

## Alternative Frameworks for Spirituality: The Frontier of Merton Studies

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By some timely coincidence, in the midst of my collecting the various parts of this year's bibliographic review-essay on Mertoniana the new edition of Philip Sheldrake's *Spirituality and History* arrived.<sup>1</sup> His revised Introduction remarks the decline of traditional religious practice alongside the increasing hunger for what we encompass under the term 'spirituality'. Sheldrake's examples remind me of my own adventures to Barnes and Noble and even to the more selective local bookshop near campus. At each site I discover Christian classics and studies of rediscovered mysticism—both East and West—along with the more prosaic self-help books that now crowd the 'Spirituality' shelves. When this English Jesuit further remarks the difficulty of speaking of a single 'Christian spirituality' and admits the more accurate nomenclature of plural 'spiritualities of Christians' along with an eclectic approach that is increasingly interreligious, I immediately think of Thomas Merton.

What is revealing as I survey this year's bibliographic harvest is the virtual absence of studies attempting to place Merton within what Sheldrake terms 'alternative frameworks' as an antidote to: (1) spirituality becoming a predominantly private affair, inhibiting a sense of community; or (2) spirituality capitulating to some extremist theories of postmodernity, denying 'that committed standpoints on human events are valid or viable'.<sup>2</sup> Robert Inchausti's work comes closest to recognizing the dilemma and his ambitious book makes a tentative move in this direction. But I want to encourage the many authors who

1. Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

2. Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, pp. 1-3.

are writing about Merton to consider seriously Sheldrake's challenge to join him in seeking alternative frameworks, 'not least ones based on a commitment to rehabilitate traditions and people that have usually been marginalized'.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Merton studies deserve to be much more involved in this larger discourse about the contemporary study of spirituality. With both Inchausti's work and Dianne Aprile's history of the 150th anniversary of the Abbey of Gethsemani (also reviewed below) we can take another step toward recognizing what Sheldrake identifies as the need for fuller historical settings in which to interpret spiritualities. Differences in interpretations of history and various ways of using sources can be critically appreciated, and thereby clarify the grounds of divergent understandings of spirituality. But perhaps most of all, Thomas Merton's work deserves to be appraised along the lines that Sheldrake discerns as a method for the interdisciplinary study of the emerging field of spirituality. *Spirituality and History* makes a compelling case for both a careful concept of spirituality and attention to the practice of spirituality.

In practice, spiritualities are specific and have particular religious or doctrinal referents. This is what makes it possible to sift the authentic from the inauthentic in spirituality. Every religious tradition has tests for the authenticity of spiritual experience based not only on human considerations but also on the revelation of the foundational beliefs of that tradition. Without specific points of reference, it is difficult to say precisely what is spirituality and what is not, and what is appropriate or not... [S]pirituality is unavoidably conditioned by historical and religious contexts and embodies thematically explicit commitments and distinctive symbols—in other words, the language of a tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Sheldrake's two case studies of development in religious life (Chapter 5) and contexts and conflicts vis-à-vis the Beguines (Chapter 6) are masterful demonstrations of his thesis. 'Interpreting Spiritual Texts' (Chapter 7) will help many readers appreciate Merton's writings.

It is in Sheldrake's final chapter, 'Types of Spirituality', that he makes careful distinctions between various typologies: (1) classification by 'school of spirituality'; (2) apophatic and cataphatic 'ways'; (3) Protestant as distinct from Catholic spiritualities; and (4) theological worldviews. Within the latter, Geoffrey Wainwright's adaptation of Richard Niebuhr's classic spectrum of Christ's relationship to culture deserves special attention because three of the types he proposes

3. Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, p. 3.  
4. Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, p. 60.

are more balanced in their attitudes toward the world and history. 'Christ above culture' 'Christ and culture in paradox', and 'Christ the transformer of culture', all are mirrored in Merton.<sup>5</sup>

Hopefully open-minded readers will perceive Sheldrake's enterprise and my recommending it as an invitation to improve Merton studies as various commentators and interpreters examine his work as a matrix for the interdisciplinary discipline of spirituality. The starting point might be to assess where the four characteristics of spirituality (distinct from the older spiritual theology) which Sheldrake identifies have emerged in the past 20 years are found in Merton: (1) inclusive rather than exclusively associated with any single Christian tradition ('not even necessarily with Christianity as a whole'); (2) no longer the application of dogmatic principles, but 'more rather than less associated with solid theology than in the recent past'; (3) concerned not so much with 'defining perfection as with surveying the complex mystery of human growth in the context of a living relationship with the Absolute'; and (4) not limited to 'a concern with interior life' but seeking 'an integration of all aspects of human life and experience'.<sup>6</sup>

No doubt the evolving task of more and more adequately interpreting Thomas Merton can gain from Sheldrake, the most imaginative and challenging contemporary English-speaking writer on spirituality.

### Books by Thomas Merton

*The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (Journals, 7; 1967–1968; ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), pp. 348. ISBN 0-06-065486-4 (cloth). \$30.00.

The final volume of Merton's journals is the climax of a four-year publishing project. Over one third of this journal has been available for over 25 years in the published volume, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*.<sup>7</sup> The bulk of this installment of the journals comprises the year from October 1967 to October 1968 and the monk's more frequent travels—now to California, New Mexico, and Alaska. Again, some of these segments have already appeared as earlier, smaller publications.

The overall tone of this volume is one of commotion. Merton's life

5. Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, pp. 214–16.  
6. Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, p. 58.  
7. New York: New Directions, 1973.

is comparatively unsettled in these pages. From the opening entries he is complaining that by being at Gethsemani, 'I have forfeited all freedom to do things that perhaps I *should* do'.<sup>8</sup> There is something prescient in his remarks in late January, 'It is already a hard year and I don't know what else is coming'.<sup>9</sup> Two months later, in the wake of Martin Luther King, Jr's assassination, Merton names, 'the feeling that 1968 is a beast of a year. That the things are finally, inexorably, spelling themselves out'.<sup>10</sup> Amid this turmoil and wrestling with the lack of solitude at Gethsemani, Merton is making major decisions about letting his writing become secondary. And yet he leavens this text with some of his most revealing spiritual insights: 'God suffers the incomprehensibility in me'; and 'I am the utter poverty of God'.

It is tempting to read these months of Merton's life as a kind of wanderlust. He vacillates wildly, first declaring while he is in California that the Pacific Ocean is 'where I belonged' and was 'at home'; and yet he honestly mocks the 'follies of tourism' and asks himself at the end of his Asian trip, 'Did I find an illusion of Asia which needed to be dissolved by experience?' He flirts with going to Nicaragua and his imagined itinerary expands to Scotland, Israel, Wales, Japan, Europe, and even Greece and the Soviet Union en route from Asia. What is intriguing amid all this is how internal changes at the Abbey of Gethsemani, under the new leadership of a fellow hermit, Dom Flavian Burns, coincide with Merton's own transformation. It is not difficult to read the subtext beneath Merton's conjectures about dealing with a more congenial abbot. Jack Ford intimated the complexity of this adjustment for Merton when he recollected in his earlier interview for *The Merton Annual* how his friend Dom Flavian responded to Merton's inquiry about permission to make the trip to Bangkok: 'Make up your own mind'.<sup>11</sup>

There are some fascinating retrospects offered by Merton in this final volume of the journals. When he reads the first doctoral dissertation written on his work, Merton ponders his own need to be undistracted by his own ideas and writing. He judges that he has written too much, calling much of it trivial when he wrote about politics and monasticism. In the same breath he points with approval to his later poetry, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*. Merton's sense

of perspective gains momentum. Despite the travel, he centers himself: 'What matters is my meditation and whatever creative works spring from it.' At the end of June 1968 there is a flash of Merton's spirituality of the true self struggling against the false self. He concludes: 'The best thing I can give to others is to liberate myself from the common delusions and be, for myself and for them, free. Then, grace can work in and through me for everyone.'

Two impressions linger from my reading of *The Other Side of the Mountain*. First, Merton's many contradictions within the space of several months will compound the task of his interpreters. It is frighteningly easy to excerpt a quotation without reading ahead to discover how Merton might retract a strongly worded attitude or opinion in the span of days or weeks. One has the sense that at the end of the Asian trek he clamors for the solitude which still eludes him. Gethsemani is no longer the geographic scapegoat for his earlier complaints about interruptions in his contemplative life. Thomas Merton recognizes one of his own persistent axioms: the search for solitude is not merely accommodated by an external environment, rather it involves the depths of an inner experience. Secondly, the very genre of the 'journal' warrants more scrutiny as it changes throughout the seven journals; significant portions of *The Other Side of the Mountain* take on the form of a working notebook with lengthy quotations from Merton's reading.<sup>12</sup> This is most evident in his reading in preparation for the Asian trip and his meetings with Buddhist monks.

Let me suggest that one of the most enduring contributions of this final volume of the Merton journals is the very restless and revisionist nature of the writing. Here I find that Merton offers us the opportunity to look over his shoulder and watch as he struggles with his own false self. In mid-November 1968 he writes of being tired of Kanchenjunga, the mountain about which he also writes that he is in awe. While he is glad that he has come there, he allows himself time for a reassessment and critical reflection: 'Too much movement. Too much "looking for" something in a vision, "something other." And this breeds illusion. Illusion that there is something else. Differentiation—the old splitting-up process that leads to mindlessness, instead of the mindfulness of seeing all-in-emptiness'.<sup>13</sup> No wonder that he would

8. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 13.

9. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 44.

10. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 78.

11. See "'Not Himself, but a Direction": An Interview about Thomas Merton with John (Jack) H. Ford', *The Merton Annual* 6 (1994), pp. 175-93 (189-90).

12. For a discussion of the ambiguity of the 'journal' genre as it is used by Merton, see my review-essay, 'Thomas Merton's Journals: A Matrix for Spirituality', *The Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 6.3 (Fall 1998), pp. 22-27; and in the second installment, 'A Mirror to Recognize the "True Self": Thomas Merton's Journals', *The Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 7.1 (Spring 1999), pp. 19-24.

13. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 281.

also long for his liberation from all diaries. In a definitive sense, the journal writer ultimately becomes the anti-journal writer.

Perhaps it is now appropriate to suggest that with the completion of the journals project it would be timely for the publishers to improve the Index for each of the volumes. Without being methodic, I did note that in this seventh volume the Index omits entries for Albert Camus, David Jones, Søren Kierkegaard, Basil Pennington and Malcolm X. These omissions handicap and mislead scholars and others who will rely upon the indices for their research and references.

*Contemplation in a World of Action* (Gethsemani Studies in Psychological and Religious Anthropology, 1; ed. Ernest Daniel Carrere, OCSO; University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), pp. xii + 266. ISBN 0-268-00834-5 (paperback). \$14.00.

Under the aegis of the Abbey of Gethsemani, this is the first in a series of books about 'being human'. Originally published in 1971 by Doubleday, *Contemplation in a World of Action* is now reissued in 'a restored, corrected edition'. Brother Daniel Carrere's Preface to this 13-chapter volume notes that the original edition included a number of typesetting errors, several of which 'obscured' Merton's meaning 'and in one instance the omission reversed Merton's point completely'.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, in Chapter 2 several paragraphs have been restored, and the editor has also restored Merton's prose where the previous editor, Naomi Burton [Stone] 'had attempted to improve on translations' with what Brother Daniel has judged to be less than felicitous results. (It would be helpful especially to Merton scholars to know exactly where these changes were made in the text, thereby calling attention to misunderstandings that might already have resulted from use of the earlier edition.)

The editorial decision to drop five chapters on the eremitical life from the 1971 edition was made because it is no longer 'a burning issue in the order'. These five essays will be published in a separate book by another publisher. This reissue of *Contemplation in a World of Action* offers readers some of Merton's last insights about monastic renewal. It is graced with a brief but lucid Foreword by Robert Coles, MD. Among other things, he offers insights on Merton's use of the term 'identity crisis' and the connection between these essays of the monk and the work of Anna Freud and Erik H. Erikson.

14. *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. xii.

### Books about Thomas Merton

Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 210. ISBN 0-7914-3635-7 (paperback). \$19.95.

Not since David Cooper's *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist*<sup>15</sup> a decade ago has there been such a refreshing new interpretation of the monk's relationship to American cultural. How stimulating to find an author who moves the conversation to a new and broader context. What's more, Robert Inchausti, Professor of English at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, combs the Merton canon and intelligently resists any gratuitous, deconstructionist caricature that would portray Merton's abandoning his monastic or Catholic identity. Instead, he celebrates how Merton 'was a man of faith in thoughtful conversation with a faithless age'.<sup>16</sup>

Two insights from the Introduction to Inchausti's study are worth recollecting. First, he pays homage to Archbishop Jean Jadot's appreciation of Merton as a man whose intuitions equipped him in a troubled era to know what direction to go—or, as I prefer to phrase it, an appreciation of Merton's ability to see around corners. Inchausti picks up what Philip Sheldrake highlights when he quotes Jadot: 'I think [Merton] will be remembered in the history of spirituality as a man who—I wouldn't say opened *new* ways—he opened old ways we had forgotten'.<sup>17</sup> The contemplative monastic alternative, grounded in the Desert Fathers and the twelfth-century flowering of Cistercian spirituality, gains a new prominence in Inchausti's interpretation of Merton. Secondly, he emphasizes what biographer Michael Mott has well named as the urgency and intimacy that resonate in Merton's gifts as a writer. The Merton canon probes the drama of the false self and the redemptive liberation of the true self in what Inchausti calls 'a shared existential recognition. When this happens, the reader's false self stands defeated, and he or she is left with a strange sense of having been both 'found out' and 'set free'—both morally convicted and spiritually redeemed'.<sup>18</sup> With these coordinates, Inchausti sets out ambitiously to evaluate Merton's place in American intellectual history.

15. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989.

16. *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 105.

17. *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 2.

18. *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 3.

Lest some readers be discouraged with the opening lines of the book, I forewarn you that his declaration might irritate: 'Thomas Merton was an apostle, not a genius.'<sup>19</sup> But in the context of his use of Søren Kierkegaard's distinction between genius and apostle, I find that these terms clarify Merton's contribution. The question revolves around whether we see him primarily as a genius creating masterpieces which define what it means to be human; or do we follow Inchausti and see him primarily as one who 'exposed the half-truths' of America, the church, and the world by dissenting and preferring 'to overcome [everyday life's] falsity and limitations by drowning them in the light of a higher truth'.<sup>20</sup>

Inchausti is not timid about his assessments of Merton's work. Many will chafe under his appraisal of 'the spiritual elitism at the heart of his early books and aphorisms',<sup>21</sup> but I, for one, would concur with a sense of this author's judgment. I fear, nonetheless, that he will suffer something of the abrupt dismissal which David Cooper's book met because he likewise dares to discourse about Merton according to paradigms that are unfamiliar to many Merton scholars and to virtually all popular readers of the monk. This work warrants a much more positive reception in both circles. Beginning with Merton's early life, Inchausti narrates how the young man is 'morally lost'.<sup>22</sup> But out of desolation comes conversion and the use of his writing talent in an honest and searching way, humbly admitting the limits of his knowledge. Inchausti's chapter on 'The Monastic Turn' taps the essence of Merton's discovery of an alternative lifestyle as a contemplative; it is the ultimate 'Paschalian wager' where the monastic disciplines can liberate him from the narcotic delusions of the world. A major part of Inchausti's deciphering the riddle of Merton's life comes by paying attention to the monk's understanding of the dangers of too one-sided a rejection of the world. 'Merton threw his life', he reports, 'into the mystic, contemplative abyss in order to reveal our hypocrisies and complicities'.<sup>23</sup> Here is a wonderfully Jungian use of the 'abyss' (a word frequently found in Merton's writing<sup>24</sup>) that describes not only Merton's experience of dread and despair, but, even more, his confidence in the potential of persons to fathom and to

19. *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 1.

20. *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 1.

21. *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 72.

22. *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 10.

23. *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 53.

24. See my essay, 'Merton's Contemplative Struggle: Bridging the Abyss to Find Freedom', *Cross Currents* 49.1 (Spring 1999), pp. 87-96.

grow into their true selves in loving relationships with the wider community of free and graced persons.

A chapter on 'Merton as Educator' integrates the discipline of purity of heart and the mystic core of the true self in the education of the monk, leading to liberation from self-preoccupation. Inchausti takes seriously Merton's rediscovery of his Cistercian identity when he became Master of Scholastics and then Master of Novices. This chapter unfortunately omits any mention of Thomas Del Prete's pioneering work on this topic. But Inchausti is alert to the ongoing existential bent in Merton's apostolate as educator: 'One had to speak from one's lostness, one's vulnerability, one's trust in God'.<sup>25</sup> His chapter, 'Toward a Politics of Being' is of the most original in *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*. The author traces Merton's diagnosis of our culture's alienation and neurotic conformity and his recommended therapy for discovering our true self in contemplative solitude. Both here and in the following chapters Inchausti strengthens his command of Merton's spirituality by grounding it in christological affirmations. Our true self, he insists, is 'the Christ within',<sup>26</sup> in Dostoevski and Pasternak he appreciates Merton's finding that 'the self-emptying of Christ served as the model for Christian life';<sup>27</sup> and in a later chapter on Zen he insists on Merton's praxis, 'let Christ be faithful in us'.<sup>28</sup>

In something of a miniature *tour de force*, Inchausti compares and contrasts Norman Mailer with Merton to distinguish a purely psychological search from the deeper mystical and spiritual quest. His tenth chapter, 'The Third Position of Integrity', returns to Merton's fulcrum, the monastic purity of heart. He is alert to the ways Merton recommends the depoliticization of institutions to expose the dominant culture's shallow individualism and masked totalitarianism. Inchausti finds Merton living with the integrity of Gandhian nonviolence, which is ultimately 'a refusal to live a lie or tolerate evil' not because of moral superiority or the visible results of a strategy but because of the conviction that only truth (*satyagraha*) can set us free.<sup>29</sup>

The following chapter on Merton as 'Public Intellectual' argues that Merton did not exploit his celebrity but desecrated current forms of activism as inauthentic because they invariably compromise

25. *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 61.

26. *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 65.

27. *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 73.

28. *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 117.

29. *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 92.

contemplative integrity in a passion for success and demonstrated results. He focuses instead upon Merton's way of monastic purity of intention and ascetic practice designed to undermine intellectual pride. Merton's Zen proclivities are examined as safeguards against ideology, resonating with his Western contemplative tradition. In the final chapter, 'Postmodern Merton?', Inchausti conjectures how Merton's response to contemporary issues might look. Here I find the author's neglect of Merton's ambitious antipoetry, in particular *The Geography of Lograire*, limits his appreciation of Merton's contribution, perhaps even his 'genius' in awakening us to the stranger who is Christ. The discussion on Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan and Deconstructionist theory (Inchausti deftly argues the bankruptcy and dead end of this path) will clarify some dense thought for many readers in this challenging chapter. Nonetheless the real importance of Merton-the-apostle's monastic, eschatological underground (as he names it) becomes more evident in the concluding, venturesome pages of the book.

My enthusiasm for *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* is not without reservation. Inchausti owes us a more careful exposition of his use of the words 'prophecy' and 'prophet'. Merton's Jewish confrère, Abraham Joshua Heschl, perhaps points us in a direction most congenial to Merton (and at least a master's thesis is dormant in this topic) by insisting that prophecy is not understanding, but an understanding of an understanding—or, seeing things from God's perspective. The words prophet and prophecy are too often used irresponsibly in contemporary discourse, whether about Merton or other religious, political or cultural figures. At times I am also nervous about Inchausti's description of Merton and his heroes/heroines as having 'invented the very values by which they themselves were to be interpreted and understood'.<sup>30</sup> Are there not dangerous echoes of Nietzsche's superman and the 'reinvention of values' after the Death of God here? Similarly, the author is not always clear in distinguishing the 'individual' from the 'person'; these terms cannot be used interchangeably in Merton's vocabulary because for him only persons are ultimately oriented toward community; 'individual' has very negative connotations in Merton's lexicon. I would have liked to see more attention to Camus in this study because Merton's seven essays on this kindred spirit, perhaps more than any other collection of his work, enabled him to approximate a coherent sense of his alternative identity vis-à-vis the culture's abundant self-deceptions.

30. *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 3.

As for Inchausti's use of the term 'civil religion', I find that Robert Bellah and others use this neologism in a far more nuanced sense. Finally, while I find Inchausti's style brisk and lively, he does deliver one awkward misnomer when he speaks of Merton's global 'ecumenicalism'.

All in all, here is a very Mertonian book on Merton. Inchausti awakens the contemporary audience serious about spirituality in Philip Sheldrake's expansive sense. Inchausti deserves to be read alertly by any circle of Merton scholars, or by readers seriously interested in appreciating Thomas Merton's wider importance.

Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1998), xii + 306 pp. ISBN 0-7737-3132-6 (cloth) \$29.95.

Michael W. Higgins is no stranger to Merton studies. He co-authored with Donald Grayston *Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Process*<sup>31</sup> and has contributed both scholarly and popular studies in various journals and magazines. This new book grows out of his work with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's *Idea* series.

Higgins describes his work as 'an interpretation of a life, a primer' and guide for the study of Thomas Merton. He disclaims the intent to write a 'full-scale biography' and chooses to characterize *Heretic Blood* as 'an interpretation of the towering figure of the century, sifted through the prism of [William] Blake's typology'. In Higgins's estimate, it is timely for such an 'unconventional' assessment of Merton, monk and poet. The key to this sometimes brash new volume lies in Higgins's claim that 'Thomas Merton is the William Blake of our time'. In the author's interpretation, both were the 'consummate rebel'.

Following an initial chapter that highlights and selects elements in Merton's biography, Higgins devotes four chapters to what he calls the poet-monk's 'spiritual geography', using Blake's mythology wherein every person consists of 'four components, each struggling for ascendancy over the others'. Blake's 'Four Zoas' are identified as: Urizen (Reason); Urthona (Wisdom); Luvah (Emotion); and Tharmas (Instinct). Higgins follows Blake in harmonizing these four 'opposites' and overcoming the tyranny of 'Single Vision' in the 'Four-Fold Vision' which yields 'imaginative and spiritual integration/wholeness'. Chapters unfold on 'Tharmas: The Rebel', 'Urizen: The Marginal Critic', 'Luvah: The Lover', and 'Urthona: The Wise One'.

31. Toronto: Griffin House, 1983.

The title of the book is taken not from the writings of Thomas Merton, but from a line in a 1906 letter from Michael Field to John Gray: 'There is deeply heretic blood in me...' Nowhere does the author give us an explanation of either the appropriateness or meaning of this metaphor in its original context; nor does he venture to explain how this is an apt title for the book. Readers do not even get a clue about the meaningful identities of Field or Gray. I find that we are victims of either the author's or the publisher's sensationalism in marketing the book under the banner of a racy title. In the original Greek, *haereses* translates as 'one who chooses'. Early in Christian history and Western culture the word took on the definite denotation of one who chooses *wrongly* or *incorrectly*. To present Thomas Merton under the label of 'heretic' when the word bears these echoes is, I judge, both to mislead and to distort his witness and the insights reflected in his writings.

There is a zeitgeist in the late 1990s that seeks to portray Thomas Merton as the equivalent of a religious and cultural deconstructionist: dismantling the monastic culture (which, to the contrary, he was constructively reforming from within); distancing himself from his Catholic identity (while, to the contrary, he was embracing and advocating the Church's renewal and pioneering its endorsement of interreligious dialogue); and playing the role of a political anarchist (whereas, to the contrary, he summoned and appealed realistically to that which was good and worthy in Western society's capacity for peacemaking and global justice). I find myself asking whether Michael Higgins in this book is intent upon appropriating Merton for the singularly deconstructionist purpose.

It surprises no one familiar with Thomas Merton to associate William Blake with this Kentucky Cistercian monk. His 1938 Master of Arts thesis at Columbia University was a study of Blake's poetry. And every reader of *The Seven Storey Mountain* will recall Merton's enthusiasm for Blake's poetry and art, inherited from his father's own mixture of bohemian and spiritual proclivities.

Higgins analyzes Merton's use of Jacques Maritain's philosophy to interpret Blake's worldview: 'To understand Blake's poetics and mysticism Merton turned again and again to St. Thomas.' He used the categories and terms of Thomistic aesthetics 'because [they] are so clear, so acute, so well-balanced that they fill the whole subject with light by which we may more clearly see into the depths of Blake's own more recondite thought'. This results in some worthwhile interpretations of early Merton poems from *A Man in the Divided Sea* vis-à-vis Blake's influence.

In chapter 5, Higgins appraises Merton's 1962 prose-poem, 'Hagia Sophia', which he considers Merton's first major treatment of Blake's Urthona, or 'the *point vierge* of our being, the Virgin/window, and the Jugian anima'. (What his interpretation omits is the greater influence of Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem using this same metaphor of the window to know Mary's discipleship and the mystery of Incarnation; Merton himself employed this metaphor of the window at length in his book *Bread in the Wilderness*.<sup>32</sup>) Higgins proceeds to devote ten pages of analysis to Merton's collection *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, calling these poems 'his emblems of mystical fury'. The author delivers a careful, thoughtful study of the influence of Zen upon these poems—and that insight ultimately proves more valuable than his insistence upon Blake's influence. One wishes for more attention to what Higgins describes as Merton's response to the 'fury', or social context of the early and mid 1960s. This contemplative alternative or antidote to the times' violence and spiritual vacuum—as manifest in these poems—deserves to be developed.

In one of his conclusions, Higgins judges that 'Merton's effort to unify, to balance the Contraries in his life and work was his supreme Blakean task'. While Merton was no doubt genuinely catholic, excluding nothing, it is an exaggeration to attribute his habitual way of dealing with the world to the primary (read, exclusive) influence of Blake. Where Higgins is more convincing is in seeing Merton's efforts in his posthumously published poem, *The Geography of Lograire*, connected to Blake's poem, 'Jerusalem', where the Four Zoas, the 'Four Mighty Ones... in every man unite' and bring the end of the tyranny of mind and power: This looks forward to what Blake describe as a time when,

every Man stood Fourfold; each Four  
Faces had: One to the West, One toward the East, One to the South, One  
to the North, the Horses Fourfold...  
Awaking [Man] to Life among the flowers of  
Beulah, rejoicing in Unity

There is a case to be made about Blake's influence upon the structure of *The Geography of Lograire* into four cantos named as the four directions. I would be more convinced of the direct (or even indirect) influence were the precise sequence of West-East-South-North mirrored in the sequence in Merton's poem. The universality of these coordinates of direction might be identified with various sources. And are the underlying animators of Merton's poem not rendering more

32. New York: New Directions, 1953.

than a new translation of William Blake, as suggested by Higgins? Other than this orientation to the poem, Higgins leaves undeveloped any interpretation of the four cantos, or the more complex architectural for the work.

Higgins has captured well Merton's dynamism. In introducing his book he raises the question of Merton and his possible canonization as a saint. On the one hand, says the author, Merton is the 'post-modern holy one: flawed, anti-institutional, a voice for the voiceless'. But he concedes that his subject 'is also a classical traditionalist: centred, obedient, in search of stability'.<sup>33</sup> What puzzles me is how Higgins elects to reduce Merton to the former category and to omit (critically discredit?) any dimension of the latter. This proves not only unconventional but also—I hesitate to say it—contrary to Higgins's own best insights. Why not live like Blake with the tension of the paradox, the energy of these contraries? But perhaps it also exposes a flaw in the fabric of *Heretic Blood*. The contemplative identity of Thomas Merton never receives its due in these pages. The author does offer three pages (pp. 246-48) on the subject late in his final chapters, delineating three understandings of contemplation (spiritual/vocational; guarantor of human freedom; means of recovering silence) in Merton. But these are piecemeal, an afterthought, and inadequate to the task. To miss that core identity and the perspective flowing from it risks truncating the real gift of this poet-monk. It is a flaw shared by many interpreters of Thomas Merton.

Does Higgins really capture the complexity of Merton? No doubt, Blake is a foundational influence, but I am not convinced that Blake is the Rosetta Stone for interpreting Thomas Merton. Merton was too protean, too quick to assimilate and to digest, too eclectic. There can be no doubt that Merton never forfeited his debt to Blake, but he moved on and amalgamated more diverse and even better influences. One need only read Merton's 'Message to Poets' in *Raids on the Unspeakable*<sup>34</sup> to ascertain his more nuanced and developed sense of the role of the prophet vis-à-vis the poet. The same might be said of his sterling essay, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', from the same collection; this is only one of the mature Merton sources overlooked by the author of *Heretic Blood*. Higgins forces the issue by making the Blake influence bear the major burden of any definitive interpretation of Merton.

Finally, it is necessary to remark about a few of Higgins's exag-

33. *Heretic Blood*, p. 10.

34. New York: New Directions, 1965.

gerations. To call Thomas Merton a 'Modern Erasmus' would seem to mistake the historical context and identity of both figures. Erasmus was a gifted classical linguist, instrumental in the resurrection of classical texts and learning. Higgins will have to spell out more clearly the analogy he is seeking. Does it ultimately help Merton's place in literature or spirituality or Christian history to inflate or to exaggerate his contribution as when Higgins claims that Thomas Merton is 'the twentieth century's most eloquent and accessible spiritual figure'?<sup>35</sup> Or to feed the innuendoes and rumors about CIA involvement in Merton's death (when the CIA files have been released under the United States Freedom of Information Act, and there is no evidence of such a conspiracy)?

Michael Higgins writes with energy and enthusiasm about Merton's debt to Blake. He is a gifted writer and readers will no doubt enjoy his style and considerable literary flair. He ventures some fine interpretations of Merton's poetry. This book unfortunately lacks evidence of discourse with other Merton scholars. In the final analysis, I sense that Higgins is straining to capture and hold the attention of a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's audience who may be more familiar with William Blake than with Thomas Merton.

*Mornings with Thomas Merton: Readings and Reflections* (selected by John C. Blattner; Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1998), pp. 120. ISBN 1-56955-009-3 (cloth). £10.05.

John C. Blattner is the former editor of *Faith and Renewal* magazine. In this handsomely produced little book he announces his goal, 'to bring together samples of Merton's writing that I hope will contribute to the reader's devotional life'. His selection of 120 excerpts from Merton's early writings focuses upon 'how he became the person he was—in particular, how he became the monk he was'. Blattner reminds us of an axiom easily overlooked amid the mountain of Merton publications: 'Merton's significance lies as much in who he was as in what he wrote.'

The excerpts comprising the 120 readings of *Mornings with Thomas Merton* are selected from four early texts: *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *The Waters of Siloe*, *The Sign of Jonas* and *No Man Is an Island*. In the main, Blattner has chosen key passages that invite reflection. His titles, or headings, for the various readings are carefully composed. The varying lengths of the entries are judiciously measured out. Five

35. *Heretic Blood*, p. 2.

familiar Merton photographs are included. This genre of the 'daily readings' will be attractive to both new and veteran readers of Merton. Its crisp and lean form serves as an invitation to the contemplative experience which Merton's writings ultimately offer as their horizon.

While Blattner is very intentional about selecting only from the four Merton volumes he chooses, readers should be warned to expect a very incomplete sampling of Merton in this book. His decision, announced in the Introduction, not to include material from later in Merton's career 'such as his scathing commentaries of the modern secular world and the reflections on the relationships between Catholicism and Eastern mysticism' is questionable. Many would find those later writings not only integral to the reader's devotional life and Merton's monastic identity, but even essential. Nonetheless, Blattner's new offering will be of interest to many readers.

Jennifer Fisher Bryant, *Thomas Merton: Poet, Prophet, Priest* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 207. ISBN 0-8028-5109-6 (cloth). \$15.00.

This unique volume was inexplicably omitted in last year's bibliographic essay but it certainly warrants attention. I am reminded of Brother Frederic Collins, a confrère of Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani, who is consistently making the plea, 'What are we doing to introduce young people to Thomas Merton?' Jennifer Fisher Bryant takes us several steps in the right direction for an audience of teenage readers. But I suggest that many lay people who give up on the densely footnoted so-called 'introductions' to Merton will find this sprightly book a Godsend.

Bryant is adept in telling a story. Given the particularly dramatic biography of Thomas Merton, she has wonderful material for her project. The author of *Lucretia Mott: A Guiding Light* (no relation to Merton biographer Michael Mott, incidentally) in the Eerdmans Women of Spirit series, she writes in a style that connects her readers to their own spiritual journey. Merton serves as the catalyst through his own struggles and his emergence with an integrity of spirit and personality.

What is compelling in this introduction to Merton is her focus upon his youth and experiences of fear, loss, trust and betrayal, and a sense of his true self. One gets a definite sense of young Thomas Merton's uprootedness and wanderlust. This is an especially effective connection for today's young readers in a very mobile and unsteady culture. Merton's conversion is recounted with Bryant's eye for detail, a key to

her effectiveness as a writer throughout the book. The author is equally skilled at demonstrating Merton's wrestling with his writer's identity vis-à-vis the monastic vocation. Again, she presents him as an attractive model for her young readers.

The passages describing Merton's introduction to the monastery will undoubtedly serve young readers who may, in fact, find here their first contact with monastic life. Three quarters of the book is devoted to Merton's life until the late 1950s. So the final decade gets short shrift. In fact, the 40 pages devoted to Merton's writings on social justice and his study and dialogue with Judaism, Islam and Buddhism are so truncated as to flaw Bryant's book. Because her audience is 'young people' they deserve a more complete rendition of the mature Merton. Perhaps the publisher was responsible for the abbreviated 3 chapters (out of a total of 13) addressing Merton's final decade and his pioneering contributions. In any case, her young readers are left without an adequate appreciation of the whole Merton.

Sixteen pages of photographs, many of them collage-pages, collect a unique visual portrait of Merton and some of the principal persons in his life. The book includes a helpful and carefully detailed Index and Selected Bibliography. It is grating to the eye, however, to repeatedly have the author refer so familiarly to 'Tom'. This is a worthwhile introduction to Merton for junior high and high school students, as well as for many laypeople who are looking for a user-friendly, straightforward introduction to Merton. However, I hope that a future edition of this book might allow Bryant to expand on the final decade of Merton's life. His voice as social critic, ecumenist and a participant in interreligious dialogue is muted in this otherwise good little book.

Paul M. Pearson, Danny Sullivan and Ian Thomson (eds.), *Thomas Merton: Poet, Monk, Prophet. Papers from the 1998 Oakham Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (Abergavenny: Three Peaks Press, 1998), pp. 211. ISBN 1-902093-01-1 (paperback). £9.99.

With a biannual conference, the Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland continues to gather a diverse group of scholars and readers. This new volume's essays reflect this diversity of interest and audience. Most notable among the plenary addresses are Rowan Williams's 'New Words for God: Contemplation and Religious Writing' and Esther de Waal's 'The Camera in the Hands of the Monk'. The latter is especially engaging because the author reflects on the camera

as an extension of Merton's contemplative identity. The former offers what Williams calls 'a negative theology of the poetic' which appeals to Merton's apophatic side. Paul Pearson's *'The Geography of Lograire: Merton's Final Prophetic Vision'*, offers a sketch of critical interest in the monk's poetry. Like Michael Higgins, however, he would improve this fine essay by clarifying how he uses the much equivocated word 'prophetic'. The young Spanish scholar Sonia Petisco's *'Recovering our Innocence: The Influence of William Blake on the Poetry of Thomas Merton'* is a valuable if brief insight that should be read in conjunction with Higgins's book.

Turning to Merton, monk, Catherina Stenqvist's *'How Postmodern Was Thomas Merton?'* is a provocative essay that relates to some of the issues raised by Philip Sheldrake. Readers would do well to consider her comments in light of *The Merton Annual* 6 (1993), where authors brought various perspectives on postmodernity to Merton studies as participants in a scholars' retreat sponsored by the Abbey of Gethsemani. John Wu, Jr, offers the most ambitious and compelling essay on Merton, prophet, in *'Thomas Merton: The Once and Future Paradigm.'* Instead of applying the term prophet to Merton, Wu chooses to examine what he terms as Merton's 'ever-growing Christology and selfhood' as keys to his paradigmatic hope as an alternative to the era's despair.

#### Articles about Thomas Merton

Beth Goodwin-O'Neal ventures a novel application of Merton's writings on racism in the context of her own Australian experience with Aborigines.<sup>36</sup> Her vantage, working at Sydney's Tranby College literacy programs with urban Aborigines, equips her to recount Australia's history of colonialism and exploitation through the lens of Merton's writings in the 1960s about African Americans and Native Americans. This essay examines 'identity' as the fundamental question of spirituality. Goodwin-O'Neal retrieves significant passages from Merton that point to the manifestation of racism in violence. She concludes that the monk's insights into the deeply religious myths of natives in the Americas are mirrored in the Australian Aborigines who are in touch with their own identity; and the colonials' unacknowledged myth, with its values of power and possessions, betrays

36. Beth Goodwin-O'Neal, 'The Relevance of Thomas Merton's Ideas on Racism to Race Relations in Australia', *Tjurunga: An Australian Benedictine Review* 54 (May 1998), pp. 83-98.

an underlying alienation and delusion. One hopes that she will develop this research into a study of parts of Merton's *The Geography of Lograire* where he imaginatively reconstructs from these actual historical incidents in the South Pacific.

The influence of the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca is examined in Patrick O'Connell's recent essay.<sup>37</sup> O'Connell continues with this investigation his occasional studies of Merton's poetry. He chooses the centenary of Lorca's birth to explore Merton's early acquaintance and attraction to the poet and his work, citing *Gypsy Ballads* (1928) and other poems of that decade as the principle influence. Working with journal entries from late 1939 through mid-1941, O'Connell claims Lorca to be 'a major influence on the early poetry' of Merton.<sup>38</sup> The echoes of Lorca which he finds in several pre-monastic poems come through what he terms a 'borrowing' of images such as: moon, horses, flora, and the surreal. At the same time he points out, rightly I think, that Lorca's influence on the early poems of Merton was as 'a stimulus, a catalyst for Merton's own creative urges' rather than by way of theme or subject matter.<sup>39</sup>

Once again we are indebted to O'Connell for pointing out numerous mis-transcriptions from the early holographic journals, in this case calling attention to poor copying of the original Spanish words of Lorca's poems as noted by Merton. (This conjures up again the need for a future critical edition of the journals with scholarly annotations and variant transliterations compared with those found in the Harper-SanFrancisco trade edition.) O'Connell questions Michael Mott's interpretation of the influence of Lorca's poem 'The Poet in New York' upon Merton's pre-monastic poetry. It is dicey to argue that because the journals do not make specific mention of something therefore the influence or importance is absent. Is this not a form of critical fundamentalism? I point to the comparative silence of the journals about Merton's relationship with Polish poet and literary critic Czeslaw Milosz as an example. While Merton might make mention in the journals of receiving a letter from Milosz, he never really records in the journals the contents or the transforming effect of this relationship and the resultant new directions Milosz prompts in his writing and creative energies (all of which is duly recorded and poured out in the

37. Patrick O'Connell, 'Under the Spell of Lorca: An Important Influence on Thomas Merton's Early Poetry', *The American Benedictine Review* 49.3 (September 1998), pp. 256-86.

38. O'Connell, 'Under the Spell', p. 256.

39. O'Connell, 'Under the Spell', p. 270.

independent primary source material of their correspondence<sup>40</sup>). The argument that draws conclusions from silence or the absence of explicit mention in the journals alone is a hazardous methodology. I find even in *The Seven Storey Mountain* that Merton is more subtle than the portrait which O'Connell attributes to him—simply a resident familiar with the details of New York City life but oblivious to the seamy underside of the city; the seeds of his own estrangement, disorientation and fragmentation are quite evident when he decides to bring roses to the mother of the Harlem family whom he and his classmates 'adopted'. There is something quintessential about Merton's early spirituality revealed in this recognition of the need for beauty and dignity amid such dehumanizing conditions.

In the same way, I wonder if it is accurate to claim that the complex of imagery which O'Connell insists comes directly from Lorca is unique. Since Merton was regularly reading his breviary as a young convert he was being inundated by the imagery of the Psalms and the patristic and medieval Office of Readings. One finds stringed lyres, horses, flora, and imagery of the moon governing the Hebrew lunar calendar in even the last 10 of the 150 Psalms. In the same way, Merton's viewing of the Hieronymos Bosch exhibition<sup>41</sup> in New York City offers a plausible impact on his imagination in terms of the surreal; Bosch even reappears in *Cables to the Ace*.<sup>42</sup> No doubt Lorca adds to this, but he is not the sole influence. Would the 'borrowings' O'Connell cites, if taken so directly from Lorca, not suggest that Thomas Merton verged on plagiarizing? Similarly, while Lorca may influence Merton's poem 'Ash Wednesday', could we not find an equivalent 'influence' from T.S. Eliot's 1930 poem with that same title? All this leads to a wonderful discussion about the nature and processes of creative poetic art.

Another question is raised in interpreting Merton's 'admiration' and 'emulation' of Lorca.<sup>43</sup> Thomas Merton is unrivaled in the use of superlatives to register his enthusiasm. He did write in his pre-

40. Robert Faggen (ed.), *Striving towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997).

41. *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation* (Journals, 1; 1939–45; ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 272. In that context (December 1940), Merton's remarks include: 'Nobody who could draw as real a Christ as Bosch—real in the sense that it is not realistic, but the incarnation of reality—of actuality, i.e. goodness, power—could do anything unconsciously in his painting?'

42. In *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 411.

43. O'Connell, 'Under the Spell', p. 268.

monastic years that he felt the greatest sympathy with Lorca, the poet. Yet as the journals also record, in September of 1939 Merton is saying: 'I think the best poet of this century in any country is Guillaume Apollinaire.'<sup>44</sup> And when he later returned to Lorca he claimed, as the author accurately quotes, 'I can think of no modern poet who gives me more genuine poetic satisfaction'.<sup>45</sup> Using the author's reference to Volume 4 of the journals, I discovered that this comes from a 25 September 1960 entry. There was yet almost a decade remaining in Merton's life. His discovery of some of the new Latin American poets evoked superlatives that rival his praise of Lorca. And his effusive praise of Louis Zukofsky's poetry—to name but one of many modern poets Merton later discovers—in both his letters and the journals impresses me as exceeding it. In March of 1967, Merton writes about his reading of Zukofsky's collection of poems entitled *A*, finding them 'more moving than any other modern poetry I have read'.<sup>46</sup>

O'Connell serves us well by this research on the Lorca connection. I would like to hear more about his judgment on the quality of Merton's pre-monastic poetry as poetry, how and why it succeeds (or fails) as poetry in its own right. There is a judicious change from the essay's claim that Lorca is a 'major' influence on Merton when the title of this essay softens to the word 'important' influence. The author's judgment on Michael Mott's reading of the same poems, however, recoils, asking if perhaps O'Connell himself 'is somewhat overstating his case'.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland's biannual conferences and consequent volumes, they publish a modest periodical, *The Merton Journal*. Poetry, book reviews and brief articles make this something of a counterpart to *The Merton Seasonal*. Like that publication, *The Merton Journal* occasionally offers a lengthy essay of importance. Dominic Walker's 'The Letters of St. Anthony of Egypt and Thomas Merton's Silent Life'<sup>48</sup> warrants attention because he analyzes and compares the relationship between the three letters of the desert father and Merton's 1957 book, *The Silent Life*. This very well researched study of the sources used by Merton will add depth to a reading of his sometimes overlooked classic on the spiritual struggle, solitude, and contemplation. Patrick Woodhouse's

44. *Run to the Mountain*, p. 19.

45. O'Connell, 'Under the Spell', p. 284.

46. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 206.

47. O'Connell, 'Under the Spell', p. 282.

48. *The Merton Journal* 5.1 (Easter 1998), pp. 2-16.

'Merton and Selfhood'<sup>49</sup> makes a worthy contribution to a familiar topic in Merton studies by borrowing the framework of Alan Jones's book, *Soul Making: the Desert Way of Spirituality*, and this author's insights from Aelred of Rievaulx and other mystics.

### Books of Related Interest

Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey: The Diary of his Final Year* (ed. Sister Sue Mosteller, CSJ; New York: Crossroad, 1998), pp. 229. ISBN 0-8245-1708-3 (cloth). \$19.95.

In Christian spirituality circles the works of Henri Nouwen are frequently compared to Thomas Merton's writings. Perhaps it is because his journals written at a New York Cistercian monastery over 20 years ago, *The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery*,<sup>50</sup> identified him with that immersion experience as a monk. Now we might also compare the two in their sudden, untimely deaths. Nouwen well deserves his reputation as a spiritual writer of extraordinary impact. His prolific writings, beginning in the years immediately following Merton's death, seemed to fill some void in American spirituality circles over the past three decades.

This sabbatical journal effervesces with enthusiasm and a Merton-like energy for future projects. But it is also a year that evidences a depth of prayer and solitude. This journal records Nouwen's perspective on his work with the L'Arche Community in Toronto which was called 'Daybreak'. And in this connection with L'Arche and his lengthy commitment to live with and for these mentally and physically challenged people, we hear echoes of Nouwen's heart and soul. His was not merely a semester's or a summer's acquaintance and eavesdropping on Jean Vanier's blueprint for discovering a spirituality of community. Readers will harvest from this journal insights that resonate well with Merton. Amid comments upon the day's news, such as the KLM Royal Dutch Airlines tragedy, Nouwen is searching for a gratitude for his own life. There is an openness about his failures, about his clamoring for recognition and yielding to a more authentic life which he has come to learn through the acceptance modeled by L'Arche community members. He never loses sight of the larger picture of world economies and crises, or the spoiling of our environment.

Twenty years ago I had the privilege of meeting Henri Nouwen

when he was teaching at Yale Divinity School. I also heard him preach at Boston's Catholic Cathedral and I still carry in my mind's eye the image of his animated body, perched high on the raised pulpit. It was as if I were watching a combination of a marionette and an angel as his voice whispered Christ's message of mercy. *Sabbatical Journey* bears the same message, even more poignantly spoken with Nouwen's mature voice. One senses that in this 'time off' he pondered his own emotional needs and fatigue, and the rhythms by which Nouwen repeatedly reclaimed his talents to serve others.

Regina Derieva, *Inland Sea and Other Poems* (trans. Kevin Carey; South Shields, England: The Pilgrim Star & The Divine Art, 1999), pp. 94. ISBN 965-7126-00-2 (paperback). £4.50.

There is a line in Thomas Merton's *Cables to the Ace* where he declares: 'I think poetry must / I think it must / stay open all night / In beautiful cellars.'<sup>51</sup> In a haunting but beautiful way, Regina Derieva's poetry gives ample evidence of Merton's intuition about this imperishable art form. When I consider both her poetic achievement and her story, I am reminded of Merton's enthusiasm in letters to Boris Pasternak in Russia when he discovered that poet's poetry and fiction—and his political predicament. Derieva was born a Jewess. In 1991 she and her husband, Alexander, and their son, Denis, immigrated to Israel from Kazakstan. In many ways they were not different from thousands of Soviet immigrants, except for the fact that in 1990 they took advantage of the new religious freedoms in the Soviet Union and were baptized Roman Catholics.

In 1996, the Israeli High Court rejected their application for citizenship, noting that the Law of Return, which governs the right of Jews to settle in Israel excludes Jews who have adopted another faith. The crux of this story revolves around the ambiguity on Soviet forms asking 'nationality' and 'faith'. Regina Derieva's passport listed her nationality as Jewish; yet she was not practicing the Jewish faith. However, in the Soviet Union Jewish identity had nothing to do with religion. Her husband had put 'nonbeliever' on the forms. Upon their arrival in Israel, Regina Derieva's conscience would not allow her to put anything but 'Catholic' on her new form. She is now in a political conundrum: the Soviet Union no longer exists, so they cannot be deported; nor can they go to some other country because they have no pass-

49. *The Merton Journal* 5.2 (Advent 1998), pp. 10-24.

50. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976.

51. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 43.

ports. The Derievas now seek refugee status so that they can at least settle in some other country.

This Catholic convert who refused to lie fashions poems that ambush the heart and mind. It is the kind of contemporary poet that I would venture to say Thomas Merton would be reading today: a mixture of cultural and political vulnerability giving rise to hope. There is afreshness in the metaphors and imagery of her lean and original poems. She herself names it the 'inveterate freedom' of wind and wave. They confirm Joseph Brodsky's perception about her work: 'The real authors here are poetry and freedom themselves.'

The Russian roots of Derieva's imagination are evident in her lyric 'The Russian Songs' and 'From Absence'. Her own contemplative identity beckons from the irony and tension of 'Winter Lectures for Terrorists' and 'De profundis'. Her religious faith speaks to the soul of readers in poignant poems from 'The New Flowers of St. Francis'. And there is a Zen-like quality to her 'Maxims and Paradoxes on the Accidental Sheets' that remind one of Merton's later poetry.

Jean Sullivan, *Eternity my Beloved* (trans. Sister Francis Ellen Riordan; St Paul, MN: River Boat Books, 1998), pp. 146. ISBN 0-9654756-2-X (paperback). \$15.00.

Jean Sullivan was a French priest, born two years before his fellow countryman Thomas Merton. Sullivan reminds me of Albert Camus because he threw himself with urgency into his late writing career by saying, 'To write is to lie a little less'. *Eternity my Beloved* was first published in France in 1966. It tells the story of a real-life French priest with a most unconventional ministry to prostitutes and other social misfits at the time of the German occupation of Paris during World War II. One of the favorite formulas of this worker-priest, Jerome Strozzi, is announced by the narrator as the novel opens: 'We'll never understand our freedom.' Sullivan then ushers the reader into a most unconventional novel about Elizabeth, a prostitute, and Strozzi. Reading this French contemporary of Merton, I understand better his own posthumously published novel, *My Argument with the Gestapo: Journal of my Escape from the Nazis*.<sup>52</sup> Sullivan, like Merton, does not write a linear plot tending toward a suspected climax. Instead, his narrator is meditative, changing the point of view as he moves from chapter to chapter. It becomes an interactive work of art for the reader. This novel invites readers to experience nuances of desire, faith and contemplation.

52. New York: New Directions, 1969.

Two brief excerpts are indicative of the contemplative center of this novel. In the first the narrator reflects on Strozzi's witness: '[H]ow does one continue to give without developing calluses on your hands—and on your heart?'<sup>53</sup> The second radiates the same irony that one finds in Merton: 'People are born only at the moment they come to terms with spiritual liberty... The Christian world seems to have patiently accomplished the feat of transforming the most scathing part of the message, Paul's song of liberation, into an object of sickly hymns and mental illusions, a refuge for misfits, leaving atheism to rediscover the explosion of liberty at the heart of life. It may be a wounded liberty, rootless and absurd, but it is still exciting enough to take the place of faith for entire generations...'<sup>54</sup> Those who know Merton's writings will want to discover Jean Sullivan's *Eternity my Beloved* which is now available in this fluently translated English edition.

Dianne Aprile, *The Abbey of Gethsemani: Place of Peace and Paradox. 150 Years in the Life of America's Oldest Trappist Monastery* (Louisville, KY: Trout Lily Press, 1998), pp. 246. ISBN 0-9642802-1-3 (cloth). \$39.95.

During the year leading up to the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Abbey of Gethsemani, a museum-quality exhibition of religious artifacts, letters, news clippings and curiosities graced the length of one cloister corridor at the monastery. Visitors found a feast for the eye. They also received a preview of the splendors beautifully photographed and narrated by the Louisville journalist Dianne Aprile in *The Abbey of Gethsemani: Place of Peace and Paradox*. With the able assistance of Brother Joshua Brands (surely the most gifted archivist in the history of the monastery), Aprile unfolds the story of North America's oldest abbey. In a style and voice reminiscent of both Annie Dillard and Kathleen Norris, she brings an intuitive sensibility and an eye for revelatory detail to this exquisite volume.

This is no ordinary history. Dianne Aprile traveled to the motherhouse of Gethsemani in Melleray, France, to trace her story from the beginning, including the failed initiative of a Trappist foundation in Kentucky early in the nineteenth century. Her unrestricted access to abbey archives and interviews with monks in the community and with previous ties to the monastery keep this story from the sometimes narcotic effects of historical reconstructions. The photography alone is worthy of hours of a reader's time. In concert with her deft

53. *Eternity my Beloved*, p. 20.

54. *Eternity my Beloved*, p. 132.

telling of a sometimes complex story, it makes for the most amazing and attractive volume on monastic life during the decade of the 1990s.

Readers of *The Merton Annual* will especially want to invest in this volume because like no other publication she gives us a context for appreciating the place where Thomas Merton chose to enter and to live his monastic life. To learn through narrative and photographs about the influx of men into Gethsemani in the wake of World War II lends gravity to any Merton reader's appreciation of the kind of monastery in which he lived. To discover more about the abbots who led the community during his monastic lifetime is to appreciate in new ways Merton's journals and letters when he alludes to them. Discovering that electricity came to the monastery in 1936, only five years before Merton's arrival, gives perspective like no biography has yet offered.

Thomas Merton was conspicuously absent from the abbey's 150th anniversary exhibit which I mentioned earlier. I can understand how the community did not want to have their history eclipsed by Merton's celebrity. In a similar way, Aprile's book does not allow him to intrude. She attends to his place in the history of the abbey in a judicious and light-handed way. This excellent book is a refreshing and welcome addition to any appreciation of the life and identity of Thomas Merton, one from among the community of monks throughout the history of the Abbey of Gethsemani.