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Bibliographic Survey 'Contemplation's Shadow and Merton's Act: Becoming a Saint Through Words'

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I. Primary Work

Thomas Merton's journals, as we suspected, are now generating many new projects by other people. His influence continues out into widening circles. Through his journals which he revised for publication and the others which he knew full well would be posthumously published, through his correspondence (because he was keeping carbons at the request of Bellarmine College from 1963 on), as well as through drawings and his tape-recorded words which are becoming available, Merton continues to influence large groups of people. Much of what draws so many to the work of Thomas Merton is his ability to communicate the mystery of the nearness of God and his own journey toward holiness. His life's work, we now begin to see, was to draw others nearer to his insights about God's presence. Slowly, it is becoming clearer that all the voluminous writing (and lecturing, photography and drawing) is reaching a significant and growing audience. The shadow of earlier contemplative traditions absorbed by him, just as Ralph Ellison in *Shadow and Act* argues about the crucial interaction of Black and White cultures in America, draws others into the seeking of God. Merton did take Bob Lax's advice to become a saint and that then affects many other seekers.

Some of Merton's prayers and drawings have been skillfully compiled in the new *Dialogues with Silence: Prayers and Drawings*,[1] edited by Jonathan Montaldo. Beautifully printed, this selection of texts and art work

1. Jonathan Montaldo (ed.), *Dialogues with Silence: Prayers and Drawings* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), pp. 189. ISBN 0-06-065602-6.

will serve useful functions by making readers more aware of Merton's continuing prayerful and meditative stance throughout his sustained contemplative career. Derived from prose, poetry, journals and letters, the prayers—sometimes composed as formal works and sometimes 'found' within a much longer passage, such as a journal entry—work well in this new context along with the drawings.

This book provides full-page reproductions of selected drawings by Merton paired with appropriate prayers. The cumulative effect of being able to absorb approximately 100 drawings in this fresh context is stimulating, informative and, finally, potentially, contemplative. That familiar 'My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going…' is paired with an India ink drawing of a monk (is this a self-portrait?). Other drawings of monks set the tone of longing in the volume already in the opening pages.[2] Many wonderful, clear line drawings of women fill the book with mystery.[3] Still other sketches suggest tribute to St John of the Cross, saints, Mary, Christ, the Gethsemani landscape and simple images of nature. Some are the abstract work done toward the end of Merton's life. Together, all these drawings suggest Merton's movement toward simplicity.

Montaldo's editorial decisions are to be commended. Some critics will, of course, object to some of the selections of prose and poetry and this arbitrary arrangement. That is inevitable. Many other selections could have been made and we would then have had a totally different book. Some readers may object to the occasional editing which had to be done, but it was necessary. Sometimes, when the original source is consulted, it is quite clear that a much larger excerpt could well have been provided. Montaldo has also regularized syntax, omitted verbosity and sometimes added words (e.g., after 'brothers' he inserts 'and sisters') to make the prayers effective for a contemporary audience. On the whole, Montaldo's choices are successful on many levels, autobiographically and as formal work. Clearly as a meditative book, this works well. It is demonstrative of the fact that Merton's voluminous work can resonate with, and for, a wide audience. It is often as if he is saying 'I'm trying to catch in words the shadow, the reflection, of what I've sometimes felt'.

We should be thankful that *Dialogues with Silence* exists. One can imagine other similar books which could anthologize Merton (on social issues, on writers, on the liturgy; etc.). There will eventually be a companion book, I am sure, which will use the photography in a similar manner to make us ponder about the beauty of the natural and commonplace

2. Montaldo (ed.), *Dialogues with Silence*, pp. 2, 5, 8, 13.
3. Montaldo (ed.), *Dialogues with Silence*, pp. 10, 23, 26.

world—which Merton observed with care and precision through both word and photography, a world never fully explained.

Another example of Merton's definite entrance into the mainstream is his inclusion in a newly edited anthology called *Straight from the Heart.*[4] This proof of Merton's words resonating for a wide audience is seen within the context of a collection subtitled, 'Reflections from Twentieth-Century Mystics'. Here Merton appears in the company of Henri Nouwen, T.S. Eliot, Joyce Rupp, W.B. Yeats and Anselm Gruen (who all make the dustjacket) along with numerous other 'mystics' (Charles M. Shelton from *Achieving Moral Health*, C.S. Lewis, *The Joyful Christian*, etc.). Ryan's contents are arranged with quotations which go from 'charity' and 'commitment' to 'suffering' and 'vocation'. Merton appears 14 different times.

Such use of Merton (along with other 'mystics' who themselves may be surprised to be in such company—including Mitch Finley and Basil Pennington, for example) is probably inevitable, but a bit disappointing. One almost wishes that The Merton Legacy Trust has been able to say, 'Let's not collect the permission fees for this type of book'. William Shannon, Richard Rohr, Elizabeth Johnson—they are all here! Andrew Greeley also makes the grade. My count determined that Henri Nouwen is the leader and quoted 16 times beating out Merton who only appears 14 times. When one stops counting and making jokes about who is quoted frequently, however, it is clear that Merton's voluminous pondering about the spiritual life has produced much of great significance to, and for, today's reader.

In Ryan's opening 'chapter' about 'charity', a Merton sentence from *Life and Holiness*[5] is chosen: 'Charity is impossible without an interior poverty of spirit which identifies us with the unfortunate, the underprivileged, the dispossessed' (p. 6).[6] Merton's entire trajectory of striving to develop his 'interior poverty' has significance for anyone struggling to make sense of the isolation, separation and consequent loneliness which is so much a part of our contemporary culture and its need for charity. Merton's words do have an influence on the mainstream. His contemplative writing can lead others, therefore, to the possibility of mystical insight. This, then, brings to mind Merton's influence on so many persons both within his own monastery and now beyond. More of this 'shadow and act', the reflection of Merton's striving, will be discussed in successive sections of this essay.

4. Dick Ryan (ed.), *Straight from the Heart: Reflections from Twentieth-Century Mystics* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), pp. 189. ISBN 0-8245-1923-1.

5. Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Herder & Herder, 19630.

6. Ryan (ed.), *Straight from the Heart*, p. 6.

In this regard it is interesting that in *The Best Spiritual Writing of 2001* the editor, Philip Zaleski, structures his opening 'Preface' around Merton's 1968 insights at Polonnaruwa. In Zaleski's view, Merton's record at that moment stands for a way of life which 'needs nothing'.[7] He then comments at length about Merton's frequent insights concerning the need to speak about what has been learned through silence or contemplation. He suggests that such need:

> explains not only Thomas Merton's vocation but also that all of who shoulder the great task of spiritual writing… The spiritual writer emerges from the silent world, the eternal spaces; for a while she plunges, pen in hand, into the noise and stench, heat and pain of creativity; and then she returns to silence. [8]

Such a need to go back into silence is increasingly clear through the insights gleaned from *Dialogues with Silence* and from this 'Preface' where Zaleski argues that all the best writers about spirituality have to be completely at home both in words and in the silence which generates words. The task which Merton has apparently taught to so many is passed on to other souls because of the momentary light he possessed. The 'writer-at-work and a saint-in-the-making…point beyond writing to the spirit'. [9] Such is Merton, the saint-in-the-making, able to direct others.

Wendell Berry, who knew Merton may (we suspect) have learned to some degree how to focus on particular contemplative moments by absorbing Merton's focus. In *The Best Spiritual Writings of 2001*, 'Sabbaths, 1999' are reprinted from *The Hudson Review*, all (12) poems of which show the need for careful observation of mystery. This too is Merton's dream; Berry writes:

> I dream of a quiet man
> who explains nothing and defends
> nothing, but only knows
> where the rarest wildflowers
> are blooming, and who goes
> where they are and stands still
> and finds that he is smiling
> and not by his own will.[10]

Merton's lectures to novices at Gethsemani (and to anyone else who cared to listen) are also having a widening influence because they reflect

7. Philip Zaleski (ed.), *The Best Spiritual Writing of 2001* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), p. x. ISBN 0-06-251772-4.
8. Zaleski (ed.), *The Best*, pp. x-xi.
9. Zaleski (ed.), *The Best*, p. xiii.
10. Wendell Berry, 'Sabbaths 1999', in Zaleski, p. 16.

his own journey. These talks were carefully prepared and Merton's gifts as a natural teacher are in evidence whenever one listens to these released recordings. In previous reviews and review-essays, Dewey Kramer, David King, Steven Baumann, myself and Thomas Collins have surveyed Merton's vocal performances. [11] Now that approximately 100 hours of a large archive (500 hours?) have been released and analyzed we can now make a few generalizations and suggest still another project might be begun.

Scholars would profit from a project to transcribe all of the recorded talks given by Merton, and especially those which have been released for commercial consumption because there are many insights hidden there just as in the complete journals. Merton loves to teach and make connections between and among his historical and theological subjects which cover the board from particular historical and theological texts to modern poetry in relation to the contemplative aspects of life and modern events.

Several new releases of Merton's lectures have been issued by Credence Communications, Inc., including 'The Church Fathers' (AA3397) which discusses Tertullian and Cassian. Tertullian, Merton notes, 'is a great writer', in fact the greatest literary writer of his age. And because he so questions his culture, he is, therefore, very much like Nietzsche or Calvin, a great thinker (even though frequently quite wrong).

In Tertullian, because of his repulsion to Roman customs and paganism, his frequent answer was extreme, for example, in his defense of natural monotheism. Merton's comments successfully link Tertullian's culture and Christian persecution in with parallels to our own culture concerning abortion arguments: thus legalities in law allow perversions to be learned.

Tertullian's tract on 'Prayer' provides valuable materials about early Christian customs and the value of prayer today argues Merton, but he notes some odd ideas as well, where one logical thing can lead to another, as is the case with another tract by Tertullian about the absurdity of wearing of a laurel crown (and its complete unnaturalness).

11. Robert E. Daggy, Patrick Hart, OCSO, Dewey Weiss Kramer and Victor A. Kramer (eds.), Review by Victor A. Kramer in *The Merton Annual* 2 (1989) pp. 314-19; Review by Dewey Weiss Kramer in *The Merton Annual* 3 (1990) pp. 311-20; Review by Victor A. Kramer in *The Merton Annual* 5 (1992) pp. 362-67. Michael Downey, George A. Kilcourse and Victor A. Kramer (eds.), Review by Dewey Weiss Kramer in *The Merton Annual* 6 (1993), pp. 235-36; Review by Steven Baumann in *The Merton Annual* 7 (1994) pp. 176-78; Review by Thomas Collins in *The Merton Annual* 9 (1996), pp. 264-66. Kilcourse and Kramer, (eds.), Review by David Kim in *The Merton Annual* 12 (1999), pp. 236-39.

This lecture—witty, entertaining and valuable—is an excellent example of Merton's enjoyment of teaching and making cultural connections. He clearly relishes examining 'the extreme mind' of Tertullian whose book on 'Patience' is, Merton laughs, a wonderful example of Tertullian's getting quite carried away: all sins are rooted in lack of patience! Merton stresses that reading Tertullian provides many excellent examples of tight thinking (even though he's 'often off the beam'), and totally illogical in aspects of the development of his arguments.

Side 2 of this cassette begins with an analysis of 'The Lord's Prayer' in relation to Cassian and Tertullian with particular attention to the phrase 'Thy will be done'. Merton argues this reveals a whole concept which we have mostly lost today: love is the mover of all things, yet the will of God is love which includes our cooperation in the Divine plan. Comments about the Tower of Babel follow as an archetypal symbol of collective pride. The next phrase 'Give us…' is for Cassian logical and simple while for Tertullian there is an interpretation which leaps forward to make the immediate equation of 'bread' with 'eternal life'. Eucharistic communion as spiritual hunger satisfied is exceedingly important, argues Merton, and the beauty of reading Cassian and/or Tertullian is that they assist us to read closely and to understand that any text has enormous implications: we should hunger for spiritual truth, not just hunger for only material nourishment. Merton ties all this in with the fact that in a monastery (where we cultivate a longing for spiritual nourishment) monks should all remain 'famished'. He carefully draws his students into the idea that humankind seeks nourishment on different levels. By working carefully with just a few phrases, in fact what he is doing is showing his students how to read.

In still another lecture Merton outlines the myth of the holy grail, the Fisher King, and its relationship to the monastic life today. This tape is entitled 'The Quest: The Quest for the Grail and Conversion of Manners' (AA3403). The monastic community can be like the Fisher King. 'The community can be in a state of nothingness…as long as people are not answering the right questions: where is the Holy Grail?' The successful monastic life is built around questions; not only do we ask questions; the monastic life asks questions of us, 'What are you here for?' The spiritual life of the monastery has to be taken with great seriousness: especially in a 'tragic' time when the most important forgotten question is 'How should I be saved?' The monastic way of life is our way of salvation. (This particular lecture is brief.)

The second side begins with jokes, announcements, and so on. Then Merton comments about the conversion of manners by way of commentary about the Rule of St Benedict. He stresses that to be a monk is not to

assume that man is bad (Stalinism makes this assumption and thus produces conduct against the will of humankind). Such is a perverted notion! On the contrary, the monastic life is to be looked at in a different way: the real idea is that underlying such a daily life (with all its imperfections) is a good which can be brought out when we remove the obstacles. A conversion of external manners only is no conversion.

Merton's being attuned to his inmost self and willing to share insights, sometimes in a fragmented way as he speaks, serves as a kind of model for others who are tuned into a prayerful criticism of a culture often little concerned with listening. We recall that Merton's great friend and best influence is Bob Lax—and the prolific focused writing which flowed from Lax after he had voiced his own Mertonian awareness is examined in the next section of this review-essay as the fruit of someone who listened, removed obstacles from his own observations and art, and surely was as well a great source of encouragement to Merton who sometimes was a reflection of Lax. Similarly, Dan Berrigan, Thich Nhat Hanh, and John Dear listened to Merton and now speak in tones learned from him.

II. Lax's Relationship

Merton's life of energetic continuing conversion has, clearly, affected great numbers of people, including many of his closest friends (Bob Lax, Ed Rice, Robert Giroux) already when they were still undergraduates, and for decades following. Others, maybe when they met him only once, or had only minimal actual contact were nevertheless greatly influenced: Daniel Berrigan, Thich Nhat Hanh and John Dear are examples of writers who have been definitely changed by Merton's presence and in whose work the shadow of that presence is reflected. Merton has inspired us to 'be attentive' and to spend our lives reporting what is observed as praise: Lax, Berrigan, Thich Nhat Hanh and John Dear all have been shaped by Merton.

Merton's best work always seemed to be grounded in what he observes or sees made through art (his or that of others) which then points to what is beyond. Thus, words lead readers back to silence, to more acute observation, and to compassion with, and for, others. This is what Bob Lax learned best. Lax's whole career was one of celebration, observing the beauty of particular moments seen, caught, made as these suggest a particular point beyond seeing.

In the wonderful friendship of Merton with Bob Lax, and in their reciprocal relationship which they had as soulmates, writers, poets, artists and as commentators about the non-contemplative culture of the present we

observe how they learned from each other. We also receive constant hints of how we might learn from such love, discipline, humor, hope and care. Last year's edition of the correspondence of Merton and Robert Lax, lovingly and expertly edited by Arthur W. Biddle, was warmly received.[12] Carefully reviewed by Patrick O'Connell in *The Merton Annual* 14, that collection is a chronicle of these two lives expressed in the word as well as through limited and controlled images.[13] Much remains to be mined from those dense letters now carefully edited. They are the record of two friends sharing what they have slowly learned about looking, loving and especially being.

This volume of letters has stimulated me to review my own knowledge of Bob Lax's large body of writing. He often has given the impression that he has little to say in relation to his friend, Merton. That is in fact never the case. I myself first met Lax at a meeting of The Jacques Maritain Association in Louisville in 1980 (and asked Lax for an interview for the Thomas Merton Oral History which was minimally successful). Now with the two sides of their extended correspondence in print we are clearer about how these two writer/artist/soulmates had a continuing effect upon each other. I do not intend to theorize about the relationship, but of course my implication is that Merton learned from Lax, as did Lax learn from Merton, and ultimately these two careers will have to be studied together, like Pound and Eliot, or Hawthorne and Melville.

I have read 19 books by Lax in preparation for these brief comments.[14] All of his books are gems. All reflect his contemplative life, even more so his individually printed pamphlets—some would call them chap books—often with his own illustrations, which provide occasions for celebration,

12. Arthur W. Biddle (ed.), *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Robert Lax* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001).

13. Patrick O'Connell, *The Merton Annual* 14 (2001) pp. 244-51.

14. Robert Lax, *The Circus of the Sun* (New York: Journeyman Books, 1959); Thomas Kellein (ed.), *33 Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1942); Paul J. Spaeth (ed.), *Mogador's Book* (Zurich: Pendo, 1992); *Journal A* (Zurich: Pendo, 1986). The 14 subsequent books listed are also Pendo publications; *Journal B* (1988) [9-28-77—11-77][Spain]; *Journal C* (1990) [3-20-64—2-26-70][Kalymos]; *Journal D* (1993) [10-13-72—10-24-73][Kalymos]; *Journal E* (1996)[Hollywood Journal] Paul Spaeth (ed.), [6-18-41 (North Carolina, New York 4-18-45; 7-13-47 (Hollywood) 10-30-47; Virgin Islands 1-28-49—6-13-49)]; *Journal F* (1997)[Kalymos Journal] John Beer (ed.), [10-31-76—11-27-76]; Robert Butmann (ed.), *Episodes*(1983); *21 Pages* (1984); *The Light: The Shade* (1989); *Notes*(1995); *Dialogues*(1994); John Beer (ed.), *Moments* (2000); *Fables*(1983); *Psalm and Homage to Wittgenstein* (1991); Paul Spaeth (ed.), *Circus Days and Nights*, (New York: The Overlook Press, 2000); Paul Spaeth (ed.), *Robert Lax* (St Bonaventure University).

praise, enjoyment of the moment.[15] Lax is fascinated with the particulars of each sacred moment and with the responsibility of the artist/observer to catch (as best he can) some of that particularity. He made his job as artist to look continually at the events which immediately surrounded him and which were to be observed as mystery, but mystery which, of course, was never to be put fully into words. Lax indicates that with each observation of the 'source of each person's life'[16] he seemed to sense that the real source was in the union of the single moments with the entire universe.

His decades of writing, then, became an elaborate record of the good to be beheld in the rather ordinary and surprising events of his daily life. The 1995 book, *Notes*, on the surface appears to be a strange assembly of notes from a trip to Lucerne in 1981; poems; notes about observations at Patmos (1994); and three pages which date from February 1995, also written at Patmos. As artist-observer-mystic, what Lax demonstrates in this collection is the mystery of *both* observing and trying to get these observations into words which catch their essence and mystery. This, too, was Merton's continuing chore. There is no way to do a contemplative study about these two artists here, but I can draw out some of the evidence so that others might follow with a determined investigation.

One should also be aware that Lax's six volumes of *Journal* provide an overview of his life and observations from 1941 to the mid-1980s. Separate books cover spans of years, or in some cases just a few weeks. One should begin with *Journal E* (1996) 'Hollywood Journal' to trace Lax's first eight years (1941–49) (this is the fifth book published in the series).[17] A careful study of Lax's published journals as prayer or manuals of observation would yield valuable insights. In the books of poetry it is sometimes as if Lax imagines a challenge with himself, or with silence.

The book *Dialogues* (1994) is classic Lax, with Section 1 including five brief exchanges about the self. Here is wisdom which parallels Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation*, yet distilled to the absolute minimum:

15. Robert Lax, *Above the Rock* (Vermont: Furthermore Press, 1985). All subsequent books in this note are from the same publisher. *ARC* (1984); *As Long As*; *Astrophysical Masterpieces*; *At the Top of the Night* (1983); *Cloud over Hill* (1984); *Dark Earth: Bright Sky* (1985); *Fat Ladies* (1984); *From the Top of the Ferris Wheel*; *Ghost* (1985); *I Can't See You*; *In and Out of Purdah* (1983); *In his Dreams* (1984); *Just Midnight*; *Said's* (1983); *Snow Flake* (1984); *Some Short Notes of Robert Lax* (1985); *The Love that Comes* (1984); *The Nights: The Days* (1985); *Other Notes*; *Water Sun Light Writes* (1984).

16. Robert Lax, *Notes*, p. 8.

17. See preceding footnote 14 for more specifics about how the journal episodes unfold.

A The
way

to
be

your
self

is
to

for
get

your
self

B oh[18]

These groups of five interchanges ponder the mystery of being, doing, wishing—the simplest of our needs and desires. Lax pulls us into the need for simplicity through his own verbal simplicity. In these interrelated groups of stark poems the subjects of love, work, action, focusing on the moment, focusing on a particular moment, prayer, living well, compassion, health, the unity of all beings, are each pondered. Often in the form of aphorisms, these dialogues allow just the right combination of mystery and insight to suggest that if we keep asking the right questions we may move toward a kind of mysticism.

Fables (1983) presents us with more moments of insight about simplicity. Throughout Lax reminds his readers of the constant need to live in the moment—not to try to be like his 'man with the big general notions'.[19] Lax's *Fables* remind us that we must learn to do things because we enjoy doing them, and most of all he reminds us not to think about ourselves too much. Then goodness and wholeness presents itself.

Lax shows us over and over that simplicity (in intent, in action) will give us all we need, yet his fables often suggest we think ourselves out of simplicity and into much trouble. These fables are meditations while they also function as prayers. Lax in *Fables* reminds us that we should avoid too much thinking ('the man with his general notions') and concentrate on the particular. It is not surprising that Bob Lax's wonderful little book *Moments* (in German, the title is better: Hohe Punkte) exemplifies this distilled method. Most of these poems/notes/journal entries are only a few lines long and sometimes a particular item will be only two

18. Robert Lax, *Fables*, pp. 9, 19.
19. Lax, *Fables*, pp. 9-17.

lines. Yet in those few words, we often see Lax catching the essence of a moment observed by someone who has spent his lifetime observing.

In another book *21 Pages* (1984) Lax provides materials which must be autobiographical, but again cut to the minimum. The book deals with waiting, watching, darkness and readiness. Here we have narrative, prayer, meditation, glimpses of insight—a kind of journal which is foremost a record of waiting.

We move from waiting to watching, then to darkness and to readiness. Lax's point is that his narrator does not give up:

> Like a prisoner, waiting for a reprieve, counting the days, not counting not knowing what to count or why to count it, waiting for one thing, one moment, one event. I didn't feel like a prisoner, but I was waiting like one; doing nothing else but waiting.[20]

Episodes (1983) is, again, a collection of key insights—observed or enacted; something seen clearly 'pure & shining' (p. 1); life-defining (p. 2); obsessional (p. 3); desperate (p. 4); convincing (p. 5). Often in fewer than eight lines (sometimes five) Lax allows us to see how any one episode can be pivotal. Moments of insight which are more than one can easily absorb are caught in just a few words: Lax says, indirectly, of what all good artists or contemplatives do: 'the most important thing/was to know/where to set his easel'.[21]

The two pieces which make up *Psalm and Homage to Wittgenstein* pull together the two increasingly important themes in Lax: praise of God who speaks (often in silence) and simultaneously wonder about the mystery of language which cannot be fully explained.

Psalm is a speech to God and a record of apprehension of how God speaks so quietly back to the speaker. The speaker announces that a decision was made which involves silence:

> I made one choice, a long time ago, I don't
> remember what it was, but since then I've
> been falling.
>
> I don't think I mean I'm falling to the ground.
> I hope I don't mean I'm falling into hell. I'm
> falling toward you. I've been falling toward
> you since then.
>
> Whenever that was.[22]

20. Lax, *21 Pages*, p. 28.
21. Lax, *Episodes*, p. 37.
22. Lax, *Psalm and Homage to Wittgenstein*, p. 20.

The recent *Robert Lax: What Does a Stone Mean?*, edited by Paul J. Spaeth, provides still more insight into the enigma of Lax.[23] The late poems included there are demonstrations that everything carefully observed can provide meaning into everything else. This, too, was what Merton was learning.

III. Three Contemporary Admirers

Wisdom: The Feminine Face of God, by Daniel Berrigan, SJ, is a book which reflects his love of scripture and contemporary culture as well as his admiration for Thomas Merton whose imprint is frequently found throughout this strong commentary. Berrigan's book is an extended poetic commentary on the book of Wisdom. Sapientia, holy wisdom, love, informs the many levels of meaning in Berrigan's text which reads the Old Testament text and us via a poem by Merton. 'Hagia Sophia' provides a framework for this commentary and Berrigan acknowledges his debt immediately as he begins.

In Berrigan's 'Introduction' he explains how his reflections 'owe much' to Merton who in the 1950s had received a line drawing of a mother and child from an artist friend who said he was uncertain of the drawing's meaning. Merton announced that it had to be 'Hole [sic] Wisdom, and the child was of course Jesus'.[24] Berrigan's intense poetic reflections are 'guided by a theology that is at once radical and orthodox, and thus thoroughly compelling' says the writer of the Foreword to the book, Michael Baxter.[25] Berrigan's astounding line-by-line commentary allows the book of Wisdom to provide shocking insight into our contemporary situation which calls out so loudly for justice and love. He insists we must seek justice and God, and that 'God is found by those who do not put the Holy to the test'.[26]

Berrigan rails about capital punishment, greed for money, unnecessary hunger, displacement, loneliness, and 'imperial system of capitalism'. He quotes many contemporary figures and comments on our war to make his case. Clearly as a culture, he argues eloquently, we have forgotten about Wisdom. We have, in the meantime Wisdom 'turning

23. Paul J. Spaeth (ed.), *Robert Lax*: *What Does A Stone Mean?* (St Bonaventure University, 2001).

24. Daniel Berrigan, *Wisdom: The Feminine Face of God* (Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 2001), p. 1. ISBN 1-58051-100-7.

25. Berrigan, *Wisdom*, p. xiv.

26. Berrigan, *Wisdom*, p. 7.

the world's wisdom on its head'.[27] He quotes Merton and provides his own radical commentary:

> Wisdom sends the infinitely
> rich and powerful One forth as poor and helpless…
>
> …A vagrant, a destitute
> wanderer…
>
> A homeless God, lost in the mighty militant powers,
> without identification…

He then condemns aspects of our contemporary civilization:

> …an image of the world emerges, a subhuman image,
> a bear pit, a bombing run, an abattoir. The powerful, intent on keeping
> or enhancing their status…

Relentlessly, for 197 pages, Berrigan allows the Wisdom of the Old Testament to testify about today's horrors. Ten times he uses Merton's 'Hagia Sophia' to focus his remarks on what we, as a culture, have forgotten. Berrigan's book is searing in its criticism of our culture's selfishness, while it is, as well, a loving tribute to the accomplishments of Merton who sang of seeing the beauty of God's love and our culture's need for the gentle embrace of nurture, kindness and, above all, compassion.

Thich Nhat Hanh also saw the wisdom of Merton as manifested in his openness and compassion for other like-minded seekers. These two monks were parallel characters cast into roles as spokesmen within cultures not concerned much with the truth in the midst of an evil war. Merton realized that Thich Nhat Hanh was his 'brother' who was seeking peace. Now we see both monks are prophets seeking peace for all humankind. The success of Robert H. King's book derives from the fact that it is based on the conviction that these two figures are prototypes of what all persons in today's culture aware of global connections should become.

Robert H. King's tightly packed *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalization*, is an insightful example of how Merton's growing influence extends right down into the present moment of globalization. The subtitle of the book suggests its careful methodology: while Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh met only once, King successfully argues that they 'have become pioneers in the development

27. Berrigan, *Wisdom*, p. 54.

of what has come to be known as engaged spirituality'.[28] Each has built bridges of understanding to the other's tradition.

King's Prologue, subtitled 'A Personal Perspective', explains how this sometimes informal study has grown out of his own practice and his conviction about engaged spirituality as crucial for today. In successive chapters he describes the 'historic' meeting of Merton and Hanh; then he shows how quickly they learned from one another. He provides an overview of Merton as 'contemplative' and Hanh as 'engaged Buddhist'. He skillfully shows how the interest of culturally separated monks from different traditions converged to learn from one another in the heart of the raging Vietnam War.

Both men belonged to the Fellowship of Reconciliation and it was through that group that a meeting on 26 May 1966 was arranged. King correctly argues that this single meeting and the correspondence and writing that followed set the stage for one of the most significant developments in our contemporary world, 'real dialogue among the world's great religions'.[29] He is correct.

While there are some mistaken assumptions informing this study (see p. 26, '[M]onasticism has played a relatively minor role in Christianity') the general thrust of King's argument remains excellent because he understands that both Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh have become contributors to our current understanding of the globalization of culture. They each influenced one another and thereby our contemporary culture and its appreciation of how different traditions of faith often seek the same goals.

One could argue that there is little here which is new because Chapters 2, 3 and 4 basically only outline the lives and work of these two monks and demonstrate (in Chapter 4) the specifics of their 'Dialogue'. Yet in Chapter 5, 'Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalization', a new contribution is definitely provided by King. This is partly because he utilizes specifics from his own life experience and this is typical of what many others are experiencing, he argues.

Both Merton and Hanh have demonstrated that we must build on a spirituality which will allow us to develop a larger than merely limited faith perspective. The concluding section subtitled, 'The Globalization of Engaged Spirituality', demonstrates that the true contemplative in our culture could not avoid being 'affected by the problem of war, which

28. Robert H. King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalization* (New York: Continuum, 2001), p. 38. ISBN 0-8264-1340-4.

29. King, *Engaged Spirituality*, p. 11.

[Merton] saw as having spiritual roots'.[30] King's use of Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh's parallel stories allows him to demonstrate that their thinking and recognition of each others' traditions and their concerns for all persons has become a model which works effectively today and will be needed in the future.

John Dear, author of the book *Jesus the Rebel: Bearer of God's Peace and Justice* (published in 2000) has provided still another book of meditations in 2001. The meditations about Jesus as 'bearer of God's peace' constantly reminds the reader of the relationship between the contemplative and the active person, and thus of Merton:

> As contemplatives who have dismissed anxiety and worry from our lives, we are free to dedicate ourselves to the most important task of life. 'Seek first God's reign and God's justice, and all these things will be given you besides'. The will of God, the essence of life, the culmination of wisdom, is found in the pursuit of the reign of God and the justice of God. There is nothing more important. Nothing else should hold our attention. Nothing else is worth our energy, time, or effort. Here we find our purpose and discover what it means to be human.[31]

John Dear's new book of meditations, *Living Peace: A Spirituality of Contemplation and Action*, is an even clearer example of Merton's positive influence. This is not a 'scholarly' book, but it is of value for several reasons. Dear has absorbed much from reading Merton, Dorothy Day, and other activists such as Berrigan. He has for 20 years been living a life of peacefulness and seeking peace through action and civil disobedience. There are many references to Merton's thought throughout this book yet it has no index.[32]

It is clear that Dear has been putting into action the lessons he has learned from Gandhi, Daniel Berrigan, Merton and others as he watches and witnesses in a society awash in violence. Dear's style is often informal while his concerns are urgent and clearly articulated. John Dear demonstrates both the necessity of action in relation to contemplation and the need, therefore, sometimes to put one's self on the line (literally) at the Pentagon, during the launching of nuclear submarines, at the School of the Americas, and so on. What is really interesting about this book is how it is simultaneously a book about Dear's need for *both* quiet and contemplative practice and engagement. It is a book about the need to speak out for a world where justice and mercy are frequently forgotten.

30. King, *Engaged Spirituality*, p. 164.

31. John Dear, *Jesus the Rebel: Bearer of God's Peace and Justice* (Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 2000), p. 176 (47). ISBN 1-58051-073-6.

32. John Dear, *Living Peace: A Spirituality of Contemplation and Action* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), pp. 227. ISBN 0-385-49827-6.

The litany of statistics provided by Dear about poverty and resources, weapons and distribution are shocking and Merton's prophetic awareness of our Western neo-colonial greed is echoed throughout this urgent text. Merton is a precursor to the compassion which Dear, as a symbol for the present generation, has taken up.

In still another book about global spiritualization Merton's thought provides a basic foundation. Throughout Wayne Teasdale's *The Mystic Heart* we perceive Merton's presence who Teasdale argues sought 'universal understanding'[33] in so much of his writing and personal seeking.

With a forward by the Dalai Lama and good tight concise writing about this encyclopedic topic Teasdale's study hardly ever misfires. Even his own autobiographical references work well because this author is able to incorporate these references (to his own teachers, his uncle, friends) in a useful manner which documents his personal journey from Catholic tradition to a new openness. He seeks to show that as a traditional Catholic he has been able to discover the many parallels which exist about so many different mystic paths.

By showing how Merton, Bede Griffiths, Krishnamurti and others were 'not content to settle down, but must press on to greater and greater discovery…[these holy thinkers suggest that] the fully formed mystic or contemplative is the new cultural hero who guides humankind to its maturity'.[34] Merton is at the heart of this continuing quest to uncover the mystic heart which informs all religious traditions.

IV. Echoes through Kelty

Merton's encouragement by Robert Lax to become a saint as reported in *The Seven Storey Mountain* has been transmuted to Merton's quest being a source of encouragement for myriads of fellow monks, friends, and listeners to his taped lectures. He also has influenced other writers who have absorbed his advice. Matthew Kelty's *Gethsemani Homilies* is another recent valuable collection of writings with strong, if indirect, echoes of Merton. Kelty is quite humble when quizzed about his own reading interests and possible influences by Merton, yet clearly this book of homilies is evidence that Kelty has ripened partly because Merton is in the background.

33. Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2001), p. 293. ISBN 1-57731-140-X.

34. Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart*, p. 232.

Kelty states in the interview which opens this collection that when Merton first talked to him about solitude he was not much interested in the subject. But with the passing of time Kelty reassessed what Merton had to say and then became much more open to the idea of solitude—all of which led him to an experimental small monastery in North Carolina and later to his life as a hermit in New Guinea. The quest, the understanding about solitude and silence, was helpful: 'I finally began to understand solitude, what it means. I wanted to do it full time. But I didn't want to do it out back of the monastery. You know, if you get married you don't live upstairs. You want to get a house of your own'.[35] This collection also includes Kelty's homily 'Love in Depth, On the Thirteenth Anniversary of the Death of Thomas Merton', which first appeared in *The Merton Seasonal* 24.1 (Spring 1999). Kelty reminds us that Merton's life was not one of suffering more. Rather, 'his engagement with God was more profound, his commitment more total, his abandonment more complete. In such a life the relation to God is superbly intimate, and no mortal living with such love can escape being burned.'[36]

We have a similar kind of affirmation expressed in many other books by writers about monasticism and the spiritual life for monks and lay people.

V. Merton's Continuing Presence

At a quiet level Merton's charm infects many writers of religious literature in simple homilies and in chapter talks as well as in 'self-help' books. Think for a moment of Dom Augustine Moore, OCSO. He entered Gethsemani in 1942 just six months after Merton's arrival there in December 1941. These men are about the same age—and each with a completely different priestly role to be played—yet we know to some degree they learned much from each other. In a newly edited book Dom Augustine writes in a chapter talk, for example, about 'compassion' and directly ties those remarks into Merton's approach: 'Thomas Merton wrote that the saints are what they are, not because their sanctity makes them admirable in the sight of others, but because the gift of sainthood makes it possible for them to admire everyone else'.[37] This seems to be a direct echo of *New*

35. Matthew Kelty, *Gethsemani Homilies* (Quincey: Francesca Press, Quincy University, 2001), pp. xvii-xviii. ISBN 0-8199-0998-X.

36. Kelty, *Gethsemani Homilies*, pp. 129-30.

37. Augustine Moore, *Within the Heart of Many: Homilies and Retreat Talks* (Conyers: Our Lady of the Holy Spirit Abbey, 2001).

Seeds of Contemplation[38] where Merton argues that we realize all are sinners and all need God's mercy.

Merton, as the progenitor of many Cistercians who today share their insights through their writings, clearly has served as a model for a significant group who now share their vision with others beyond monasteries. This is true of Basil Pennington and of James Stephen Behrens both of whom have lived the monastic life at the Conyers Monastery where Augustine Moore, Merton's contemporary, was Abbot.

Fr James Behrens notes that Walker Percy once remarked to him that he 'should always write with hope. He said that because I am a Christian and as a Catholic priest I am "stuck with a wondrous message and had little choice but to write about it" '.[39] Such hopefulness is at the root of all good Christian writing and is at the core of all Merton's best work of praise, a body of work designed to give hope.

We see this hope in Behrens, in Mother Gail Fitzpatrick, OCSO and in Thomas Keating, OCSO whose *Intimacy with God* (revised for a third printing in 2001)[40] absorbs insights from Merton (The glossary defines 'true self'). Keating explains in detail the relationships between modern psychology, finding one's self, and the interest in centering prayer. Through Keating's books and through his widely distributed tapes Keating teaches prayer and contemplation. And also through the organization 'Contemplative Outreach' thousands of persons have been drawn to a much closer 'intimacy with God'. In the first decades of this century explains Keating, the earlier 'Christian contemplative tradition [had been] believed to be locked up in cloisters. Even there, it often existed in a truncated form with an overemphasis on interior transformation…'[41] Keating's work, like Merton's, seeks to develop ways to share the Benedictine and Cistercian traditions.

Merton's 'influence' upon the thinking of monastics and spiritual writers is pervasive. References to him turn up in a wide range of contexts. Recently, I was struck by the section of Mother Gail Fitzpatrick's book *Seasons of Grace: Wisdom from the Cloister* where she frequently discusses how monastics are called to build communities and how the Merton talk 'Life and Community' defines community for her not as something easy but rather as 'being wherever you knock up against somebody in pursuit

38. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962).

39. James Stephen Behrens, *Memories of Grace: Portraits from the Monastery* (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 2001), p. 156 (82). ISBN 0-87946-220-5.

40. Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad, 3rd edn, 2001), ISBN 0-8245-1588-9.

41. Keating, *Intimacy*, pp. 112-113.

of doing something together, for only then do we decide to build community'.[42] What is striking about the commentary which follows by Mother Fitzpatrick is her insistence that God chooses 'whom we knock up against' and we then choose whether or not to be in community. It is Merton who provides the foundation for these insights. Merton built awareness of communities on many levels. Most especially he encouraged others to live in the present, thus to build a sense of community building and appreciation within the context(s) of their individual lives.

Dianne April's *Making a Heart for God: A Week inside a Catholic Monastery* is literally a book made possible by Merton's thought. There are references to his writing throughout and his words structure the book.[43] Thus, as she writes about Gethsemani's spirit, she is really writing, to some degree, about how Merton's spirit lives on there.

Similarly, the new book of 'conversations' with the monks of New Clairvaux in Vina, California is sprinkled with suggestive references to Merton's work—his writing and his personal influence.[44] Often in such remembrances, Merton is setting the tone. A further example would be Thomas Moore. In each of the books by Moore, author of *Care of the Soul*, some tribute is paid to Merton. Moore's 1997 book is an excellent example. Moore demonstrates that Merton teaches us how to be 'garden dwellers'.[45]

Moore's *The Re-enchantment of Everyday Life* is a 1997 text, but deserves fleeting mention in the present context because once again Merton so informs much of what is accomplished there. Merton needed decades to distill his wisdom (Moore explains he needed time also for such integration and distillation, see his introduction).

In this particular series of reflections about the absolute need for using one's imagination Moore shows readers why they must come back to re-enchantment of everyday life if they are going to heal their souls. As Moore writes, he incorporates fundamental contemplative lessons which he has learned from Merton, things evident in the 'diaries' says Moore: 'which are punctuated over years by single-sentence observations of

42. Gail Fitzpatrick, *Seasons of Grace: Wisdom from the Cloister* (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 2001), p. 209. ISBN 0-87946-216-7.

43. Dianne April, *Making a Heart for God: A Week inside a Catholic Monastery* (Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths, 2000), ISBN 1-893361-14-4.

44. David D. Perata, *The Orchards of Perseverance: Conversations with Trappist Monks about God, their Lives, and the World* (Ruthven, Iowa: St Therese's Press, 2000), p. 201. ISBN 0-9672135-0-9.

45. Thomas Moore, *The Re-enchantment of Everyday Life* (New York: Harper, 1997), ISBN 0-06-092824-7.

nature that give a Zen-like contemplative counterpart to…personal thoughts and experiences'.[46]

The new book *A Pelican in the Wilderness: Hermits, Solitaries, and Recluses*, by Isabel Colegate, is also characteristic proof, again, that Merton has entered into the mainstream. Her book mentions him only twice, but both times in interesting ways: first, as a model of someone seeking knowledge about interfaith experience and therefore seeking connection with Dom Henri Le Saux, who became Swami Abhishiktanda and called himself a Hindu Christian monk. Second, Merton is discussed in relation to Rilke who Merton greatly admired. However Merton realized that Rilke's, or anyone's poetry, only provides a 'theological conception, or an image' and that more importantly for him such 'an image has to be sought and loved. "Union with God!" So mysterious that in the end man would do anything to evade it, once he realizes it means the end of his own ego—self-realization once and for all'.[47] Merton is here the model of a modern seeker, seeking to go beyond his own images, conceptions and writings.

Other recent successful books which testify to the presence of Merton in the minds of an extraordinarily wide range of writers include references to him in relation to 'Sacred Places' in New York City; his position as a Christian mystic in the developing Western tradition and his legacy; the use of writings as a valuable tool for discovering the mystic in 'all of us'; and, finally as references within a book about everyday simplicity.[48] He is being read.

VI. Academic Writing

The fact of Merton being recognized by everyday readers and by mainstream commentators about spirituality and contemplation is now a fact. His appreciation by the academy, his absence in secular anthologies is another fact. The latest book by Ross Labrie, ambitious and valuable, should assist 'sophisticated' audiences to place Merton as a contributor

46. Moore, *Re-enchantment*, p. 101.

47. Isabel Colegate, *A Pelican in the Wilderness: Hermits, Solitaries, and Recluses* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2002), p. 284. ISBN 1-58243-121-3. (This quotation is from *The Intimate Merton*, no page number given.)

48. These books are Edward F. Bergman, *The Spiritual Traveler in New York City: The Guide to Sacred Places and Peaceful Places* (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring). ISBN 1-58768-003-3; Ursula King, *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies throughout the Ages* (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2001). ISBN 1-58768-012-2; John Kirvan, *God Hunger: Discovering the Mystic in All of Us* (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 1999), ISBN 1-893732-03-7; Robert J. Wicks, *Everyday Simplicity: A Practical Guide to Spiritual Growth* (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2000). ISBN 1-893732-12-6.

within the development of serious art and spirituality as well as the development of the history of ideas in the twentieth century. Ross Labrie's book, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*, is an excellent synthesis and explication of Merton's spiritual longing as it merged with and empowered his artistic and intellectual journey. This well-written study should serve to introduce Merton's accomplishments to a wider academic world unaware of Merton and his constantly developing 'inclusive' imagination.[49]

Labrie will not be able to 'prove' all of what he asserts, but the wholeness and clarity of patterns provided by this systematic analysis is a wholeness refracted from Merton's willingness to look at beauty and horror, love and hate, concern and disregard even when they appear so often side by side. In today's culture Labrie shows us that Merton's poetic imagination sees the unity of a world often fragmented (by economics, prejudice, anger, war, religious misunderstanding, selfishness, etc.). Labrie shows that it is through Merton's inclusive imagination that he remains hopeful, and in that hopefulness Merton remains able both to write and to bathe in the quiet of contemplation and ultimately in knowledge of the contemplative outside of predictable Catholic sources.

Early on Labrie clearly establishes some of the crucial connections he will then systematically examine:

> Although Coleridge used the term *meditation* in speaking of the poet's intuitive access to ultimate reality, it is clear that he meant by that term essentially what Merton meant by *contemplation* and furthermore that the contemplation Merton associated with the mystics was similar in kind to that which he perceived in the romantics. As Merton recognized, the bridge between romanticism and mysticism was Platonism. He explicitly noted Blake's indebtedness to Neoplatonism in his thesis on Blake, and even though he distinguished between the goals of art and those of mysticism in *The Ascent to Truth* (1951) as well as in two well-known essays on poetry and contemplation, written in 1947 and 1958 respectively, nevertheless the distinction seemed to lose its importance for him after the mid-1950s. Increasingly, following the mid-1950s and especially when he began to write more spontaneously and with not a great deal of effort given to revision, Merton used the writing of poetry as an opportunity for contemplation. Spontaneity itself, he recognized, was a feature of romantic composition, favored because it allowed the true self to respond to the subject at hand before the intervention of the rational self with its discourse of impersonal argumentation.[50]

49. Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), pp. 263. ISBN 0-8262-1382-0. See pp. 22-23, and the conclusion of ch. 1, p. 28, for Labrie's definitions.

50. Labrie, *Inclusive Imagination*, p. 7.

As this passage indicates, Ross Labrie's book is inclusive in that he has surveyed the published work and can then speculate about what holds the developing career together. This is a solid academic exercise, loaded with footnotes and documentation. It is also a pleasure to read. Labrie has investigated extensively and well. His systematic approach here is both new and valuable because he assidiously connects the many pieces of this enormous mosaic of Merton's intellectual and religious journey together. Labrie's scholarship preceding this book (*The Art of Thomas Merton* and *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature*[51] have provided ample ground work for this insightful piece of analytic scholarship.

Ross Labrie clearly loves literature, and especially poetry, as does Merton. He returns to the Romantics and specifically to William Blake, then to Hopkins and to Merton's love of these writers to construct his opening argument about the roots of Merton's inclusive imagination and method. Labrie successfully demonstrates that Merton's diverse production does have many connecting threads, most especially in Merton's continuing ability to make connections (mystical, liturgical, literary and ecclesiastical) from his own experiences (personal and through his voracious reading). Such enthusiasm then made it possible for Merton to see, sing and praise the bigger framework of God's creation, and our own responsibility to see that larger beauty and our apparent cultural deterioration in doing so in this historical era.

Labrie has systematically kept track of many streams in Merton's mind, manuscripts and publications. Often his dense footnotes reveal that in a single paragraph he has been able to make connections between and among what may even appear to be disparate references in Merton's writings, journals, correspondence, working notebooks and in little-known periodical publications.

This is an academic book and it is not easily read, yet it will prove to be a mine of information for other scholars as new projects of comparison unfold. This kind of synthesis is what we have been looking for in Merton studies—the beginnings of an overall explanation of Merton's immense productivity and seeking of religious and mystical unity. Labrie groups related themes to provide his investigative structure—Romanticism and Mysticism, Consciousness and Being, Solitude and Self, Nature and Time. He steps back from the forest of these 'inclusive' topics and proceeds often tree by tree to demonstrate what Merton has accom-

51. Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1979); *idem*, *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

plished. Each of his opening four chapters demonstrate what appears sometimes to be thematically disparate or unrelated ideas while there is always a connection built.

Labrie shows that Merton's work with Blake in 1939 as mystic is not unrelated, therefore, to Merton's groundbreaking thought of 1959–60 about ascetical and mystical theology. Labrie's subsequent critical examination demonstrates that there is no contradiction between the need for cultivation of solitude and a similarly important knowledge of the self which cannot be verbalized or explained:

> In the writings of the 1960s one can see the tension created by Merton's straddling of these two rather different ontological worlds in the long series of ruminations on the contemplative life titled 'The Inner Experience'. In this detailed examination of the contemplative life, Merton separated the evil done by the self from the 'good ground of the soul'. While such a distinction might appear to have driven a wedge between the quotidian and the ontological self, Merton's continued belief in the value of the organic, affective self was trenchantly expressed in his dramatization of the conflict between the self and technology in section 66 of *Cables to the Ace*:
>
> Science when the air is right says 'Yes'
> And all the bubbles in the head repeat 'Yes'
> Even the corpuscles romp 'Yes'.[52]

This is not to rest in the quiet of the 'true self'. Labrie also demonstrates by such careful tying together of materials that for Merton 'paradise' will only be a possibility for humankind when in some fundamental ways we are willing to cultivate a sense of childishness. As his book progresses Labrie continually demonstrates how, as Merton became increasingly interested in a wider and wider range of topics, he could see the commonalty in all:

> Thus, rather like Keats in the 'Ode to a Nightingale', he celebrated the self-forgetfulness that allowed him to unite with the whole of being. Incidental to this extension of himself into the whole of being was his growing awareness of the underlying unity of the spiritual and philosophical writers he was consulting. For this reason it seemed to him that the thought of Zen Buddhism unexpectedly resembled that of the Desert Fathers of the fourth century… The primordial ontology that underlay Merton's paradisal consciousness can be found in many corners of his writing. He admired, for example, Albert Camus's advocating what he called a 'primordial humanism, the seeds of which are implanted' in human nature. With a similar atavistic orientation, Merton, in an informal talk given in Calcutta in the fall of 1968, argued that what human beings had most to recover was their

52. Labrie, *Inclusive Imagination*, p. 21.

> original unity and that that recovery was achievable in what they still retained of their original state as human beings.[53]

Finally, Labrie successfully argues that only through an understanding of the development of myth will we be able to understand our global culture:

> …in notes for [his] projected talk in Calcutta, which were later published in the *Asian Journal* as an appendix entitled 'Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue', he contrasted what he termed the Asian habit of 'non-hurrying and of patient waiting' with the Western passion for 'immediate visible results'. Through his encounter with Buddhism while traveling in the East, Merton was able to mount a challenge to the dominant rationalism, particularly in its disputatious aspects, of Western culture, as can be seen in his impressions of the great stone Buddhas in Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka, in 1968, figures that struck him as quintessentially and ideally Asian.[54]

One cannot easily do justice to this dense study in a few pages of review. Suffice it to say that the connections are still being carefully provided between 'Romanticism and Mysticism' as the study concludes, and as we move to an examination of the last few years of Merton's literary production. Labrie argues it was

> …distressing to Merton [to recognize that] knowledge…since the late Middle Ages Christianity had lost the power and desire to welcome non-Christian cultural values, turning away from them instead as potential sources of heresy. Resisting this cultural xenophobia, which he admitted had eased in the 1960s, he attempted to build within himself a cultural and spiritual edifice that included the voices of various religious and philosophical traditions. In this way, like Gandhi, he hoped to unite in himself the spiritual thought of the East and the West and so to prepare *in himself* the future reunion of divided traditions. He came to believe that he would be a better Catholic not by refuting 'every shade of Protestantism' but by affirming the truths of Protestantism: 'So too, with the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists, etc'. It was at this point in his thinking he came to focus on what he came to regard as the most significant characteristic of unity—its inclusiveness. The extension of the self toward unity was generated by a perception of evil as disunity, a pulling into itself of the separated ego in the case both of individuals and of nations. In opposing such partisan perception, Merton focused on the history of culture as a history of amalgamation. From his earliest writings he had sought the high road of inclusiveness…[55]

53. Labrie, *Inclusive Imagination*, p. 125.
54. Labrie, *Inclusive Imagination*, p. 201.
55. Labrie, *Inclusive Imagination*, p. 226.

Labrie's book will allow other scholars to begin to understand the inclusiveness of Merton's vast imaginative project.

Another close reading of a challenging writer whom Merton greatly admired, Flannery O'Connor, is provided by George A. Kilcourse's careful work in his *Flannery O'Connor's Religious Imagination: A World with Everything off Balance*.[56] Kilcourse's framework about O'Connor's 'Christian Imagination'; the use of insights from Merton about belief and unbelief; and successful incorporation of theologians such as Romano Gaurdini and Karl Rahner give us a new way to understand the presentation and presence of grace in O'Connor. Similarly, his employment of William F. Lynch allows us to see that at the base of O'Connor's fictional imagination was her concern with choice and grace and freedom.

If we contrast Kilcourse's careful work with another new O'Connor study, Katherine Hemple Prown's *Revising Flannery O'Connor: Southern Literary Culture and the Problem of Female Authorship*,[57] it is perhaps understandable why Merton has not become a darling of the secular criticism which has developed into a true industry for O'Connor while seldom providing much attention to her religious imagination. Prown's book elegantly shows that O'Connor was very aware of technique, her indebtedness to other authors and that she was very much aware of the need to revise her manuscripts (especially early on) to minimize the appearance of a female voice. This limited study is of value. No doubt O'Connor's 'formulation of her literary identity' was significant.[58] Much more significant, I think, was her careful absorption of theology so that her characters make sense, not as oddities, but as creatures of God in an ordered universe which has been knocked out of kilter. Prown's book has a very narrow focus. Kilcourse's book, on the other hand, is well informed by insights from Merton and others and stresses Flannery O'Connor's Christian imagination. He does an excellent job of reading O'Connor's fiction and of using theological insights from Merton to focus on O'Connor's sometimes ironic twisted vision.

As we know from Robert Giroux who edited O'Connor and Merton, and wrote of their parallels in his introduction to O'Connor's short stories, these contemporary writers often observed contemporary culture through similar lenses. What Labrie and Kilcourse both succeed in doing for a widening of appreciation and understanding of Merton and O'Connor is to demonstrate that they learned never to write, imagine, and criticize within the vacuum of a writer's imagination, but within a

56. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001, pp. 328. ISBN 0-8091-4005-5.
57. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001, pp. 201. ISBN 0-8139-2012-4.
58. Prown, *Reviving Flannery O'Connor*, p. 75.

universe of a 'Catholic theology of grace' and of 'men with free will',[59] even though sometimes unaware of Christianity at all.

VII. Periodicals

Some remarks about periodical publications and *The Merton Seasonal*, now in its twenty-seventh year of publication, are useful at this point. *The Seasonal* remains an excellent indicator of the pulse of Merton Studies. I will not survey all the contents of vol. 26, and here only indicate it stands as the reservoir of citations and ideas for Merton commentators and researchers: Look, for example, at vol. 26 no. 4: it includes three interesting articles (on a study-trip to Prades, Ed Rice, and about the value of *The Ascent to Truth*); two poems in the manner of Bob Lax; and an Ed Rice bibliography as well as a bilingual poem for Merton along with three good reviews including books which I also survey in this essay (*Dialogues*; King's *Thich Nhat Hanh*; and Kelty's *Gethsemani Homilies*) plus the most recent addition to the publications 'By and About' Merton which includes 75 items.[60]

For those who knew Bob Daggy and *The Seasonal* in its earlier years, we are both pleased that Daggy started this quarterly and that it has now grown to its present proportions under the skillful and dedicated guidance of the present editor, Patrick O'Connell. An evaluative word about each of the articles in the last number of vol. 26 allows us to be reminded of the kind of valuable and often 'speculative' work which frequently appears there.

The strongest article of this issue is David Joseph Belcastro's. His earlier work at ITMS meetings and in print has had to do with Czeslaw Miloszh and Albert Camus's relationships to Merton: here Belcastro goes back to Merton's first 'systematic' theological treatise about spirituality. Often the quotes within this article are extensive (too much so?) yet Belcastro makes his point well. He agrees with earlier commentators about the lack of focus in *The Ascent to Truth*, but he also finds 'seeds' of Merton's unfolding spiritual insights in this dense even daunting venture into St John of the Cross's world via the theology of St Thomas Aquinas.

Other articles in *The Seasonal* which concludes 2001 are helpful because they place Merton in relation to another important figure: his lifelong friend Edward Rice, and to Merton's place of residence as a child. The article about the study-trip to Merton's childhood village, Prades, is little

59. Kilcourse, *Flannery O'Connor's Religious Imagination*, p. 243.

60. *The Merton Seasonal* is published at The Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine University.

more than an item of journalism. Nevertheless, it contains bits of insight to be gleaned.

There are also several scholarly articles included in the bibliography included in vol. 26 no. 4 which do look promising. A group of articles appeared in *Franciscan Studies* 55 (1998).[61] There is also a new book called *Reading Thomas Merton: A Guide to his Life and Work* by John Laughlin published in 2000 which I have not yet seen. These citations must be examined. *The Merton Seasonal* remains, therefore, as the necessary clearing-house for new materials about Merton. Its short articles, sometimes not-before published materials, and bibliographic listings are useful and thus, finally, no scholar can do without this material as a primary source to be investigated.

Similarly, *The Merton Journal* (published by The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland) which appears twice a year provides basic insights about Merton and his influence. Often these pieces are useful for scholars as well as the general reader. This year I only examined the table of contents. In the *Merton Journal* for 2000 Arthur W. Biddle has written 'Robert Lax: An Appreciation' (Advent Issue, vol. 7 no. 2) and there are general articles entitled 'Models of Self-Emptying Love' (Alexander Webster) and 'Theravada Buddhist Monasticism in the West' (Kim Wolfe) which look promising. In vol. 8 no. 1, articles on 'Poetry and Contemplation' (Patrick O'Connell) and 'Thomas Merton's Antipoetry' (Sonia Petisco) appear. There are also poems, general articles and reviews. The Advent 2001 issue vol. 8 no. 2, includes articles about 'Merton and Nicannor Parra' (Paul Pearson), 'Merton and Pasternak' (David Scott) and about 'Merton and Alan Watts as Twentieth-Century Archetypes' (Peter King). Other pieces appear to be reflections and book reviews.[62]

Articles in other scholarly journals about Merton appear infrequently. George A. Kilcourse has published a carefully written article in the

61. The three articles in Vol. 55 (1998) of *Franciscan Studies* by Kathleen Deigman, CND, 'Road to Rapture: Thomas Merton's [Study at Bonaventure's] *Itinerarium Mentis in Deus*' (pp. 281-97); Michael Downey's 'Merton's Franciscan Heart' (pp. 299-309); and 'Where The Green Light Meets the Air': The Hermit as Pilgrim in the Franciscan Spirituality of Thomas Merton' by Sean Edward Kinsella constitute the beginning of what might eventually become a book-length investigation of Merton's absorption, informally and systematically, of Bonaventure's proposals about the journey to God; relationships between early Cistercian and Franciscan thinking; and the Franciscan eremitical life as a model for Merton's deepening understanding of the solitary life.

62. *The Merton Journal* is edited by Michael Woodward and information is available from 9 Croesonen Road, Abergavenny, Monmouthshire. NP7 6AE, UK, or by email at mertonjournal@p3p.org

American Benedictine Review entitled 'Unmasking an Illusion: Thomas Merton's Contemplative Grounds of Dialogue'. This survey provides basic information about Merton's foundational thinking concerning contemplative identity and the 'image of awakening' in his writings which suggest an 'implicit dialogue' with readers, thus an inchoate theology of dialogue.[63]

VIII. Conclusions

In conclusion, I will make some observations about the course of Merton scholarship during the past decade or more. No doubt Merton is now well known. What still remains is the question of whether he is being assidiously read by groups of critics who can understand his message and carry it into the wider world.

Scholarly research in periodical literature concerning Merton, even in journals which one might assume should generate such articles germane to Merton Studies, remain quite scarce. Look, for example, at the recently published issues of *Christianity and Literature*. Most of what appears about Merton is in the form of reviews or short items in the two journals just discussed. The bibliographic survey articles which were prepared for the first five volumes of *The Merton Annual* were inclusive, yet often disappointing in the quality of materials surveyed because at that time (1987–1991) our temptation seemed to be to include everything which appeared in print as items which should be evaluated. The fact of the matter is that 15 years ago much Merton commentary was, if not hagiographic, so admiring of Merton that one wonders of its objectivity. This easy acceptance is beginning now to change.

In the five years following (1992–97), as *The Merton Annual* changed its editorial focus—and began looking for scholarship beyond the so frequently admiring—the material surveyed became somewhat more analytical. Still often it stood as pleas for the recognition of Merton in the wider world of scholarship and as requests for more systematic scholarship.

In vols. 11–15, another trend has emerged. George Kilcourse and myself have alternated this yearly survey about scholarship concerning Merton. We both have regularly lamented the lack of interaction between and among scholars. We also have expressed disappointment that Merton scholarship does not yet seem to be being accomplished much within the academic world of the Humanities. Where are the seminars

63. George A. Kilcourse, 'Unmasking an Illusion: Thomas Merton's Contemplative Grounds of Dialogue', *American Benedictine Review* 52.1 (March 2001), pp. 35-59.

about Merton at the Modern Language Association, or at the regional meetings, and so on? Where are the Merton agenda items at *Christianity and Literature* meetings? They remain quite rare. Yet what we have also observed in these five years is another phenomenon in Merton recognition through his influence upon other important writers and commentators. He has now been 'accepted' in at least two new ways (1) people of influence (Daniel Berrigan, Thich Nhat Hanh) clearly have absorbed Merton and this is revealed in their writings and actions; (2) scholarly work is also beginning to be done with the wider academic community in mind which synthesizes Merton's work along with preceding scholarly inquiry. This is seen in two ways: (1) in the new book by Ross Labrie which is inclusive (not just as an acceptance of Merton, but in its own methodology); (2) also in scholarly work which has appeared in *The Merton Annual* itself.

The editors have carefully restrained themselves from making comments over the years about the good work which has appeared in our own pages. However, 15 years of such work and approximately 4700 pages of published material does allow me to make some judgments.

Best of all (and Merton might love this) he is now reaching a wide audience beyond the Catholic audience—and not just by reading, but by a combination of means: reading, retreats, workshops, and scholarly conferences which relate him to other traditions (Sufism, Buddhism, Judaism) beyond the Catholic. He has become somewhat of an icon in the literature of comparative spirituality. As demonstrated in section IV of this review-essay, Merton is included in popular anthologies about spirituality and is included in collections of essays and studies about world religions. He has become part of our wider cultural life like Thoreau or Wendell Berry. Scholars are beginning to read him with the care which he demands. Scholars are also looking carefully at his texts and his methodology, at his background built up in life and love, reading and action.

Merton has, in a sense, short-circuited the critical 'system'. He has certainly not yet been given a stamp of approval by academia, but thousands of readers keep his books in print. He also has continued to influence other significant religious thinkers and spiritual writers. I am reminded of the immensely successful genre of romance novels, scorned by the elite, virtually ignored by all scholars except those interested in popular culture, yet they sell in enormous numbers and do affect enormous numbers of lives.

To some degree Merton has been and will continue to be ignored by people looking for systematic theological treatises or formal philosophy, or by readers who only approve of what a secular culture chooses to

endorse. Despite his isolation, good and careful work of analysis and synthesis appears and Labrie's book is the best recent example. The many original investigations published in *The Merton Annual* itself are more strong evidence. Merton, I trust, will be examined by a wider reading community in the future. An excellent and prophetic book by a European scholar hints about Merton's future recognition.

In this just published translation of Dorothee Soelle's *Mystik und Widerstand: Du Stilles Geschrei* (1997), now in English, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, Merton is integrated within the study, examined as part of the pattern of humankind's longing for God in Western thought as well as in this current age of fundamentalism and materialism.[64]

Soelle's major work which encyclopedically surveys the history and development of mysticism in the West examines the relationship between the recognition of suffering and the mystical impulse. She sees Merton as a mystic who could fight 'in the resistance against the Vietnam War' and as someone able to act in this manner precisely because he was in tune with nature and capable of praising all of nature. She quotes Merton's remembrance of listening to rain and sees this as 'the beginning of the mystical journey…in and with the other of nature'.[65] Soelle unites this survey of major mystical figures in European and American traditions with the continued demand to speak for the abused and forgotten. When one acts in harmony with the universe, she insists, then like Merton writing to Jim Forest in 1966, one must see the whole world with its mystical foundation:

> 'Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially an apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truths of the work itself'. He advises the young pacifist to become free from the need to his own affirmation. For then 'you can be more open to the power that will work through you without your knowing it'. Living in mystical freedom one can say then with Eckhart, 'I act so that I may act'. Being at one with creation represents a conversion to the ground of being. And this conversion does not nourish itself from demonstrable success but from God.[66]

Soelle's work places Merton's life of solitude and action in the main-

64. Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), pp. 325. ISBN 0-8006-3266-4.

65. Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, p. 100.

66. Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, p. 232.

stream of Western thought. Her knowledge of literature, myth, folklore and the facts of contemporary economics, war and greed provide a fitting setting for investigating the life and work of Merton who saw beyond his enclosure to affirmation of a world in severe danger.