "hellburns" he admitted to Henry Miller are amply illustrated as he agonizes over having shadowboxed with a medley of false selves and personae. To Clayton Eshleman, University of Indiana translator of Pablo Neruda and César Vallejo's poetry, Merton writes in May 1966 that "there is no question that the great issue is freedom. From Urizen's goddam hammers." But Merton elaborates important defi-

nitions of religion, spirituality, and the Church itself in these porous letters. They are the treasure chest of his spiritual legacy. To Pablo Antonio Cuadra in 1963 he laments the obsession with technics and results that lead the human spirit to be "overwhelmed by the riot of its own richness, which in the end is the worst kind of poverty." He concludes by seeking truth, "constantly discerning it from the obsessive fictions of the establishment everywhere."

The range of correspondents in the letters is remarkably diverse, including Evelyn Waugh, Jacques Maritain, Walker Percy, James Baldwin, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, among others. In a 1967 curriculum vitae addressed to Jonathan Williams, Merton proves self-deprecating as he writes, "Autobiography 1948 created a general hallucination followed by too many pious books. Back to poetry in the fifties and sixties. Gradual backing away from the monastic institution until now I live alone in the woods not claiming to be anything, except of course Catalan." Indeed, the woods surrounding Merton's hermitage figure prominently in his enthusiastic reports to correspondents. For from the environs of the hermitage, amid a great spiritual silence, Merton voiced his own authentic moments in an unmistakable Easter fugue.

Song for Nobody: A Memory Vision of Thomas Merton. Ron Seitz. Ligouri, Missouri: Triumph Books, 1993. 188 pages. Hardcover $19.95.

Midway in the opening part of this provocative portrait of Thomas Merton, Ron Seitz names the immediate emotion engaged upon remembering his friend: "a run-on endless heart movie I can hardly control." *Song for Nobody* begins with a flashback to twenty years earlier and the death of Merton of Gethsemani in 1968. Gloom. Doom. It is a dicey, brooding overture with its own disonnance and abrupt lurches ahead. We fast-forward and it is December 1988. Seitz teases his strength and foolishness to imagine again Merton. He quickly finds himself heading for the abbey "to wipe clean my vision, to begin again fresh with memory—the only instrument of inspiration and creativity to compose a portrait of the Thomas Merton I knew." On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the monk's death we receive a poet's rendering.

This is a book calibrated with the eyewitness fervor of other intimate friends' remembered visions—the likes of John Howard Griffin, Bob Lax, Ed Rice, and Jim Forest. But its author is more transparent than the others. This is a book as much about the author's ongoing

conversion and search for a spiritual foothold as it is about his famous monk-friend. Seitz's voice sometimes whines rather than laments. There is an echo of Jack Kerouac's bravado that Seitz admits is often counterfeit. The most apt image I find to describe his venture is that of the tightrope walker dangling over a perilous chasm of the maudlin. Seitz even quotes Merton once sarcastically describing him as "gargling with language." But there is an uncanny quality about this book that refuses to let the reader look away. By the final pages, the author's confidence has steadied him across the tightrope. What has emerged is the story of a unique ten-year relationship between monk and professor-poet-beatnik-husband-father-spiritual questor.

If ever we needed an antidote to Merton's self-admitted concern that he would be turned into a myth for parochial school children, *Song for Nobody* writes the prescription. Beneath the problematic veneer of Seitz's hero worship and sense of loss is the sometimes temperamental, always human monk. The personae fade in this earthy, vibrant, and sometimes unpolished rendition of the sinewy poet-prophet. At times Seitz recollects an irreverent Merton who demolishes monastic observances when they distort a deeper spiritual identity. The much-discussed polarization of contemplation and art are reconciled in Merton's own telling, remembered by his poet-confidante. Perhaps Seitz puts it best early in his memory vision when he judges that from the beginning "Tom was a 'Body Poet.' "

> I think that the spirit of Eros had finally reclaimed him in his last years—that he was open to touch others in the concrete, the immediate, the (if you will) existential flesh. I think that, at long last, he had "let go" for the free fall that comes with the final acceptance, the trust, and love of one's own person. . . . He was "at home with/in creation."

Such insights gauge Seitz's affinity for the key themes of Merton's spirituality: the true self, contemplative awakening, the cosmic Christ, the "hidden wholeness," the desert experience, paradise consciousness. If he unabashedly promotes Merton's identity as poet he compels readers to be persuaded that this was Merton's natural, even primary, gift. The scholar-theologian-philosopher identity fares poorly in Seitz's recounting the monk-hermit's story. But Merton himself fueled this critique with the banter and self-deprecation he exchanged with the poet with whom he indulged an uncommon intimacy. It is

obvious that Seitz's flirting with a monastic vocation in 1958, combined with his irreverence for what Merton called "simulated monasticism," made him an engaging poet-comrade. The exchanges of Zen archery, haiku, and sarcasm evidence Seitz's deft counterpunches in response to Merton's leading. The two men grew to love each other. There lingers throughout their relationship something of the surrogate father and son quality. The fact that Seitz's spiritual mentor was Dan Walsh forged an even stronger kinship.

Where biographers and commentators have overlooked Merton's prowess as a poet, Seitz explores and ends up quarrying rich spiritual ore. He appreciates the apophatic mysticism of silence where words run out. But out of such silence emerges the poet's word. He can name the "language tangle" of discursive thought when he and Merton come to an impasse. But the exchange of glances, like the images in a poem, communicates the contemplative's letting-go of self-consciousness for the no-mind that accepts and celebrates things just as they are. Merton had taught Seitz to use his camera as such a contemplative instrument, "to stop looking and to begin seeing."

While few have attempted to integrate Merton's late, lengthy antipoems, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire,* into his spiritual vision, Seitz offers an interpretation of these poems in terms of the monk's lyric essay "Rain and the Rhinoceros." Both are directed against subtle modern totalitarianisms. One wishes that he had made stronger connections with Merton's protest against racism and urban violence, war, and secularization in his attention to Merton's meandering antipoetry.

The final days with Merton before the trip to Asia are narrated with intense feeling. There is melancholy as he describes the final minutes at the hermitage and the last meal with a circle of friends in Louisville, the scene of some apparently large egos clamoring for Merton's attention. More poignant is the playful lunch Seitz and Merton shared with Seitz's toddler sons and his wife. The final morning before driving him to the airport, Seitz pleaded with Merton for a dialogue on the absolute essentials of the Christian faith. The monk unfolded a last testament on the cosmic Christ and Christian hope that offered the author "some kind of peace to a proud, but troubled soul." This summons to trust in the ultimate goodness of creation resonates well with Merton's spirituality and indexes Seitz's insight into his friend's soul.

Like other books on Merton, Seitz's suffers from a certain one-dimensionality. He so focuses on the poet that he risks overlooking the total integration of monk-social critic-ecumenist-mystic-theologian. The very strength of his portrait is also his weakness. But Merton scholarship grows with the cumulative effect of such converging studies. Seitz gives us access to the affective and childlike side of Merton which often evaporates from the dense pages of his prose. His poetic profile of Merton has forced us to reconsider the relative balance in a multifaceted personality.

Laughter: The legacy that ultimately effervesces from the pages of *Song for Nobody* is the rib-shaking, face-creasing, belly laughter shared between Thomas Merton and Ron Seitz. There is something of the vaudeville exchanged between two clowning wits. A mocking, ironic humor volleys between these poets with whiplash speed. It is refreshing to hear Merton described by one of his intimates as vulnerable enough to laugh and to weep. Seitz accuses some of Merton's detractors as misinterpreting the vulnerability as naiveté. He interprets the monk's relationship with a student nurse in 1966 as just such a misinterpretation. The gamut of Merton's spirit enlarges with both the weeping and the laughing.

Song for Nobody is not an easy read for those expecting a linear biography. The syntax, cryptic haiku, "song space," sentence fragments, and other evidences of Seitz's poetic license challenge and occasionally escape even alert readers. The mixture of stream of consciousness, poetry, letters, sarcasm, mock humor, private meanings, and Zen all combine for a playful but rewarding effort. Over thirty black-and-white photographs of Merton and his abbey environs (most from Seitz's own camera) grace the book.

A final caveat: Not since Ed Rice's *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* have we encountered so much interpretation "remembered" by a Merton intimate. The sheer volume of material, including dialogue, which is recorded in this volume (and Rice's) raises questions for scholars about the first-person attributions these authors make. This is not to discredit in any way their contribution. But Merton research and scholarship needs to find a method to integrate, to assess, and to critique the relative significance and merits of this genre of the remembered Merton.

Meditations With Merton. Nicki Verploegen Vandergrift. Ligouri, Missouri: Ligouri Publications, 1993. 80 pages. Paperback $4.95.

This modest book uses excerpts from Merton's writings and launches into meditations on a series of spiritual themes. The author describes her effort as "an attempt to reflect on [Merton's] words in light of everyday living." A related Scripture passage and original prayer complete each entry.

The resulting collage reads more like a contemporary commentary on excerpts from *New Seeds of Contemplation,* the text most heavily quoted. In fact, one of the weaknesses of this volume is the disproportionate use of that single text, although several passages from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* earn a place as catalysts for the meditations. The passages are well selected, concise, and represent some of Merton's best spiritual writing. While the text is arranged into ten sections—Personal Integrity, Sanctity in Life, Seeds of Identity, Integration, The God Within, Labor, Solidarity and Service, Words of God, God's Will, and Love Is a Foundation—the overall structure is not apparent and seems random.

No doubt these meditations are deeply felt and well-written spiritual reflections. However, the genre of such spiritual meditations might be represented in some more accurate manner than through the description "with Merton." There is a contemplative sensibility in the meditations coupled with a sense of Eastern as well as Western spirituality. What seems to be lacking is the deeper social consciousness and compassionate protest that characterize the mature Merton. Because he grew beyond the classical expressions of *New Seeds of Contemplation,* Merton's later works deserve more attention in these meditations. The thirty-two brief meditations do make for good spiritual reading in their own right. This is a book that might be used for Lenten spiritual exercises or as a retreat instrument.

A Seven Day Journey With Thomas Merton. Esther de Waal. Foreword by Henri Nouwen. Photographs by Thomas Merton. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Publications, 1992. 114 pages. Paperback, $12.99.

Esther de Waal's reflective and handsome volume succeeds where Vandergrift falters. A Benedictine and Celtic spirituality scholar, she intentionally sketches the "retreat design" on her seven days' journey as an effort to gauge Merton's effect on her own spiritual life. But she insists that hers is "not a book about Thomas Merton" and for that reason her well-selected borrowings incorporate his insights without eclipsing the primacy of the reader's discovery of the contemplative awareness of God's presence in life. De Waal's second chapter, "Thomas Merton's Journey," however, does offer a cogent interpretation of his monastic identity and his holistic spiritual attitude that incorporated body, mind, imagination, spirit, and all the senses. Her interpretation of Merton's story as a paradigm for all of our stories is well wrought in terms of the parable of the Prodigal Son.

The seven days that structure the book mark progressive moments toward an integration that equips the retreatant to resist the ambush and imperatives that rob us of time for contemplative prayer. In the first chapter, "The Call," de Waal relies upon John Howard Griffin's experience of silence and solitude to appropriate Merton's eremitic life as an awareness of vulnerability. When the illusion of strength is broken, then we cannot escape the awareness of God's mercy. Chapter 2, "Response," follows this perception of weakness, failure, darkness, and sin with a poignant reflection by Merton on compunction. The familiar Merton theme of the "true self" is ably unfolded in chapter 3, "The Solitary Within," where she deftly retrieves from the prologue of *The Rule of St. Benedict* the monastic therapy for sloth. This avoids both the torpid, semiconscious, half-alive and half-awake existence and the false self's need to be fed by achievement and acclamation.

The final four chapters, "Encounter with Christ," "The Demands of Love," "'Common and Natural and Ordinary,'" and "Integration," borrow from Merton an especially strong Christological focus. The affective dimension of the heart engages the mystery of the cross; Christ's love is portrayed as a forgiving love. This allows the retreatant to return to the world with an authentic love for others that relaxes its illusions and grasp, "since I no longer need their dependence." De Waal concludes by proposing the key to Merton's own journey from a *Seeds of Contemplation* text: "All our salvation begins on the level of common and natural and ordinary things." This plumbs the depths of Merton's sacramental consciousness and eventuates in his "wholeheartedness . . . which finds the same ground of love in everything." This sacramental principle allows us to rediscover the spontaneity to celebrate the sacredness of life.

One of de Waal's most effective tools in presenting excerpts from Merton is her arrangement of prose quotations in the form of lines of poetry. Such "found poems" evidence well his metaphoric gifts as a writer and halt us when we would ordinarily miss his meaning. Her first chapter, "How Do I Use This Time," offers unique practical notes and suggestions for the use of psalms and twenty-eight of Merton's photographs, which have been carefully chosen for their contemplative and artistic qualities and are masterfully interfaced with the text.

The only frustration in using this splendid volume concerns the "Notes and References," which are placed at the end of the book. It proves clumsy to identify quotations without footnotes and a few quotations are not identified. The unfortunate printing error that mispaginates the references in the last chapters needs to be corrected in future editions. The book is well researched and exhibits a careful and reflective familiarity with Merton's classic writings and more recent publications, such as his letters to religious in *The School of Charity*.

Swimming in the Sun: Discovering the Lord's Prayer with Francis of Assisi and Thomas Merton. Albert Haase. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1993. 216 pages. Paperback $9.95.

Franciscan Albert Haase's *Swimming in the Sun* is a book of contemporary spirituality, drinking from the wells of Francis of Assisi and Thomas Merton. It integrates three elements: (1) the importance of practical experience; (2) psychology; and (3) the wisdom of the world's relations, with an emphasis upon Christianity. Haase identifies the five important elements of personal spirituality as (1) one's image of God; (2) the present moment as the place of encounter with God; (3) community; (4) personal commitment to God's dream of peace, love, and justice; and (5) the practical importance of asceticism. The title of the book comes from Merton's description of the Lord's Prayer in *The Sign of Jonas*.

The design of this book will prove attractive to those who are seeking a more applied spirituality. The author has designed chapters to appropriate phrases from the Lord's Prayer in terms of Francis's and Merton's "spiritual wisdom." To this end he excerpts fine quotations from the writings of both (including Merton's poetry), plus some pearls from Merton's very effective Credence Cassettes tape recordings on spiritual titles. The author's illustrations and anecdotes abound, making this book more homiletic than scholarly in character. Although the breadth of sources Haase employs from the Merton canon evidence his scholarly abilities, each chapter concludes with a very practical list of questions labeled "Points for Reflection."

Swimming in the Sun offers a popularization of Merton's spirituality. The colloquial style and contemporary vernacular provide a user-friendly context and threshold for some of Merton's more polished and sometimes dense prose as well as for the biblical scholarship that Haase incorporates into the book.

Follow the Ecstasy: The Hermitage Years of Thomas Merton. John Howard Griffin. Edited with foreword by Robert Bonazzi. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993. xv + 158 pages. Paperback, $12.95.

Although this biography of Merton's final three years in the hermitage was originally published in 1983, this new Orbis edition deserves a note. Merton's friend John Howard Griffin was originally charged in 1969 with the project of the official biography. However, even after ten years his task remained incomplete and the debilitating effect of diabetes forced him to resign his commission. From his drafts of material his family and Latitudes Press have extracted the chapters on Merton's final years because, explains editor Robert Bonazzi, this period had most fascinated Griffin and it had been freshest in the memories of those he interviewed.

Bonazzi's extraordinary foreword captures the spiritual affinity between Merton and Griffin in poignant descriptions and insightful intuitions that warrant Merton readers' attention. He sketches three characteristics of Griffin's work that permeate his immersion in Merton's hermitage and the interpretive biography that resulted: (1) the reality of Griffin's experience of solitude; (2) the objective portrayal of Merton's 1966 romantic relationship with a young nurse; and (3) the illuminative, personal quality of Griffin's prologue ("Les Grandes Amitiés") and epilogue ("The Controversial Merton").

Griffin's gifts as a writer uniquely equipped him to render his monk-artist friend's experiences. The selection of materials from letters, journals, and notebooks is deftly woven into his narrative. Above all, a contemplative kinship between the biographer and his subject engages the reader. Ten years after first reading these pages I was again moved and mesmerized by Griffin's graceful interpretations. But two

questions deserve to be raised about this volume. First, why does Bonazzi go to such lengths to reach for overstatement in diminishing Michael Mott's biography as "mainly a book of facts and scholarly interpretations from which the essential Merton does not emerge" in comparison to *Follow the Ecstasy?* This unnecessary and misleading exaggeration blemishes an otherwise excellent foreword. Second, for all the value and insight of Griffin's narrative of the hermitage years, the publication of this segment with its focus upon Merton's late romantic relationship risks a sensationalism that is disproportionate to Griffin's whole effort. One hungers for the remainder of his manuscript, even in rough form, for John Howard Griffin's presentation of the hidden wholeness of Thomas Merton. Perhaps this hope can one day come to fruition with Robert Bonazzi's able enterprise.

Articles

Robert E. Daggy, "Choirs of Millions: A Reflection on Thomas Merton and God's Creatures," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 28:1 (1993) 93–107.

This article presents an eclectic collage of Merton's various celebrations of creatures now endangered or mistreated. The curator of the Thomas Merton archives at Bellarmine College offers the context of the monk's apocalyptic mentality concerned with human survival vis-à-vis the modern world and projects him as a guide and mentor for our ecological era.

Daggy points out that Merton's Thoreau-like reverence for nature and the creatures of rural Kentucky extended throughout his monastic life, although it intensified with the solitude and seclusion of his final three years in the hermitage. As forester at the abbey, Merton's long-standing attention to the woods is duly chronicled. Asian religious respect for nature and Merton's study of these traditions is acknowledged by a Taoist-inspired poem.

The suggestion in this article that Merton's theology of creation is synonymous with contemporary "creation spirituality" warrants critical scrutiny. The identification of this term with the work of Matthew Fox gives theologians pause about such an easy identification of Merton with this unorthodox trajectory. Future attention to Merton's ecological interests would do well to examine the effect of the imagery

of the psalms, the backbone of the monastic Liturgy of the Hours, on his appreciation of creation. Merton's poignant prose-poem on *le point vierge* in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* also deserves a prominent place in his understanding of creation.

Karl A. Plank, "The Eclipse of Difference: Merton's Encounter with Judaism," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 28:2 (1993) 179–91.

This Davidson College professor's article will prove important not only for the immediate assessment of Merton's encounter with Judaism, but as a critical analysis of the monk's efforts to deal with the particularities of "the other" as other in dialogue. Plank speaks of "a certain flaw" in William H. Shannon's 1990 *America* essay, "Thomas Merton and Judaism," and proceeds to probe the effects of Merton's language addressed to Jews or about Judaism, which Shannon has neglected. The results are illuminating and radically revise our understanding of Merton's correspondence and dialogue with Abraham Heschel without diminishing the merit of his desire to appreciate Judaism.

Plank evidences careful scholarship on the Second Vatican Council's declaration on non-Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate,* and its unsatisfactory solution to the question of conversionism. The question is not only the matter of the Church's proselytizing, "but the value of the Jew *as Jew.*" In this regard he borrows from feminist liberation theologian Sharon D. Welch, who recommends a "communicative ethic" of risk, allowing distinctiveness and difference and refusing the universalisms of the lowest common denominator, that is, the "Judaeo-Christian tradition." Plank connects this emphasis upon difference to postmodernist critiques. He interprets Heschel as challenging Merton about the Church's arbitrary and manipulative "attempts to define Judaism relative to the theological claims of Christianity."

Although Plank credits Merton with reminding us that anti-Semitism is an attack on Christ, he claims that such a statement diverts us from the immediately concrete vulnerability of historical Jews. Merton, he finds, relies upon the Christian lens as a single frame of reference. Plank carefully concludes that Merton's emphasis on kinship is partial rather than wrong and certainly is not an intentional wound but "a conspicuous omission." In fact, he finds foundations for better Jewish-Christian dialogue in Merton's *The New Man* (1961) with its

critique of Prometheanism. But he finds even more fruitful that book's reflections on human persons' ability to share in God's capacity for speaking freely *(parrhesia),* because if dialogue is grounded in the perception that the Jew has challenging words to speak, then such freely spoken words might be seen as the Jew's attempt to love the Christian—and the Christian's vulnerability to being loved.

Victor A. Kramer, ''Forgetting in Order to Find: The Self in Thomas Merton's Poetry,'' *Cross Currents* 43:3 (1993) 375–88.

The author of *Thomas Merton, Monk and Artist* returns to Merton's poetry to examine how it best reveals his changing self-perceptions. In this regard Victor Kramer follows the lead of Anthony Padavano, who has argued persuasively that Merton's poetry was the true barometer of his soul. Kramer's study proves especially valuable because he traces patterns in the basic stages of the monk's poetic self that simultaneously reflect his changing concept of self. We discover through this study the voice of an unselfish and less self-conscious poet who interacts and grows into compassionate awareness of others.

When he identifies Merton's ''elusive *core*'' as silence, awe, and forgetfulness of self, Kramer offers a compelling revision that contrasts with other attempts to isolate what he calls the pious monastic Merton of the 1940s, the angry Merton of the 1950s, or the earnest and ironic Merton of the 1960s. The strength of this essay is the appreciation of contemplative prayer and the transformation it effected in Merton's life and poetics. The analyses of particular poems from the early and middle Merton canon afford a clear and cogent interpretation from this perspective.

Not only does Victor Kramer offer his hermeneutic for Merton's poetry but also for the much-neglected ''antipoetry'' of the final years of the hermit's life. *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire* yield new dimensions with this appreciation of how Merton comes to ''make room for all,'' especially the marginalized, the excluded, and the exploited, whose lives and stories echo in his global canvas of Western culture's sins. It provides an index of the radical changes Merton witnessed and the challenges he prophesied for his audience.

When Kramer judges Merton's success with the theme of self-forgetfulness, he appraises it as the work of a minor poet having ''major spiritual importance.'' Readers will look for continuing attention to

Merton's poetry and various interpreters' analyses of that spiritual importance. Its exact nature will undoubtedly be the central concern of a wide circle of discourse.

Richard E. Getty, ''The Polychrome Face of Contradiction: Assessing Inconsistencies in Thomas Merton,'' *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 28:3/4 (1993) 281–96.

Getty, a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice, opens a series of questions by analyzing what he terms ''contradictions'' in Merton's work and life. He begins by asserting that contradictions are not to be explained away. He finds that the challenge ''is rather to come to terms more honestly with the human condition that contradictions illustrate and the ramifications of this condition for grace and salvation.'' Borrowing from an impressive number of sources and Merton commentators, Getty finds Merton's autobiographical search for identity and his discoveries of the true self critical to our attraction to and understanding of the monk.

Silence, poverty, and conversion of life are topics selected to illustrate inconsistencies in Merton's writings. Getty identifies evolutionary growth, a dialectical temper, dissatisfaction with formulations, multiple persons influencing his thought, and Zen Buddhism as reasons explaining the contradictions in Merton's life and personality. Plausible as these may be, Getty's work challenges the interpretations of many who find more continuity in the Merton canon. Others have interpreted his writings in terms of ''paradox,'' or seeming contradictions, rather than explicit incongruity. Getty's judgment that Merton's ''indulgent living'' (for example, his books and camera) and ''acquisitiveness'' marked failures (and not just contradictions) in his vow of poverty is certainly a revisionist and harsh appraisal. Likewise, while he quotes Merton's abbot, Dom James Fox, to attribute a ''lingering propensity to think in terms of exclusion,'' there is another stream in Merton that insists on inclusiveness and a ''hidden wholeness.'' What Getty provides is an insistence that our specific biographies narrate how ''we are saved *through* our humanity and not *from* it.'' One hopes that he will expand and develop more precisely his larval and global reflections on Merton's story as one of ''graced individuality'' or ''personality.''

Breaking New Ground in Merton Studies

What has begun to happen in Merton studies evidences a subtle, almost imperceptible shifting away both from attempts to romanticize his monastic life and vocation and from efforts to domesticate his role in the Church and culture-at-large. The revisionist direction of some of the 1993 Merton material represents a turn to a more critically analyzed, integrated Merton. And the ongoing publication of primary Merton sources itself contributes to this breaking of new ground.

At the beginning of this review-essay I raised the question of the distinctive genres of Merton's own work. It is intriguing to find buried in the early pages of *The Courage for Truth* a 1962 letter to Jacques Maritain where Merton himself ruminates on such a query. He is cautioning his philosopher-friend against publishing for the general public his recently deceased wife, Raissa's, journals in their entirety. His fear is that such an intimate genre would be received with only "flippant respect" because of people's fear, a fear he says "mocks their own inner light and beauty." Three years later he writes to Maritain after having read his fellow Frenchborn friend's published "notebooks" (Merton uses the French word, *carnets*). Merton confesses that his own just-finished work, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander,* "is itself a kind of carnet (rather than a Journal) but with quite a lot of poetic and descriptive stuff too." This poses the hermeneutical question: What kind of autobiographical gravity do Merton scholars and aficionados give to these varied genres: journal, correspondence, diary, working notebook, prose-poem, lyric essay, poetry? We expect the six editors of Merton's forthcoming journals to clarify the equivocation of scholars—and Merton himself—in using these designations.

A second new vein of research, signaled by its prominence in *The Courage for Truth,* centers upon the theme of marginality for interpreting Merton's monastic identity. This theme also intersects with his identities as poet, social critic, and explorer of interreligious dialogue. It would profit us to examine the ecclesiology expressed in monasticism itself. How is contemporary monastic life, with dwindling numbers, reinterpreting this charism? Merton's insistence that monasticism is a lay countercultural movement has retrieved for us some compelling arguments to contribute to the often agonizing discussions about future directions for the life of the Church. It is frighteningly easy to mistake his vectors and retreat to monasteries for a spiritual recharge

when Merton was arguing against such a distorted, trivial imitation of simulated and juridical monasticism.

Along these very lines runs another artery in Merton that connects with the monastic ideal: the contemplative identity. Parker Palmer has written that Merton's personality was not intrinsically monastic (with its observances of silence and cloister) but contemplative in a broader sense: it embraced his abilities as poet and accepted the created world in all its complexity and diversity. Scholars and commentators will give more attention to Merton's mature self-understanding as a contemplative without disguising his monastic status or his expressions of religious faith. We need to see in higher relief this distinction in order to fathom how contemplation centered his art and his social consciousness.

Finally, attention to the question of language and its relationship to the possibilities for human community in Merton's writing augurs well for our understanding of his legacy. The seminal papers presented at the October 1992 Abbey Center for the Study of Ethics and Culture at the Abbey of Gethsemani opened this question in an experiential process that resonates with Merton's intuitions. Rosemary Haughton has aptly reflected upon the elusive and necessary common language and our frustration over "The Fall of Babel" in her commentary included in volume six of this *Annual.* The International Thomas Merton Society's Fourth General Meeting also focuses on this issue and promises insights with Lawrence S. Cunningham's reconsideration of Merton's "A Message to Poets" and a medley of responses. One awaits for the lively conversation and rigorous reflections to unfold.